

Birth of a Nation Belgium and the Treaty of London

On April 19 1839 the European Great Powers signed the 24 Articles of the Treaty of London and by doing so legally dissolved the 'United Kingdom of the Netherlands'. From then on Belgium and the Netherlands would go their separate ways. It was a painful break that had been building up over many years, and its effects would reverberate for many decades to come.

It started under the Emperor Napoleon. After his abdication the victors planned to dismantle his bellicose Empire and create a defensive ring around France. The creation of the 'United Kingdom of the Netherlands' was part of that plan. The amalgamation of the old Seventeen Provinces of the Netherlands and the Prince-Bishopric of Liège was to be total, '*un amalgame le plus complet*'. After Napoleon's return and the battle of Waterloo, attitudes towards France hardened and the Congress of Vienna strengthened the new kingdom by adding to it the Duchy of Bouillon, Chimay, Philippeville and Mariembourg. The Duchy of Luxembourg was promoted to a Grand Duchy and entrusted to King William I. From then on he could style himself 'King of the Netherlands and Grand Duke of Luxembourg' (November, 1815). The Congress also created a German Confederation consisting of 34 states, including the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, and 4 Imperial Cities. The Kingdom of Prussia received Eupen, Malmedy and Sankt Vith in compensation.

The survival of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was soon threatened by political, economic, linguistic and religious differences. Following violent disturbances in Brussels in September 1830 the position of King William I was fatally undermined. On 4 October a Provisional Government declared Belgian independence, and on 3 November a 'National Congress' was elected. A conference of the Great Powers that met in London during November attempted to impose a cease-fire, but met with little success. The National Congress drew up a constitution that retained the monarchy but disqualified the House of Orange-Nassau for all time (24 November). The process of dissolution seemed unstoppable: although

Russia, Prussia and Austria voted for heavy-handed intervention, France was hoping to fish in troubled waters while England decided to wait on events. In the event, military intervention proved impossible. On 20 January 1831 the powers presented a draft treaty, the first part of which guaranteed Belgian neutrality in perpetuity. It further proposed the following division of territory: the Netherlands should keep its 1780 boundaries while Belgium should have the remainder, except for the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg which remained the personal possession of King William. The fate of Limburg remained the thorniest issue. Despite its title of Duchy the province had virtually no connection with the ancient Duchy of Limburg. Furthermore, it was a patchwork governed by a range of different authorities. Venlo, for instance, and 53 so-called 'Generality' villages had not been part of the United Provinces in 1790 but were added to the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1796. Moreover, Maastricht had been governed jointly by the Netherlands and the Prince-Bishop of Liège; and all the rights of the Prince-Bishops had passed to Belgium. The second issue was the National Debt: Belgium was to take over 16/31 of this, leaving 15/31 to the Netherlands. This arrangement was unjust because it took no account of the origin of the debt, and the Netherlands was responsible for the larger part of it. Back in the early days of the union such a division had already caused a great deal of bad blood. King William accepted the proposals, but the National Congress rejected them because the revolution had been actively supported by the whole of Luxembourg, by Limburg including Sittard and Venlo and even by Zeeland-Flanders.

Meanwhile, the National Congress had produced a constitution but as yet no King. In the end, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg declared himself willing to accept the crown on condition that the National Congress accepted the proposals of the Great Powers. In response, the Belgian representatives proposed a number of modifications. This new draft treaty of XVIII Articles contained little that referred explicitly to the division of territory but it had a good deal to say about the National Debt. But the Powers accepted it on 26 June, and after heated debate the National Congress

followed suit on 3 July 1831. Whereupon Prince Leopold accepted the crown.

King William rejected the treaty and invaded Belgium with an army which had no difficulty in defeating its much weaker opposition. Brussels was only saved from occupation by the last-minute appearance of a French army sent to its aid. Belgium's defeat showed that, far from functioning as a dam against French expansion, it was in fact dependent on the French army, and only the Dutch army could be relied on. Consequently, all the outstanding issues were resolved in the Netherlands' favour: William I kept German-speaking Luxembourg as an independent Grand Duchy with a seat in the German Confederation and acquired half of Limburg, also as a duchy with a seat in the German Confederation. He was also granted Zeeland-Flanders, with control of both banks of the Western Scheldt, although the Netherlands had to guarantee free access to Antwerp by water and to allow the construction of an 'iron Rhine', a railway linking the port of Antwerp with the German Ruhr across Dutch territory. (When the Netherlands recently opposed a Belgian demand to reopen the railway after years of non-use, on 24 May 2005 the Permanent Court of Arbitration found in Belgium's favour on the basis of this treaty.)

Internationally, Belgium was awarded neutral status, to be guaranteed by the United Kingdom. It also retained Belgian Limburg and French-speaking Luxembourg. These resolutions were formally set down in London on 14 October 1831 in the 'Treaty of 24 Articles'.

In spite of the row that blew up when the treaty was made public, Belgium signed on 15 November 1831. But King William I remained intransigent. As a result Belgium retained de facto possession of Limburg and Luxembourg for years; but conflict between supporters and opponents of the treaty steadily increased, with the Dutch King's refusal to withdraw his forces from Belgian territory provoking military action against their presence.

It was not until 14 March 1838 that political, economic and personal pressures finally led King William to inform the London Conference that he would accept the Treaty. But this was now met by a Belgian refusal. Never before had such emotionally-charged speeches



Signatures (a.o. British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston) on the 1839 Treaty of London.

been heard in the parliament. The European Powers were unmoved, however, and on 19 March 1839 a final vote was held; the result was 58 for and 42 against.

The curtain had come down, but it was some time before passions subsided. Belgium's neutral status had a decisive effect on the course of the First World War. When the German army marched across the Belgian frontier on 4 August 1914, in breach of Germany's agreement, the United Kingdom felt obliged to involve itself in the war. In 1919 the question of the treaty was again broached. During the peace negotiations in Paris, some groups demanded not only the abolition of the neutral status but also and especially the return of Zeeland-Flanders, Dutch Limburg and German Luxembourg. Their demands fell on deaf ears. The Belgian representatives were only able to persuade their European neighbours to lift their neutrality and to restore Eupen, Malmedy and Sankt Vith to Belgium. And so yet another piece of the Congress of Vienna's work was undone.

Romain Van Eenoo
Translated by Chris Emery

Published in *The Low Countries* 2009, no. 17
See www.onserfdeel.be or www.onserfdeel.nl