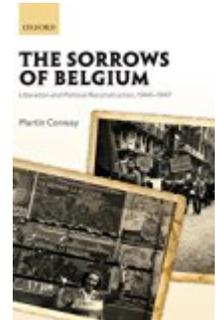


Martin Conway. *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944-1947.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 512 pp. \$150.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-969434-1.



Reviewed by Maartje Abbenhuis

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

This lovely book offers more than a history of the reconstruction period in Belgium between 1944 and 1947. It also presents a convincing and thoughtfully argued history of the collapse of the Belgian nation-state in the postwar era. It is a beautifully written book, based on extensive archival research. Once you get over the dense print on the pages, it is a remarkably engaging read.

Martin Conway borrowed his book title from Hugo Claus's famous novel *Het verdriet van België* (1983) and uses it as a metaphor to describe Belgian society "where private and public melancholy have become inextricably intertwined" (p. 2). At one level, the use of the metaphor is highly appropriate, especially given the context of the Second World War and his allusion to the "death" of Belgium in the post-Cold War era. However, as an overarching theme for the content of the book, which is largely about the manner in which various groups and individuals in Belgium influenced (or upset) the country's political reconstruction in the period 1944 to 1947, it seems rather melodra-

matic. As Conway ascribes such a high degree of agency to the political actors of the time, his title somewhat undermines their stories, which were not of sorrow, on the whole, but rather of reconstructive hope. Still, given that the long-term outcome of the reconstruction was dire the title remains apt. At the very least, it heightens the irony of Conway's commentary that political scientists in the 1960s celebrated Belgium as a model "modern" democracy. Today, they lament its demise.

The central concern of Conway's book is explaining the juxtaposition between the political turbulence created by the Nazi-occupation period and the mild-mannered political reforms established in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. He asks how it was possible for the Belgian state to reestablish almost a carbon copy of its prewar political constitution while it underwent serious political challenges to its viability during the war, including the result of the occupation, the questionable actions of King Leopold III, and the impact of the pro-Nazi Flemish movement. He argues that given the context of crisis

and upheaval, the potential existed for a radical challenge to prewar authority to assert itself. Instead of choosing a radical solution, however, the Belgian state reestablished itself in its prewar mould. The political structure remained the same, even though Belgian society had undergone fundamental change through the war years. Furthermore, Conway argues that the answers to the question “why did Belgium fail as a nation-state?” lie first and foremost in the reestablishment of an already outdated political structure that subsequently was unable to adapt to further societal change.

The value of this book is twofold. Not only does Conway do a thorough job of narrating the dynamics of postwar reconstruction (to which he dedicates most of his chapters), but he also does so within an important explanatory framework. He argues that Belgium’s success as a state in the postwar era was short-lived because by the late 1960s it no longer worked as a political system: the political structure did not keep up with fundamental changes in Belgian society. Therefore, according to Conway, the failure of Belgium was first and foremost structural and existed well before the crises of citizenship and identity that became so vocal and divisive from the 1960s on. In other words, Conway makes a strong case that it was the inability of the state to accommodate societal change at all levels that caused Belgium as a nation-state to fail. He explains that the failure to accommodate societal change applied at all levels, from the political elites to the working classes, from the politics created by linguistic difference between the Flemish and Walloons to the reassertion of the individual over the influence of the political-religious “pillars.” According to Conway, in the end, the crisis of Belgium was more a crisis of the state than of the nation. That is to say, it was not the rivalry of competing linguistic-nationalisms that brought Belgium to its end but rather the inability of the Belgian state to respond to the expectations of its diverse range of citizens. The crisis expressed itself as a linguistic-political one

in the aftermath of the 1960s, but its origins lay in the inflexibility of the state to adapt. And this explains why Conway’s research on the reconstruction period is so significant, because if there had been a time that Belgium could have reconstructed itself fully it would surely have been between 1944 and 1947. But Conway argues that the failure to adapt already existed in the 1930s, and so, ultimately, his argument is one of continuities.

This is a beautifully constructed book that makes a very convincing case for the collapse of Belgium as a nation-state. It is much more than a history of the postwar reconstruction period, although it is that as well. It will be of use to academics interested in the construction of European political identities, political legitimacy, and the nation-state in the Cold War and post-Cold War world, as well as anyone working on the history or political environment of Belgium in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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