

DOCTORAATSONDERZOEK - DOCTORATS

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The Island and the Storm. A Social-Cultural History of the Belgian Diplomatic Corps in Times of Democratization, 1885-1935

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The Island and the Storm examines how processes of democratization have revealed themselves in the evolution of the diplomat culture. Focusing on the Belgian diplomatic corps as a test case and investigating the social and professional practices and discourses of its members, it sheds light, from without and within, on a fundamental phase in the diplomatic corps' transition from a European aristocratic fraternity to the international meritocratic elite that it is today. Apart from that, it contributes to our understanding of the process of negotiation between – what could be labelled as – “pre-modern” and “modern” ways of conceiving and articulating international relations.

The historical phase studied in this work covers the years between 1885 and 1935. In Belgium, this period witnessed the broadening of political democracy, most notably in the form of several franchise extensions and in the rise of the mass media. These were years when, to rephrase Aristotle's theory of mixed government, the triangular relation between the one, the few, and the many underwent considerable changes, in both the realms of domestic and foreign policy. In this story, the one is the Belgian king, the few are the Belgian governing politicians, and the many are the Belgian public, whose opinions on diplomats and diplomacy seem to have been primarily voiced in parliament and in the press. *The Island and the Storm* explores this changing

relationship from the perspective of Belgian diplomats, who, especially in the beginning of this period, were closely associated with the one. This association came under pressure in the wake of the two major episodes in the Belgian diplomatic history of the fifty years under scrutiny, namely the acquisition of a colony by King Leopold II in 1885 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Albeit with a different intensity, both these episodes impacted processes of democratization in Belgium.

The Island and the Storm fills an important hiatus in our understanding of diplomatic culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Contrary to more ‘traditional’ diplomatic histories, it resolutely writes the political into the social-cultural history of diplomats. Firstly, it clearly positions the institution of diplomacy within the national political system and implements a thorough negotiating perspective between diplomats on the one hand, and the three poles of ‘mixed government’ on the other hand. This implies scrutinizing the changing relations between diplomats and the monarchy, between diplomats and the members of the government, and between diplomats and parliamentarians and journalists. Secondly, it chooses to adopt the perspective of the diplomatic corps of a minor and neutral state on the international scene. Arguably, the different stakes of such a state in comparison with those of the much studied Great Powers affected the ways in which the institution of diplomacy created meaning for its practitioners. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the thesis lifts the social-cultural history of diplomats over the threshold of the First World War. Contrary to the few existing social and social-cultural histories of diplomatic communities, most

of which tend to offer fairly static portraits of diplomats in an age when the paradigms of 'traditional' diplomacy still predominated the conduct of international relations, on the international level this study scrutinizes how diplomats dealt with what contemporaries labelled as the transition from 'old' to 'new' diplomacy. On the domestic level, it takes into account how this elite social group reacted to the social and political transformations caused by the sweeping event of the war.

I argue that while in international politics social skills and professional knowledge still significantly contributed to the success of diplomats, on the domestic scene their success largely depended on the extent to which they could convince the sovereign of their loyalty, the politicians of their flexibility, and the public of their heroism. Indeed, the most successful diplomats were the ones who managed to adopt a self-effacing stance not in the execution of Belgian foreign policy but in their relations with the King, the politicians and the public. Such self-effacement allowed the King to affirm his authority over foreign policy, enabled the politicians to shine on the international stage and conferred diplomats a certain mystical lustre in the eyes of the public.