

**Jonathan A. Epstein.** *Belgium's Dilemma: The Formation of the Belgian Defense Policy, 1932-1940.* History of Warfare Series. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2014. 288 pp. \$160.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-25467-1.

**Reviewed by** Nicholas Sambaluk (Air University)

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In recounting the development of Belgium's defense policy from 1932 until the country's invasion by Nazi Germany in May 1940, Jonathan A. Epstein argues cogently for a more favorable reconsideration of what is typically seen as a lackluster performance. The country's defeat, commonly called the "Eighteen Days' campaign," circumstantially lends itself to disfavor, but Epstein maintains that a post facto evaluation of Belgian defense efforts, although widespread, unfairly criticizes decisions and actions taken by leaders facing complex challenges. Simply aligning with the Allied powers prior to the German invasion, in addition to courting catastrophic domestic political dissension, "would have been to commit national suicide" by guaranteeing an already likely invasion (p. 273).

Epstein, therefore, combats interrelated perceptions about Belgium in World War II. One is that Belgium's stance of "independence" stonewalled any cooperation with the Allies in the lead-up to the war. Another is the presumption that inadequate performance of the Belgian Army and swift capitulation of King Leopold III propelled the Allied disaster in May 1940.

Much of the work lays out the confessional, linguistic, political, and geographic factors that complicated the country's strategic picture. The context entails consideration of Belgium's experi-

ence in World War I, including its army's battle for survival, its then-king Albert's role during the crisis, and the military occupation experienced by most of the country, including the Walloon eastern half and much of the Flemish western. For students of military history who are less familiar with the course of social and political forces in Belgium, these chapters provide abundant and interesting information, presenting a more nuanced perspective of otherwise seemingly baffling strategic decisions, such as Belgium's partial divestment in 1936 from its military cooperation with France and its occasional deployment of army units on its southern frontier facing France.

Concurrent with the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939, for example, Belgium massed troops in a defensive posture along the Franco-Belgian border, and the weight of its deployments did not shift back to Belgium's eastern border with Germany until the conclusion of the Polish campaign allowed the redeployment of German forces to the west. Belgian leaders had in fact been guarding against the prospect of French forces violating Belgian sovereignty by marching through it in order to attack Germany. In explaining the occasional positioning of Belgian forces along the country's border with France, the book might have gone further in underlining the point by noting that successive iterations of French military plans prior to

World War I (up to 1912) regularly called for a French military passage through Belgium, invalidating that country's neutrality and sovereignty.

Part of Epstein's argument also involves demonstrating that Belgium's military performed far better than remembered afterward. Examples to this effect include the formation, at the behest of interwar defense minister Albert Devèze, of mobile units armed with light T-13 tanks and tasked with fighting a delaying action in the Ardennes region. In this, Belgium's use of small armored vehicles belies the ponderous myth that Allied planners assumed the Ardennes to be impassable to vehicles, whereas they in fact mistakenly considered the roads insufficient for the transportation of large motorized units but not for smaller complements of light vehicles. The combat performance of these Belgian units both impressed and delayed the Germans advancing in the vital region, although this impact was negated by miscommunications between the French and Belgian forces and by the Belgian command's belief that the anticipated strike in the Ardennes constituted a supporting thrust subordinate to an attack against central Belgium, which they assumed would be the main effort.

Despite looking at a comparatively less famous aspect of an infamous topic, and despite its revisionist intent, *Belgium's Dilemma* presents the reader with a coherent narrative that contextualizes events and corrects common misperceptions. It is a useful contribution to the literature on World War II and an insightful historical window on the kinds of strategic considerations faced by small countries set amid larger powers.

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