

RECENSIONS - RECENSIES - BOOK REVIEWS

MICHAEL F. PALO

Neutrality as a Policy Choice for Small/Weak Democracies. Learning from the Belgian Experience

Leiden/Boston, Brill/Nijhoff, 2019, 559 p.

Belgium is having somewhat of a moment in diplomatic history. Maybe it is the centennial of the Treaty of Versailles, drawing new attention to the sovereignty of small nations. Or perhaps the modest surge in scholarship is connected to the uncertainties small states face today, with traditional transatlantic security under pressure and several world powers competing for dominance. Whichever the incentive, historians and political scientists have shown fresh interest in the eternal struggle of small nations to stay both independent and safe in a volatile international environment. In historical small state studies, Belgium has been a popular case study since at least the 1970s and has recently drawn new attention. Neal G. Jess and John R. Dreyer include Belgium in their re-examination of small states in the international system (2016). H.P. van Tuyll van Serooskerken (2017) writes an account of the Belgian and Dutch participation in the Paris Peace Conference, that builds on Sally Marks' *Innocent abroad* (1981). Maartje Abbenhuis compellingly reconsiders the idea and practices of neutrality in *An age of neutrals* (2014), decades after David Kieft's *Belgium's return to neutrality* (1972), Jonathan Helmreich's *Belgium and Europe* (1976) and Daniel H. Thomas' study on Belgian neutrality in European diplomacy (1983). Meanwhile, Belgian scholars such as Rik Coolsaet (*Les Affaires étrangères au service de l'Etat belge de 1830 à nos jours*, with Claude Roosens and Vincent Dujardin, 2014) and Michael Auwers (*The island and the storm: a social-cultural history of the Belgian diplomatic corps in times of democratization, 1885-1935*, 2014) have made strides in deciphering the inner workings of Belgian foreign policy and diplomatic culture.

All the above works and many, many more are examined in Michael Palo's *Neutrality as a pol-*

icy choice for small/weak democracies. Learning from the Belgian experience. In a detailed and well-written synthesis, the author combines old and new insights, and international and national scholarship on Belgian foreign policy during the 19th and 20th century. This is a subject Palo has thought, taught and written about for the past forty years. A professor emeritus of history and international theory at Vesalius College and the Brussels Schools of International Studies, he wrote a PhD on Belgian diplomacy during the First World War (University of Illinois, 1978). The "long incubation" (p. XIII) of the book is felt in the rare combination of theoretical scope and historical depth that marries the systemic, nomothetic perspective of a political scientist with the interest in the uniqueness of a nation's trajectory of a historian.

The book's central point is that small states are naturally drawn to international neutrality as a survival strategy and that weak states' foreign policy is as much driven by internal socio-political dynamics as it is by international structures. To substantiate these two claims -of which the former seems more original than the latter- Palo takes a fresh look at Belgian foreign policy. First, he uses counterfactual questions and scenarios to demonstrate the range of available policy choices to the Belgian government, especially before 1914. Second, he reconstructs Belgian foreign policy within his own Integrated Analytical Framework to examine the international and national factors at play. In his *Objectives and Methodology*, Palo lays out the basic elements of his new approach to a well-worn subject. He states that "one cannot understand the foreign and security policies behavior of small/weak states by remaining exclusively at the system-level analysis" (p. 7) and laments the neo-realist tendency to treat the structure of the international system as the most important driver of foreign policy. Instead, Palo proposes a five-step methodology that emphasizes the dialectic relation between the international system and the national unit with its specific domestic agendas and divisions.

Palo applies a counterfactual perspective in his first chapter, imagining the absence of non-voluntary armed neutrality between 1839 and 1914. Although he presents a laudable summary of the historiography on Belgian foreign policy, this is the shortest chapter of the book with engaging but rather fragmented sections on the roots of Belgian nationhood, alliances during the Franco-Prussian war and the British decision to defend Belgian sovereignty in 1914. Using these case-studies, the author argues convincingly that neutrality would indeed have been the safest, most sensible road for the small nation. He carefully weighs the classic neo-realist options such as balancing, bandwagoning with a stronger state or transcending international discord, and shows instead that 'hiding' or voluntary non-alignment would have been the best route for Belgium. The counterfactual analysis, however, fails to provide adequate proof that the Belgian government would have actually consistently chosen that option between 1839 and 1914. It is regrettable that Palo does not use his five-step approach and the in-depth analysis of the next chapters to substantiate the counterfactual hypothesis that/how neutrality would have been pursued by Belgian administrations on key moments. But it is almost absurd to fault this erudite and ambitious overview for what it has not done.

In the next three chapters, Palo puts his five-step approach into practice and builds a strong case for a dialectic analysis of internal dynamics and international political evolutions if one wants to understand a country's foreign policy. The two chapters on Belgian foreign and security policies between 1914 and 1940 are the heart of this work, and should be mandatory reading for all students of European international relations in the era of the Two World Wars. Palo meticulously traces how the neutrality that failed to protect Belgium was abandoned during the First World War, and replaced by a more independent course, with accession to the League of Nations, a military agreement with France and an economic union with Luxemburg. He also shows how Belgium's foreign game plan was fraught with internal frictions and the reality of the country's geopolitical position. The govern-

ment started to reverse its course in March 1931; and eventually decided to go back into hiding in October 1936, and pursue voluntary quasi-neutrality and rearmament instead of balancing or bandwagoning with Great Britain and France. Palo points out that this often-lamented decision can only be explained by the "internal political, linguistic, and ideological division" that "dictated a self-help policy" (p. 347). He also argues that another route would not have "spared them the horrors of World War II" (p. 155) and probably would have worsened "wartime and postwar divisions in Belgian society" (p. 258). The fourth chapter mainly covers the period 1940-1950 and details how after spending one hundred years in "some kind of neutrality" (p. 259) and with almost constant internal divisions, Belgium unanimously decided to side with the United States against the Soviet bloc and "eagerly joined" (p. 259) the rules-based system of collective security embodied by the NATO and the UN.

In a fifth and final chapter; Palo takes a broader political science-based approach. He delves into small state studies, and provides a rather lengthy overview of the literature on the security dilemmas of small democracies worldwide in recent history. In the last section, Palo finally attempts to "pull together" (p. 336) what the Belgian case study and comparative overview teach us about the international behavior of small/weak democracies. He admits that the Belgian case presents little in terms of "general lessons to learn and patterns of action to emulate" (p. 347), but shows that geo-politics and collective security matter, domestic politics and culture matter, and that careful interdisciplinary and empiric consideration of both are essential to understand foreign policy.

Palo's account is based primarily on secondary sources. This does not, however, diminish the historiographical value of this book. In voluminous footnotes - almost a book on their own - Palo treats the reader to small, often splendid state-of-the-art assessments on a wide range of topics spanning more than a century. The 150-page bibliography displays the extensive reading that has gone into

Palo's 'in-depth process tracing'. This book is not an easy read. The abundance of information and perspectives makes the text dense and by times difficult to navigate. But the persistent reader is rewarded with a rich and multilayered account. In fact, Palo offers three books in one: an encyclopedic synthesis of Belgian foreign policy, a thoughtful analysis of the foreign policy options of small democracies, and a historiographical review on Belgian international relations. The end-result is impressive, and should be a fixture in the libraries of both political scientists and historians interested in how small democracies operate, survive, and thrive in a big and volatile world. It might even inspire them to look over the disciplinary fence.

Nel de Mùelenaere

LODE WILS

Op zoek naar een natie. Het ontstaan van Vlaanderen binnen België,

Kalmthout, Polis, 2020, 414 p.

Het kan niet ontkend worden dat de nu 91-jarige Lode Wils een heel productieve en onvermoeibare historicus is, met legio publicaties over de Vlaamse Beweging die zowel tijdens zijn professoraat in Kortrijk en Leuven als tijdens zijn emeritaatsperiode tot stand kwamen. Meerdere boeken zagen het licht, waarvan sommige na verloop van tijd in een nieuw jasje verschenen of waarbij de aparte volumes samengebundeld werden. Tal van artikels die hij voor tijdschriften schreef, verschenen ook opnieuw in verzamelbundels. Zijn leerlingen zorgden daarvoor bij zijn emeritaat en uitgeverij Polis doet nu hetzelfde met een twintigtal andere al eerder gepubliceerde artikels. Jammer genoeg is dit boek één van de laatste van de verdwijnende uitgeverij Polis geworden.

Wils' nieuwste boek telt dus verschillende genres. *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, het tijdschrift waaraan Wils al jarenlang meewerkt, wijdt aan voor de Vlaamse Beweging belangrijke of controversiële werken steeds uitvoerige besprekingen waarin specialisten er hun licht laten over schijnen. Wils nam die taak zeer dikwijls op zich. Die teksten vormen het hoofdaandeel van dit boek. De andere komen uit verzamelbundels rond spe-

cifieke thema's. Hij publiceert deze artikels - op twee na die hij bijwerkte - in hun oorspronkelijke vorm en daterend uit de periode 1992-2019.

Wils selecteerde deze artikels en bracht ze samen onder één noemer: zoals de ondertitel van het boek zegt gaat het over het ontstaan van Vlaanderen binnen België. Dat betekent dus dat hij eerst aandacht heeft voor het ontstaan van België lang voor, in en na 1830 en de lijn doortrekt tot vandaag. Tegen de achtergrond van de grote maatschappelijke transformaties in de westerse samenlevingen schetst hij de doorbraak van de naties in de 19^{de} eeuw en van de recente periodes waarin nationale identiteiten eveneens sterk aanwezig zijn. Dan volgen, chronologisch geordend, de case-studies die de evolutie sinds 1830 concreter maken. Met de portretten van Willem I en Hendrik Conscience komen de scheiding van 1830 en de Vlaamse Beweging in het jonge België aan bod. De liberale Pangermanist Pol De Mont, de katholieke flamingant Karel van Caeneghem en de liberale Vlaamsgezinde Nicolaas Cupérus brengen ons bij de Vlaamse Beweging op het einde van de 19^{de} en het begin van de 20^{ste} eeuw. De Duitse *Flamenpolitik* en het activisme ontbreken evenmin, noch Wils' bekende stelling dat de Eerste Wereldoorlog en het Duitse ingrijpen de anti-Belgische stroming schiepen en Den Haag het knooppunt van beide bewegingen was. Een andere stelling -hoe Albert I in het interbellum de Vlaamse Beweging afremt- krijgt uiteraard ook aandacht. Op basis van de analyse van een verslagboek krijgen we vervolgens een gedetailleerd zicht op de werking van de Katholieke Vlaamse Landsbond, een creatie van de katholieke flamingant Frans Van Cauwelaert, aan wie Wils een heel uitvoerige biografie wijdde. Met een stuk over de latere oprichter van Verdinaso, Joris Van Severen, komen linkse en rechtse stromingen tijdens de complexe naoorlogse jaren 1918-1920 aan bod. Streuvels' biografie laat zien dat deze auteur tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog nog steeds in Duitsland uitgegeven werd. De autobiografie van de Nederlandse historicus Pieter Geyl is voor Wils dan weer de gelegenheid om de Groot Nederlandse beweging in het interbellum centraal te stellen. De stukken over Elias en Van Roosbroeck brengen ons bij