

# H-Diplo

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**Sally Marks, *Paul Hymans: Belgium*.** (Makers of the Modern World: The Peace Conferences of 1923 and their Aftermath). London: Haus Publishing Ltd, 2010. 215 pp. ISBN 978-1-905791-81-1 (hardback, £10.40).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Martin Conway, Balliol College, University of Oxford**

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Small states, so the dictum goes, do not make their own histories. But they can at least try. Such was the case of Belgium which in the tumult of the First World War and its prolonged aftermath found itself projected from the margins of European diplomacy to what Sally Marks rightly terms “startling diplomatic prominence” (171). As Marks’s new study of a subject which she has long commanded with formidable authority well displays, the experience was far from being a happy one. Belgium had of course not sought the limelight: the neutrality it was guaranteed under the 1839 Treaties had long since become part of the self-image of a nation which to the frustration of King Leopold II had eschewed military and colonial greatness in favour of the pursuit of the modern virtues of free trade and cultural and social progress. German invasion in August 1914 brought this isolation to an abrupt close, and in the process turned the leader of its minority Liberal political party, Paul Hymans, into one of the principal diplomatic figures of Versailles and Geneva. Hymans became Foreign Minister in January 1918 in the coalition government established in exile at Le Havre during the war, and made the post very much his own, occupying it with intermissions consequent upon Belgium’s frequent changes of government until 1935. A Brussels notable and lawyer with a nice house in the suburb of Ixelles, impeccable manners and clothes, as well as the wide range of cultural and intellectual interests appropriate to a

late-nineteenth-century statesman, Hymans was initially unsuited to the rough and tumble of Versailles. His legalistic, punctilious and overlong interventions in meetings exasperated the French and, above all, Lloyd George, who soon developed an antipathy to invocations of the sufferings of martyred Belgium, pointing out that Belgium had lost fewer soldiers in the First World War than had Australia. Nevertheless, Hymans soon adapted to the realities of international diplomacy, learning when to keep quiet but also when to threaten to withdraw, the value of deploying King Albert to intimidate the representatives of other states with the force of majesty, and perhaps above all how to exploit the limited freedom of manoeuvre allowed to Belgium by the frequent disagreements between the French and British governments.

Not that he was ever more than modestly successful. Indeed, the overwhelming impression gained from reading Marks's lucid analysis of such technical matters as the Luxembourg railways and navigation rights (and sanitary provisions) in the mouth of the Scheldt is that Belgium's interests were consistently neglected by the Great Powers. No matter; Hymans himself prospered in the new diplomatic age inaugurated by the First World War. He became something of the Zelig of his age: always present (and very much correct) in the photographs of the diplomatic events of the 1920s and early 1930s, be it as President of sessions of the League of Nations (which provided him with a convenient alternative berth, when Belgian governmental crises had pushed him out of office), seeking to solve the disputes of Vilnius, Corfu or, subsequently, Manchuria; or attending, more or less decorously, the World Economic Conference or the League Disarmament Conference. It was a lengthy and, in its own terms, distinguished diplomatic career which must have given him an intimate knowledge of Europe's railways (and First Class carriages), and which coincided rather neatly with Belgium's brief period of prominence in Europe's international diplomacy. As he finally left office for the last time in 1935, so Belgium began its diplomatic reorientation which, under the leadership of the very different figures of Paul-Henri Spaak and King Leopold III, would lead to its renunciation of the 1920 military agreement with France and its espousal of a new policy of diplomatic independence.

Hymans is, in his own way, a fascinating character, who symbolised the tentative evolution of Belgian Liberal politics out of its nineteenth-century mould and into a new era of mass politics. Marks, however, rightly assumes that few of her readers will be too engaged by the complexities of Belgian politics. Therefore, within the biographical mould imposed by the series in which it appears, her book provides a lucid and accessible introduction to Belgium's place in the international diplomacy of the era. This is a remarkably unfamiliar story, and Marks's book provides the best modern introduction to the subject. The period between 1914 and the mid-1930s constituted a twenty-year moment when Belgium rather suddenly became part of the wider European diplomatic process, and when it sought to influence that process in ways that accorded with its interests. But, as Marks well shows, what is remarkable is the failure of those efforts and, with it, the wider failure of the system within which it tried to operate. Belgium's international ambitions after the First World War were threefold: international support for its economic reconstruction after the highly destructive impact of German Occupation; recognition of its independence in a situation in which there could be no simple return to its pre-1914 neutrality; and security, in the form of guarantees of its borders and of international intervention in the event of invasion. In all of these goals, it was largely unsuccessful. In part, this failure was the product of its own strategy. Marks demonstrates how Belgium pursued, especially in 1919, goals such as the absorption of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg into its sphere of influence (reversing the so-called amputation of Belgian territory in 1839) that were simply based on a lack of understanding of the attitudes of the major powers. But, at heart, the failures of Belgium were not self-inflicted. They were the product of the almost complete disengagement of the British from a concern with Belgium's interests and the adoption by the French of an offensive strategy that saw Belgium's interests only through the prism of their ambition to establish a forward zone of influence in Luxembourg, Belgium and the Rhineland.

None of this perhaps mattered as much, at least in the short term, as it could have done. Belgian public opinion, and more especially its press, was outraged at the neglect by foreign powers of Belgium's territorial ambitions, but there was no immediate threat to the country's security. Efforts to influence events in Luxembourg came to nought, as did the prolonged attempts to force the Dutch government into making concessions over the

Scheldt river or Dutch Limburg, but Belgium's borders (including the minor addition, agreed at Versailles, of the germanophone cantons in the east) did receive some guarantee via the Locarno agreements. More striking, however, is the way in which the issue of the stability of a crucial corner of north-west Europe failed to receive any proper resolution. Belgium survived to celebrate its centenary in 1930, but no new treaty had been concluded among the Great Powers to guarantee its independence. Instead, the Belgians were in effect obliged to seek their own salvation, coming close to agreeing to Stresemann's proposal in 1926 that the eastern cantons be returned to Germany in exchange for German financial assistance to cope with Belgium's post-war economic crisis. Britain effectively disappeared out of Belgian affairs in the early 1920s, leaving Belgium only with the lopsided 1920 military agreement with France, an agreement that Hymans recognised was intended to serve France's security and not that of Belgium.

In the 1930s, the shortcomings of the absence of any multilateral diplomatic or security structure in north-west Europe became painfully apparent, leading to Belgium's attempt at a policy of diplomatic independence, and ultimately the renewed German invasion of May 1940. Hymans, by then in retirement, fled once again from the German armies to France. But this time there was no rallying of the Great Powers for the cause of Belgium. France, instead, concluded an armistice with Germany and established the Vichy regime, while Britain abandoned European commitments for the defence of its territory and empire. By the time that Hymans died in a hotel room in Nice in March 1941, Belgium was under an apparently irreversible German Occupation and its monarch had recently returned from seeking to negotiate with Hitler at Berchtesgaden the terms of Belgium's entry into a German-dominated New Order Europe. Hymans had in effect lived long enough to witness not just the demise of his country's independence, but the wider collapse of the international system in which he and Belgium had so prominently participated.

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