This book has been a long time in the making. It is the fruit, as Patricia Chastain Howe makes clear in her introduction, of over twenty-five years of research and emerges from a doctoral thesis first supervised by George W. Taylor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Yet its publication is highly timely, at a moment when the foreign policy of the French Revolution is again being scrutinised under the microscope of archival scholarship and when some exciting general conclusions are being extracted that help to nuance our understanding of the revolutionary movement as a whole. Recent publications by historians like Bailey Stone, Orville Murphy and Jeremy Whiteman have done a lot to inject life into what once seemed a rather dry topic, a closed world of diplomatic history that was often poorly integrated into more general histories of the 1790s. And though Patricia Howe does not specifically refer to these authors – the research for this book almost certainly predates their publication - her monograph belongs to the same school of history writing. She presents the history of diplomacy in the context of the general political history of the day: the bitter squabbles between Girondins and Montagnards (here symbolised by the struggle over the foreign ministry between Beurnonville and Pache), the impact of the war on high politics, and the centrality of the war in Belgium and the United Provinces to the ideological mission of the revolutionary leadership.

At first glance this is a monograph covering four years of French foreign policy towards the Belgian provinces of the Austrian Empire, a policy that led to war with Austria and Britain in 1792 and 1793 and to defeat and humiliation for one of the Revolution’s early military heroes, Charles-François Dumouriez, who would be forced into exile branded as a traitor. But it is far more than that. For if Howe is right - and the solid archival sources on which her book is based leave us in little doubt that she is - then the outbreak of the war was the logical culmination of years of consistent strategic planning by Dumouriez and his close ally Pierre LeBrun, and their single-minded, at times near-obsessive pursuit of a plan to liberate Liège and the Belgian provinces from Austrian rule and to establish a united democratic republic in their place. Both were close to the Girondin
leadership, and both had a commitment to secure the independence of Belgium and the democratic rights of her people. That is the thread that runs through this book: it is the story of a concerted political campaign led by Dumouriez and LeBrun and conducted both inside and outside the National Assembly. Patricia Howe refers to this as France's 'Belgian plan', though she is quick to acknowledge that the term is hers and was never used by contemporaries.

The evidence she produces in support of her interpretation is dense and often compelling. Much of her book is based on primary documents, especially the correspondence between ministers and their generals on the frontier. Both LeBrun and Dumouriez served in the foreign ministry in these early years, and, though they came to politics from different professions and perspectives – LeBrun had been a journalist, Dumouriez an army officer – they were as one in their concern to liberate Belgium and offer the Belgians democratic institutions. LeBrun even became a naturalised citizen of Liège. This, she believes, was their principal motivation from as early as 1789-90, when they had shared a deep concern and fellow-feeling for the Belgian independence movement, to the extent that their work in favour of the Belgian radical cause should be seen as ‘critical to our understanding of the French decision to invade Austria in 1792’. And though it might seem exaggerated to attribute so much influence to two individuals, she offers an explanation that rings true, pointing out that when the Assembly took responsibility for foreign affairs from the King the deputies’ concentration on domestic issues was so total that the two men were left a relatively free hand. The rest of the book is the story of the machinations to which they resorted in order to pursue their aim.

It is a stirring tale, if a tragic one, of blind commitment to a political cause, and it tends to give the lie to the idea that the Girondins were held together by little more than loose sociability and friendship groups. We find LeBrun, while still at the foreign ministry in Paris, organising exiled Liégeois patriots and collaborating with Belgian radicals in the cause of independence. Dumouriez, back in command in the field, is given command of the Armée du Nord, a post bestowed by LeBrun, claims Howe, so that he could achieve their common goals in Belgium. Dumouriez remained committed to a French invasion of the Belgian provinces, believing that his army would be able to count on the support of ordinary people and that victory was therefore assured. She cites the fact that this course of action was supported by the Diplomatic Committee in Paris as proof that ‘the Belgian Plan had become official French policy’, that it was no longer limited to the entusiasms of two men. The war in Holland, too, was predicated upon the plans for Belgium, while LeBrun hoped to secure his goals by maintaining good relations with Britain. Of course, things would not proceed as simply as that. Belgian conservatives saw no advantage in supporting an invader allied to their radical opponents. Indiscipline and blasphemy by the radical sans-culotte battalions in Brussels antagonised local people and encouraged a clerical reaction. Finally, the victor of Jemappes would be outfought by the Austrians at Neerwinden, after which the French were forced to abandon Belgium to the enemy. The Belgian plan was in tatters. To the government in Paris this debacle bore all the signs of treason, especially since Dumouriez then tried to rally other generals against the Jacobin administration, going so far as to urge an invasion of France to expel them from power. In response the Jacobins sent out commissaires to secure the loyalty of the army, quelling any possible mutiny and forcing Dumouriez into exile. He would go over to the Austrians and would end his wartime career in London, where he advised the British government on how to resist Napoleon. LeBrun, less fortunate and more steadfast, was betrayed by his landlord in Paris and despatched to the guillotine in December 1793.
There the book ends. On one level it is a curiously moral tale of political principle and blind commitment to the cause of Belgian liberties. But it is more than that. For if Patricia Howe is right, the issue of Belgium was not only a consistent element in French foreign policy across the first four years of the Revolution, but it played a significant role in the battles between Girondins and Montagnards in the early months of the republic, and contributed to the brutal purge of the Girondin leadership following the federalist revolt.

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