

## EXERCISING NEUTRALITY

*The Practice of Manoeuvres in the Belgian Army before the Great War*

**- Bram Dierckx & Josephine Hoegaerts -**

Marie Henriette, princess consort (later Queen) of Belgium and the unhappy wife of Leopold II had a stallion in her Spa stables called “Beverloo”. An odd name for a horse, perhaps, referring as it did to the national military training camp on the northern border. She had reportedly given Beverloo his name after witnessing an impressive cavalry attack during annual military manoeuvres in and around the camp. Like many civilians, but unlike her husband, Marie Henriette greatly enjoyed the ‘virile’ spectacle of the army’s joint exercises. In 1862 she wrote to Felix Chazal, the Minister of War, to discuss the manoeuvres’ capacity to cheer up her brother, who had been bored with the theatre. The manoeuvres were more than theatre, though. Throughout the nineteenth century, they were organized regularly and served as a reminder of national unity and military readiness to both the military itself and the population at large.

“A soldier’s life, considered as a whole, can be divided into two distinct periods : life in the garrison, and life at the camp and on manoeuvre”<sup>1</sup>.

In 1912, two Belgian army physicians published a booklet on *La vie du soldat belge*. Their main worry was hygiene in barracks and garrisons, and in their booklet they introduced young recruits to their new military (and ideally salubrious) surroundings. Now, more than a century after the publication of the booklet, we have a relatively clear idea of what life in the barracks was like for the ‘modern’ armies of Europe. Works like that of Ute Frevert and Odile Roynette on the German and French nation ‘in barracks’ have added to our understanding of military culture and military life in peacetime in the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup>. The second period in a soldier’s life proclaimed by the physicians cited above has, however, garnered less attention. Although manoeuvre warfare figures as an important aspect of strategic thinking and military history<sup>3</sup>, the very common experience of

manoeuvres as an exercise for military men of all ranks has seldom been studied by historians<sup>4</sup>.

In this article, we focus precisely on this practice of manoeuvring as part of military training in peace time. The Belgian army – which saw little military action throughout the nineteenth century – offers an intriguing example of how the theory of manoeuvre warfare and its application to military exercises was introduced and developed and how it affected the image of the army within the modern nation<sup>5</sup>. For a country that was consciously and necessarily neutral, the yearly *grandes manoeuvres* (and the energy and cost they entailed) may seem like a futile exercise. Nevertheless, the manoeuvres were highly prized as crucial parts of the training of rank and file soldiers and officers alike : they were introduced immediately upon the formation of the new nation’s army in 1831, were organized regularly throughout the whole century, comprised enormous numbers of soldiers and served as an advertisement

1. “*La vie du soldat, considérée dans son ensemble, peut être divisée en deux périodes bien distinctes : la vie en garnison et la vie au camp et aux manoeuvres*”. RUILOT & SACRE, *La vie du soldat belge, Considérations et conseils relatifs à l’Éducation et à l’Hygiène militaires*, Brussels, 1912, p. 18. 2. UTE FREVERT, *Die kasernierte Nation. Militärdienst und Zivilgesellschaft in Deutschland*, München, 2001 and ODILE ROYNETTE, “*Bons pour le service*”, *L’expérience de la caserne en France à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 2004. 3. For definitions of manoeuvre warfare in military history, see e.g. CHRIS BELLAMY, “Manoeuvre warfare”, in *The Oxford companion to military history*, New York, 2001, p. 541-544; K.W. ETES, “Maneuver warfare”, in JAMES BRADFORD (ed.), *International encyclopedia of military history*, New York, 2006, p. 812-813; “Maneuver”, in *The encyclopedia of nineteenth-century land warfare, An illustrated World View*, New York, 2001, p. 526 and GILBERT BODINIER, “Manoeuvre et manoeuvres”, in *Dictionnaire d’art et d’histoire militaires*, ed. André Corvisier, Paris, 1988, p. 538-540. 4. An edited volume by Christian Malis focuses on the heritage and history of the place of manoeuvres in warfare, but less on their place within military training. CHRISTIAN MALIS (ed.), *Guerre et Manoeuvre. Héritages et renouveau*, Paris, 2009. 5. For a brief overview of military historiography in Belgium, see JOOST VAESSEN, “De sa tour d’ivoire vers la cité ?”, *De Belgische hedendaagse militaire historiografie sinds 1970*, in MACHTELD DE METSENAERE, JEAN-CLAUDE BURGELMAN & GUY VANTHEMSCHÉ (eds.), *De Tuin van Heden. Dertig jaar geschiedschrijving over het hedendaagse België*, Brussel, 2007, p. 457-497.

for the army's discipline and efficiency. That the Belgian army command considered the manoeuvres a useful and necessary exercise is beyond question. Part of the research in this article will be concerned with their reasons for this conviction : what were the objectives of the Belgian *grandes manoeuvres*, and how did they change throughout the century ?

In answering this question, we will argue that the manoeuvres played a role in the subtle process of militarization that took place in Belgium before the Great War<sup>6</sup>; however, more importantly, we also contend that the *grandes manoeuvres* contributed to the army's self-image as the nation's representative or mirror-image rather than simply its protector. Although this function of military manoeuvres is likely to have been shared by other modern European armies, the specific character of Belgium (in the nineteenth century a relatively young and arguably artificial nation, and a bilingual nation at that) offers an exceptionally clear view of the interaction between the practices of 'making' and training an army on the one hand, and the birth of a nation and the creation of patriotism among its people on the other hand. Moreover, Belgium's neutral status presents an almost unique case (nineteenth-century sources tended towards comparisons with Switzerland) of almost uninterrupted military exercises. Although the threat of war regularly returned, the Belgian army was rarely involved in military conflict in the nineteenth century. Rather than developing 'in step' with the country's engage-

ment in warfare, the practice of military manoeuvres and the associated strategic theory changed according to the evolution of foreign politics and definitions of neutrality and its necessity in the nineteenth century.

In what follows, we will consider the development of the self-image of the modern army in the context of (and in close connection with) changing notions of neutrality and nationhood. In the first instance, we will do so chronologically : the first part of the article studies the inception and establishment of the nation, the army and its practice of military manoeuvres. In this first period (ca. 1830-1881), interaction with foreign armies played a significant role in the establishment of the army, and they also served as an important audience for the manoeuvres. It is also the period of the construction and extensive use of a central training camp for all Belgian recruits. The second period (1881-1913) represents a period of growing confidence : the nation and army have been firmly established, and the latter shows rising ambition as it takes its *grandes manoeuvres* outside the camp. It is also a period of cautious militarization characterized by heightened attention to the authenticity of the manoeuvres and their function as a preparation for actual war. In the third and final part, we take a step back and consider the perception of the manoeuvres by civilian observers (and thereby the role of these exercises in connecting the army to the 'nation' and its population). Bourgeois newspaper-readers, as well as the 'local'

6. NEL DE MÔELENAERE, "An Uphill Battle. Campaigning for the Militarization of Belgium, 1870-1914", in *Journal of Belgian History*, 42, 2012 (n°4), p. 144-179.



*Prince Baudouin visiting the Beverloo camp in 1887. The 'Royal Pavillion' occupied a central place in the camp, thus underscoring the camp's 'national' character. (Collection Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History)*

farmers upon whom soldiers were billeted during the manoeuvres, would inevitably come into contact with the army during the exercises<sup>7</sup>. Apart from cultivating unity within the army, the manoeuvres were bound to have an impact on the relations between the military and the civilian community in 'Belgium'.

## I. 1830-1881 : La Belgique a pris son rang

The first joint manoeuvres of the Belgian army took place almost immediately after the founding of the nation and the organization of the army. In 1831, they were organized in the observation-camp in Diest (close to Louvain). Their international context was glaringly obvious : like the army as a whole, the manoeuvres were largely in the hands of foreign officers (mainly French)<sup>8</sup>, whilst the enemy in the north, the Netherlands,

provided their primary objective : protection of the young nation's fragile independence<sup>9</sup>. Throughout the 1830s, the precarious position of Belgium between two more powerful nations, with an enemy to the north and an ally to the south, continued to shape the discourse on the Belgian army and its manoeuvres. The continuous and numerous presence of French and Polish officers in the army command led to some resentment (as they prevented the less experienced Belgian military personnel from rising through the ranks), but the general discourse was one of unity between Belgium and France and trust in the latter's officers. In 1836, the *Journal de l'Armée Belge* called for Franco-Belgian unity : "[n]ow, as a new era dawns over France and Belgium, let us live united!" The journal continued by stating that "[t]he Belgian and French people are born to love, not to hate each other"<sup>10</sup>. Belgian officers did not only lack the experience and organizational skill to raise a 'new' army; they also could not

7. The analyses are mainly based upon reports on the manoeuvres in the military, militaristic and civil press, including articles in the official military journal *La revue militaire – Journal de l'Armée belge*, the militaristic journal *La Belgique militaire – Journal hebdomadaire, Organe de l'armée*, the military medical journal *Archives belges de médecine militaire, Journal des sciences médicales, pharmaceutiques et vétérinaires* and the Catholic civil newspapers *Het Volk*, *Antisocialistisch Dagblad* and *Journal des Flandres* and the liberal *L'étoile belge* and *L'Indépendance belge*. Added to these were official and unpublished reports on the manoeuvres, and the manoeuvring regulations held at the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History in Brussels. 8. KRIS QUANTEN, *De officieren van het Belgisch leger in de negentiende eeuw : een historisch-sociologische benadering*, Unpublished MA thesis, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 1999, p. 40-41. 9. During the Ten Days' Campaign (2-12 august 1831), a French expeditionary force was all that prevented the disorganized Belgian army from being completely overrun by the Dutch which would have suppressed the Revolution. (JOHAN P. NATER, *De Tiendaagse Veldtocht, De Belgische opstand 1830/1831*, Bussum, 1980 and CHARLES TERLINDEN, *Histoire militaire des Belges, Part 2*, Brussels, 1968, p. 331-352). 10. "Aujourd'hui qu'une ère nouvelle régit la France et la Belgique, vivons unis !" and "Les Belges et les Français sont deux peuples faits pour s'aimer et non pour se haïr" ("Camp de Beverloo", *Journal de l'Armée belge* 3, 1836, p. 272 and 275).

boast the (international) reputation some French officers had, and which would reflect on the legitimacy and perceived stability of the Belgian troops. The French general Hurel serves as a particular example of the appreciation for French military experience and organization in the first decade of the Belgian army: he was charged, in 1835, with identifying a suitable area for a permanent site for the joint manoeuvres<sup>11</sup>. The *Journal de l'Armée belge* enthused that "it is thanks to the great General Hurel and his worthy Belgian and French soul mates that our young army has the sense of order, discipline and unity that make up its strength"<sup>12</sup>. In later years, the 'discovery' of the heaths of Beverloo – an area of empty land and sand dunes that would soon become the national training camp – was mainly attributed to the King, but in the 1830s, Hurel was the explicitly military and explicitly French hero of the camp.

The history of Beverloo Camp is complex, but its birth and original use seem straightforward enough: after the designation of the *Campine* (a region on the Dutch border) as its site, construction work began in 1835. Beverloo Camp was built in brick, which signalled its permanent character, and it replaced a number of smaller, temporary camps. It was

described, with growing national pride, as the first of its kind in Europe. The discourse on Beverloo's unique status continued well into the twentieth century. According to historian Henriette Claessens, writing in 2002, there was "No other military camp in Europe where the different branches of the armed forces can manoeuvre together, and which is built and equipped with, for its age, such efficiency and modernity"<sup>13</sup>. While the invention of the practice of military manoeuvres was ascribed to Frederick of Prussia (and occasionally to Gustave of Sweden), and command over the manoeuvring troops was in the hands of French officers, the practice of annual manoeuvres at a fixed and permanent place where recruits throughout the armed forces could come together was increasingly presented as a particularly Belgian stroke of genius, and Beverloo was favourably compared to the areas used by other nations for military exercises.

"Agreeing on this issue with practices in Sweden and Prussia, it is not only in strategic exercises that our soldiers must be educated; their physical flexibility must be developed in gymnastic exercises as well. The instruction that our troops have received at Beverloo Camp is simultaneously military, moral and

11. HENRI JAMAR, "Het kamp van Beverlo. Een stuk Limburgse heide door generaties soldaten gekend", in *Het Leger. De Natie*, 1954 (11), p. 12-13 and ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire belge de 1831 à 1914*, Brussels, 1958, p. 61-65. 12. "C'est au brave général Hurel et à ses dignes compagnons d'âmes belges et français que notre jeune armée doit les sentiments d'ordre, de discipline et d'union qui l'animent et qui font sa force" ("Camp de Beverloo", in *Journal de l'Armée belge*, 1836 (3), p. 280). 13. HENRIETTE CLAESSENS, *Leven en liefdes van Leopold I*, Tielt, 2002. Claessens' work on Beverloo is largely based on SYLVAIN WEUTS, *Honderdvijftig jaar Kamp van Beverlo. Geschiedenis van het Kamp van Beverlo en Leopoldsburch verteld aan de hand van oude prentkaarten, oude en actuele foto's*, Leopoldsburch, 1986, which, in its turn, is heavily inspired by GUILLAUME GRATRY, "Camp de Beverlo", in EUGÈNE VAN BEMMEL (ed.), *La Belgique Illustrée : ses monuments, ses paysages, ses oeuvres d'art*, Brussels, 1880, p. 480-492.





*The Beverloo camp was celebrated as the first of its kind in Europe. Its permanent, brick construction in particular was represented as a unique feature. Foreign visitors, such as Major H.B. Harvey, were as impressed with the camp as they were with its inhabitants. "Drunkenness is rare in the Belgian Army", Harvey noted in his report "and, amongst the young soldiers in this Camp, there appeared to exist a spirit of willingness, cheerfulness, and subordination". (Postcard, 1914, [www.delcampe.net](http://www.delcampe.net))*

material. Their hearts, minds and bodies were brought into shape at the same time”<sup>14</sup>.

Despite the self-congratulatory tone that prevailed in narratives about Beverloo, such narratives also seem driven by the knowledge that enforced stability and unity (indeed quite literally set in stone) was somehow more necessary in Belgium than elsewhere. The young army lacked long traditions to fall back on and thus needed the manoeuvres, the young nation was continuously under threat and therefore needed protection, and the recruits, who came from all corners of the country, were unaccustomed to ‘Belgian’ patriotism and therefore needed to be taught about the nation and its (political) unity.

In Belgian military historiography, the army has been described as a ‘melting pot’ that helped to constitute national unity by gathering recruits from different regions<sup>15</sup>. The amalgamating potential of the army was present in garrisons as well, but it was at Beverloo Camp and during the joint manoeuvres that the unifying power of the army was most consciously addressed by the military command (and the military and militaristic press). From its inception Beverloo

was conceived as “an opportunity for everyone to pledge reconciliation and unity”<sup>16</sup>. Beverloo Camp was the place where the three branches of the armed forces could train together, where the higher command in particular could be trained, and where the soldier was taught patriotism and would “become more and more attached to the national flag”<sup>17</sup>. The number of soldiers brought together for these early exercises was large in the context of Belgium: in 1835, 995 officers, 22,172 enlisted soldiers and 3,133 horses trained together<sup>18</sup>. They did so by re-enacting a number of battles from the recent past (past losses figuring as instructional experiences) and by fighting a crudely represented or simply imagined enemy. In both the historical and imagined battles, the Netherlands was usually cast in the role of enemy. During the 1872 manoeuvres, for example, the imagined enemy was described as “a Dutch army, concentrated in North Brabant, and threatening Antwerp”<sup>19</sup>. This reflected the very real continued threat to independence from the north, and also allowed ‘Belgian’ troops to create a distinctive identity for themselves carefully embedded in the country’s international context.

14. “D'accord sur ce point avec ce qui se pratique en Suède et en Prusse, ce n'était pas seulement aux exercices stratégiques que l'on voulait former nos soldats, on développait encore leur souplesse physique par des exercices gymnastiques. L'instruction que recevaient nos troupes au camp de Beverloo était une instruction à la fois militaire, morale et matérielle. On façonnait tous ensemble, leur cœur, leur intelligence et leur corps” (“Camp de Beverloo”, in *Journal de l'Armée belge*, 1836 (3), p. 282). 15. Luc De Vos, *Het effectief van de Belgische krijgsmacht en de militiewetgeving, 1830-1914*, Brussels, 1985, p. 159 and *Id.*, “De smeltkroes. De Belgische krijgsmacht als natievormende factor, 1830-1885”, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 1984 (15), p. 421-460. 16. “Pour tout le monde une occasion et un gage de rapprochement et d'union” (“Camp de Beverloo”, in *Journal de l'Armée belge*, 1836 (3), p. 284). 17. *Idem*, p. 280. 18. “De groote legeroefeningen”, in *Het Volk*, 27 August 1896, p. 1. The first census, by Alphonse Quetelet in 1846, observed a national population of slightly over 4 million. 19. “Une armée Hollandaise, concentrée dans le Brabant septentrional et menaçant Anvers” (“Camp de Beverloo”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1872 (2), p. 9).



The ostensible goal of the manoeuvres, to turn young men into Belgians and the young army into a well-oiled machine, cannot be understood outside this wider international (European) context. One of the signs of the exercises' success was, according to a writer in the *Journal de l'Armée Belge*, that "[t]oday, our army can compete, on issues of conduct, discipline and instruction, with the best and oldest organised troops of Europe"<sup>20</sup>. Other Belgian (military) journals felt vindicated in their triumphalist discourse on Beverloo Camp and its pioneering character by the attention foreign visitors gave to the camp and the manoeuvres. The practice of travelling to observe foreign armies, the exchange of military knowledge and experience, and military men's practice of reporting on 'foreign' exercises were common (Belgian officers went to observe the German, Russian, and French army as well), but the obvious foreign interest in the camp was noted with particular pleasure and seems to have been interpreted as confirmation that "Belgium has taken its place among the free and constitutional powers"<sup>21</sup>. In 1838, the French comte de Montalembert visited the national camp and drew up a report that would be reprinted throughout the whole century<sup>22</sup>. The report is interesting per se, as a document of historical military

practice, but in the history of the recently established camp and the Belgian army's burgeoning practice of military exercises, it mainly showed the first signs of emancipation from French military command: here was a French visitor who did not come to the Belgian army only to lead and teach but also to learn.

Fourteen years later, the British major Francis Harvey also published a report on his visit to Beverloo Camp. The major repeatedly stressed his appreciation for the 'liberal' and cordial welcome he received from officers, the camp's director and Leopold I. Harvey's account repeated the story of the unique position of Beverloo as the only permanent site for military instruction in Europe.

"The Camp of Beverloo, up to this date, is the *only Permanent Camp* in Europe – a circumstance worthy of our utmost attention at the present period; and one calculated to impress upon us the foresight and judgment with which King Leopold has directed, and still continues to direct, his energies, to rendering his small army equal to any contingency, in thus compensating by superior *quality*, for its inevitable deficiency in *numbers*, as compared with the standing armies of the larger Continental Powers"<sup>23</sup>.

20. "Notre armée peut aujourd'hui rivaliser pour la tenue, la discipline, l'instruction, avec les troupes les mieux et le plus anciennement organisées de l'Europe" ("Camp de Beverloo", in *Journal de l'Armée belge*, 1837 (4), p. 419). 21. "La Belgique a pris place parmi les puissances libres et constitutionnelles" ("Camp de Beverloo", in *Journal de l'Armée belge*, 1836 (3), p. 279). 22. *Belgique militaire* published the report in its entirety for the first time in 1912. It also reappeared in *Revue générale* and *La Vie militaire* ("Montalembert au camp de Beverloo", in *La Vie militaire*, 1913 (4), p. 105-108). 23. H.B. HARVEY, *A visit to the camp of Beverloo*, London, 1852, p. 11-12. The report was also published in the *Belgian Official Journal* on 8 January 1853.

Camp de Béverloo. — Vue prise dans les dunes d'Hechtel.



CAMP DE BEVERLOO — Les Manœuvres



Military maneuvers were held in the sandy dunes of Beverloo, where different branches of the army would train together. From the 1880's onward, the maneuvers were held 'en terrain varié'. Rugged landscapes such as that of the Ardennes or the Condroz were particularly popular. (Postcards, 1913 and 1912, [www.delcampe.net](http://www.delcampe.net))

During his visit to the camp, the major had observed a *période de manoeuvres*, which he described in great detail to his (presumably military) British audience. In his reports the Belgian army is depicted as a kind of laboratory for military training in Europe. Harvey considered the site of Beverloo the ideal place for British officers to make educational observations – not least because it was so easy to reach. British officers could, according to Harvey “at a very trifling expense, avail themselves of the means of improvement laid open to them by a friendly nation”<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, because the Belgian army was so small, it was easier to observe and understand than those of the greater armies of Russia or Prussia.

“Some of our officers are in the habit of plunging at once into the movements of immense masses of Troops, such as are assembled in Austria, Russia, and Prussia, but they err in so doing : for I maintain that with a ‘*Corps d’Armée*’ outnumbering 14,000 or 15,000 men, they will be unable satisfactorily to follow up the details of the different manoeuvres, and they will fail either to comprehend their application, the thorough combination of the three Arms, or the choice of ground”<sup>25</sup>.

The unfortunate composition of the Belgian army offered, furthermore, an exceptional example of what could be achieved by rigorous and steady practice. “When we consider the drawbacks under which the Belgian Army labours (...) it becomes a *matter of surprise*

to see the precision with which such mere recruits are taught their Drill in so short a period”<sup>26</sup>. In short, Harvey seems to have agreed with many of the optimistic notions of the triumph of the project of a national training camp and the practice of joint manoeuvres that prevailed in the Belgian military press, and with local criticism of the law of conscription. He considered the Belgian army and Beverloo Camp exemplary instances of military unification, to be contrasted with the “constantly dispersed state of our [British] Army”<sup>27</sup>. He ended his report with a particularly explicit reference to the notions of political and military unity, which dovetailed with those in Belgian military discourse. Citing the Belgian motto “*L’Union Fait la Force*”, he stated that “the union of practical instruction, energy, and talent, constitutes the real strength of armies”<sup>28</sup>.

Harvey’s glowing report was probably at least partly motivated by the major’s twofold goal of encouraging reform in the British army and showing (possibly diplomatic) gratitude to his Belgian hosts, but it also suggests that the manoeuvres achieved some of their objectives. Between 1830 and 1880, the practice of manoeuvres in Belgium remained largely the same, and it was geared toward three main goals. First, the military manoeuvres were intended to make a unified force out of inexperienced recruits and unite the three branches of the armed forces. According to *Belgique militaire*, “[only] at the camp, where they live together, can the members of the great military family get to know, value and love each other”<sup>29</sup>.

24. *Idem*, p. 9. 25. *Idem*, p. 37. 26. *Idem*, p. 21. 27. *Idem*, p. 10. 28. *Idem*, p. 38. 29. “*Au camp seulement, les membres de la grande famille militaire, vivant réunis, peuvent apprendre à se connaître, à s’estimer et à s’aimer*” (“Camp de Beverloo : période des manoeuvres de 1875”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1875, p. 776).

Second, they were designed to prepare this unified army for the protection of the nation's independence (in the 1830s this mainly meant protection against the Netherlands; however, after 1839 the notion of independence became closely connected to the country's forced neutrality and its position between Europe's most powerful nations)<sup>30</sup>. Third, the manoeuvres were intended to create moments in which the armed forces could publicly present themselves, not only to the Belgian civilian (and political) population, but also to foreign observers.

"The first effects (...) will, no doubt, be to make Europe know authentically, the progress our beautiful army has made in the last five years in the art of war; for the country, the camp will be a guarantee of security and honour; the nation will calmly rely on its children"<sup>31</sup>.

As the nation's independence became more established, the presence of numerous foreign officers – who, as Harvey remarked, received a particularly 'liberal' welcome – offered opportunities for international communication and rapprochement in an area explicitly represented as neutral. In 1896, the following list of foreign officers permitted

to observe the Belgian manoeuvres was published : "Colonel de Smaguine, Russian military attaché; Lieutenant-colonel Douglas Dawson, attaché of the British army; Captain Haillot, French military attaché; Captain count de Hacke, German military attaché; Captain Reichart of the federal Swiss army; Captain Petraru, Romanian military attaché; Captain Castendyck, envoy of Germany; Lieutenant Harris, military attaché of the United States of America"<sup>32</sup>.

With the exception of the Netherlands, representatives from all the neighbouring countries were present, as were some other military powerhouses.

For soldiers, the manoeuvres were the final apotheosis of their training, and served in many ways as a bridge between the military world and the civilian life. 'Experienced' soldiers would, ideally, take part of their military and patriotic training home after having served. Official reports of the manoeuvres were sent to the Ministry of War and were circulated within political circles, unofficial reports were published in the military and civilian press and, finally, the manoeuvres were open to the public, who seem to have thronged

30. The constant threat to the country's autonomy, it has been argued, was what necessitated a continued stress on military prowess (LUC DE VOS & RUBEN VERBIST, "De militaire dienstplicht en haar rol binnen de natievorming en democratie, 1890-1921", in ELS WITTE (ed.) *Natie en democratie, 1890-1921*, Brussels, 2007, p. 137). 31. "Les premiers effets, (...), seront, sans aucun doute, de faire authentiquement connaître à l'Europe, les progrès qu'a faits notre belle armée depuis cinq ans dans l'art de la guerre; pour le pays, ce camp sera un gage de sécurité et d'honneur, la nation se reposera tranquille sur ses enfants" ("Camp de Beverloo", in *Journal de l'Armée belge*, 1836 (3), p. 279-280). 32. "Le colonel de Smaguine, attaché militaire de Russie; le lieutenant-colonel Douglas Dawson, attaché militaire de l'armée britannique; le capitaine Haillot, attaché militaire de France; le capitaine comte de Hacke, attaché militaire d'Allemagne; le capitaine Reichart, de l'armée fédérale suisse; le capitaine Petraru, attaché militaire de Roumanie; le capitaine Castendyck, attaché à la légation d'Allemagne; le lieutenant Harris, attaché militaire des États-Unis d'Amérique" (WILLEM DE HEUSCH, *Les manœuvres en Flandre en 1890, Les grandes manœuvres en 1896, 1897*, p. 13).

to Beverloo for the exercises and their final parades in ever greater numbers throughout the century.

## II. 1881-1913 : Not annexed to Germany or France

Between 1830 and 1881, the character and organization of the joint manoeuvres changed very little (although they expanded in scale and their reputation grew throughout the century). The Minister of War played an important role in their organization, he and the King appointed a *directeur des manoeuvres* who would decide on the ‘themes’ played out during the exercises, preside over the *arbitres* and evaluate the movements of the officers and ordinary soldiers in his appraisal at the end of the exercises. The detailed regulations for the manoeuvres (originally largely copied from the Dutch *Reglement op de exercitiën*) also changed very little<sup>33</sup>. It was only after the Franco-Prussian war that the military command began to reconsider the goals and character of the joint manoeuvres profoundly. In 1881 this would result in an important change in the organization and location of the exercises. The manoeuvring army (which had grown steadily) would no longer solely focus on Camp Beverloo; rather it would practice in *terrain varié*. The preparatory exercises

were still largely carried out at the camp, but the grand public manoeuvres that finalized recruits’ training would henceforth take place in different areas each year.

After almost half a century, the plains of Beverloo ceased to represent the whole country in miniature and were instead designated as a ‘second fatherland’ for military men<sup>34</sup>. The first, or ‘real’, fatherland was the combination of the very different landscapes in which they would now train. This change in location, and the ensuing evolution in the discourse on military representations of the tangible fatherland, went hand in hand with the formulation of new objectives for the manoeuvres. It also answered to past criticisms that the manoeuvres had been too far removed from the reality of military campaigns<sup>35</sup>. The ‘new’ manoeuvres were designed to be more convincing and authentic. According to the authors of *La vie du soldat belge* (1912), the manoeuvres were “[a] fictionalized war, it is war without the dangers of fire and the different hazards it entails and which we can only realize imperfectly in other exercises; it is also commonly called *la petite guerre*”<sup>36</sup>. Officers would no longer move their troops on the familiar heaths; instead, they would be confronted with unknown terrain “*proportionné à leurs forces*”<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, troops would no longer be pitted

33. *Reglement op de exercitiën der infanterie voornamelijk geschikt voor het theoretisch onderwijs der Belgische Armée en burgerwacht, Soldaten- en Pelotons-school*, Antwerp, 1831 and *Reglement op de exercitiën en manoeuvres van de infanterij voor de armée van zijne majesteit den koning der Nederlanden*, 4 volumes, 's Gravenhage/Amsterdam, 1815. 34. “Le camp est la seconde patrie du soldat”, in *Le Camp de Beverloo, Guide illustré avec plan*, Brussels, 1907, p. 11. 35. “Camp de Beverloo”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1872 (2), p. 2. 36. RUIJL & SACRE, *La vie du soldat belge*..., p.143. The similarity to war was stressed by other authors and by the regulations as well, e.g. “Vue d’ensemble”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1896 (2), p. 375; *Instructions générales pour les manoeuvres*, Brussels, 1896, p. 2. 37. “Vue d’ensemble”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1896 (2), p. 411.

against an imagined or represented enemy : they would face each other – as if they were two opposing armies<sup>38</sup>. Whereas the early manoeuvres had derived their authenticity from the past (they drew on past battles and were aimed against the old oppressor, the Netherlands), from 1881 onward the ‘new’ manoeuvres were firmly geared toward a potential future gleaned from the changing international political scene. They were, above all, explicitly practical<sup>39</sup> : “Do we have to remind you of the joy with which the army has welcomed an innovation that would, in exchange for more fatigue, give it the occasion to watch and practice matters of war more closely ?”<sup>40</sup>.

The popularity of the southern regions of the Ardennes and the Condroz for these ‘new’ manoeuvres dovetailed with the military command’s insistence on looking forward rather than back in this period. For example, reflecting on the 1884 manoeuvres, *Belgique militaire* insisted, “we cannot always operate in the same regions, where we are unlikely to wage war”<sup>41</sup>. The prediction that the Belgian army was more likely to wage war in the ‘rough’ regions of the country than on the heaths of Beverloo certainly seems to have been correct. More importantly, however, these regions presented the exercising soldiers

and officers with unpredictable terrain. In that sense, the new and ever changing locations of the manoeuvres were a material reminder of the new objectives of the exercises and the changes in the kind of army they were aiming to cultivate. Before 1881, the exercises were aimed at the formation of a disciplined army, well-versed in drill and simultaneity. In 1852 Major Harvey noted that the Belgian army resembled a “large and well-disciplined family”<sup>42</sup>. He also praised the *directeur des manoeuvres*, Olivier, for his “intimate knowledge of all the minute minor details of *Drill*”<sup>43</sup>. After 1881, however, the discourse of the well-trained army turned more and more towards ideas of intelligence and responsibility. Obedience remained an important quality in a soldier – and one that was extensively instilled – but for the higher ranking officers the ability to decide and to deal with the unpredictability of war became the primary goal of the exercises.

“The manoeuvres have presented officers with the unexpected, these exercises have created circumstances for off-the-cuff decisions; the irregular terrain has allowed them to exercise their intelligence, to show they have a good eye, and to awaken their perspicacity, they have been forced

38. The regulations had allowed for both possibilities from the 1830s onward, but the manoeuvring reports show a change in preferences around the 1870s and 1880s.

39. “Sur l’utilité des grandes manoeuvres, Aperçu historique”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1903 (2), p. 162-171. 40. “Faut-il rappeler avec quelle joie l’armée a accueilli il y a un an l’innovation qui, en échange de plus de stress, doit lui procurer l’occasion de voir et de pratiquer de plus près les choses de la guerre” (“Les grandes manoeuvres”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1882 (2), p. 261). 41. “On ne peut pas toujours opérer dans les mêmes contrées, et où probablement nous ne ferons pas la guerre” (“Manœuvres de 1884 – coup d’œil critique”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1884, p. 328). 42. H.B. HARVEY, *A visit to the camp...*, p. 16. 43. *Idem*, p. 17.



to make rapid decisions on the choice of positions and sites to occupy, in a word, they have shown their aptitude for command in general”<sup>44</sup>.

This was, perhaps, a reflection of changes in strategic theory and the image of war per se, but it also corresponded with the growing stability of the Belgian army’s self-image. Before 1881, the most pressing issue was the actual organization of the army and the search for competent commanders. By the end of the century, however, this army had been built: there was a relatively large pool of former servicemen who could be called upon in times of need, numerous ‘Belgian’ officers had climbed the ranks and gained experience, and the long years in Beverloo had put Belgium on the international military map. The Belgian army may have been in need of reform, but it had, at least, been firmly established<sup>45</sup>.

The army, especially during its mass joint exercises, retained its status as a national ‘melting pot’, but the character of this melting pot changed as well. In other words, by the end of the nineteenth century new differences between soldiers needed to be surmounted. Changes in the recruitment laws, rising political consciousness among the lower

classes (not to mention the rise of a staunchly pacifist Belgian Labour Party<sup>46</sup>) and a growing movement for Flemish culture and language transformed the challenges faced by those responsible for ‘unifying’ the nation’s male population in the army and binding them to the nation. Throughout the nineteenth century, French remained the sole language of command, but it was increasingly understood that contact and communication between recruits from both parts of the country, or between recruits and their officers, could not be taken for granted, and that social and linguistic differences could not be simply circumvented by mechanical exercises and continuous drill<sup>47</sup>. As mentioned before, the new insistence on intelligent and responsible leadership in the face of unpredictability was mainly aimed at officers. However, for regular soldiers as well, the army became a more extensive school of nationhood<sup>48</sup>. Whereas the early manoeuvres could be seen as a sort of introductory course to Belgium (mainly covering its existence and its position vis-à-vis France and the Netherlands), after 1881 the manoeuvres quite literally introduced recruits to ‘their’ country. The continuous marching and the maps issued by the ministry of war were a course in national geography, and the resulting contact with the local population of the regions they visited

44. “Les manoeuvres (...) ont mis l’officier devant l’imprévu; ces exercices on fait surgir à l’improviste des circonstances multiples; le terrain varié lui a permis de mettre en jeu son intelligence, a éveillé son coup d’œil et sa perspicacité; aux avant-postes il a dû savoir faire rapidement un choix des positions et emplacements à occuper, en un mot il a montré dans toute sa plénitude son aptitude au commandement” (“Manoeuvres de 1881”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1881 (2), p. 512). 45. NEL DE MÜELENAERE, “An Uphill Battle...”, p. 150. 46. On Labour Party’s view on the army, see JAN GODDERIS, *Oorlog aan de oorlog ! ? De houding van de Belgische Werkliedenpartij ten aanzien van het leger 1885-1914*, Unpublished MA thesis, Universiteit Gent, 2004. 47. RICHARD BOIJEN, *De taalwetgeving in het Belgische leger (1830-1940)*, Brussels, 1992, p. 32. 48. LUC DE VOS & RUBEN VERBIST, “De militaire dienstplicht...”, p. 137.



introduced them to the cultural diversity of the country.

This army of educated and intelligently obedient men still had the protection of the country as its apparent primary goal, but the precise object of protection had also changed. In the early years, preservation of the nation's newly found independence was the military's first concern, and the Netherlands was the obvious potential aggressor. By the end of the century, the country and its independence seemed stable enough, but the precarious position of Belgium as a small and neutral country between political and military behemoths became an issue of concern. The Franco-Prussian war and its political consequences in both France and Germany seemed a harbinger of political and military threats to Belgium, and the army endeavoured to prepare for its role as the foremost guarantor of 'active' neutrality. According to *Belgique militaire*, in which an article entitled "*Nous sommes neutres*" (we are neutral) appeared in 1887, the country's neutrality was strongly connected to its distinction from its two powerful neighbours: "We do not want to be annexed to Germany, nor to France, we want to live and die as Belgians. *Vive le Roi! Vive la Nation!*"<sup>49</sup>. Whereas the young Belgian army of the first half of the century had mainly sought

emancipation from its more experienced French generals, in the second half of the century it was no longer content to modestly find a place for itself between the greater nations and gain autonomy. The Belgian army was 'moving forward' and was intent on competing with the armies of its neighbours. That this competition could not take place on the battlefield was clear to all (apart from the obstacle of neutrality, the Belgian army was simply too small, even if it should be brought on war-footing). In the area of military training, however, and specifically with regard to the reformed manoeuvres, Belgian military observers showed greater confidence.

"In Belgium, we are now moving beyond the time of trial and error, and we are beginning to move forward. There is no doubt that if we continue in this way, our manoeuvres will soon be as interesting as those of our great neighbours"<sup>50</sup>.

The renewed active participation of the King in the manoeuvres might have strengthened these feelings of confidence. In the 1830s (and up to the 1860s) Leopold I had been actively involved in the organization of the military exercises<sup>51</sup>. Throughout the century, the manoeuvres continued to be carried out *sous les yeux du Roi*<sup>52</sup>, and the King

49. "*Nous ne voulons devenir ni une annexe de l'Allemagne, ni une annexe de la France, nous voulons vivre et mourir Belges. Vive le Roi! Vive la Nation!*" ("*Nous sommes neutres*", in *Belgique militaire*, 1887 (2), p. 419). 50. "*Nous commençons en Belgique à sortir de la période de tâtonnements, à entrer dans la voie de progrès, et nul doute que si nous continuons de la sorte, nos manœuvres offriront bientôt autant d'intérêt que celles de nos grands voisins*" ("*Vue d'ensemble*", in *Belgique militaire*, 1896 (2), p. 375-376). 51. JEAN STENGERS, *De koningen der Belgen, Macht en invloed*, Leuven, 1992, p. 85-89 and LODE WILS, "De monarchie en de landsverdediging onder Leopold I", in *Actes du colloque d'histoire militaire belge (1830-1980)*, Brussels, 1981, p. 208, 212 and 214. 52. "Les grandes manœuvres", in *Belgique militaire*, 1882, p. 263.

continued – at least officially – to appoint the *directeur des manoeuvres*. His presence at the final revue each year contributed to the unifying and festively patriotic character of the exercises. In contrast, during the second half of the century (the reign of Leopold II, 1865-1909) the role of the monarch seems to have become largely symbolic. However, in 1909, the army regained a militarily active king: Albert I had shown his mettle in the manoeuvres of 1896, before his ascent to the throne. In 1913 he participated again, leading ‘his’ troops in what could – with hindsight – easily be seen as a precursor to his later role in World War I and the heroic reputation he would gain<sup>53</sup>.

### III. Displaying the army to the population

While the role of Leopold II in the manoeuvres may have seemed less active or involved than that of either his predecessor or his heir, it was not necessarily less important. Rather than being a soldier among soldiers, Leopold II participated in the manoeuvres as a (civilian) spectator. He and his wife thereby engaged in the very common practice of bourgeois observation of the manoeuvres – and thus they may have helped further one of the explicit goals of the exercises. Part of the objective of the manoeuvres, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, was to strengthen

relations between the army and the nation. This was partly achieved by introducing soldiers to the nation and its varying landscapes and terrain, but it was also attained by showing off the army to the civilian population. In 1896, for example, soldiers took time off to “visit the region’s beautiful scenery, or take boat trips on the River Meuse” on a free Sunday during the manoeuvres. During the actual exercises, it was the soldiers themselves who attracted the gaze of ‘tourists’<sup>54</sup>. Throughout the (late) nineteenth century, military parades and militaristic additions to national celebrations were staged to this end as well, but the manoeuvres and their pull as a tourist attraction seem to have been a more stable aspect of Belgium’s militarization (at least in the second half of the nineteenth century). It was certainly one of the more concerted attempts by the army and the Ministry of War to contribute to patriotism and militarism among the civil population of Belgium. The attraction of the manoeuvres was exemplified, and possibly heightened, by the presence of such famous observers as King Leopold and Queen Marie-Henriette. It also affected reports on the manoeuvres in civilian newspapers and in the tourist guides that were provided for their public audience. Apart from the audience addressed by press and tourist brochures, the manoeuvres also attracted sections of the population with more modest means. The extent to which the lower classes were an object of the military’s

53. WILLEM DE HEUSCH, *Les manoeuvres en Flandre en 1890, Les grandes manoeuvres en 1896, 1897*, p. 48; “Au jour le jour, Échos de la ville”, in *L’indépendance belge*, 2 September 1896, p. 1 and *Grandes manoeuvres de 1913*, in *la Belgique militaire*, Brussels, 1913, p. 52 en 59. 54. “Verscheidene soldaten maakten van de zondagrust gebruik om de prachtige landschappen van den omtrek te bezoeken; anderen maakten tochtjes op te Maas” (“Groote legeroefeningen”, in *Het Volk*, 2 September 1896, p. 1).



'Brancardiers' captured at the Beverloo camp. From the 1880's onward, these stretcher-bearers played a role in the maneuvers. (Postcard, 1904, [www.delcampe.net](http://www.delcampe.net))

endeavours to establish moments of contact with the civilian world remains unclear, but they certainly seem to have been involved in plans to instil a sense of patriotism and militarization in the population during the manoeuvres.

Military and militaristic journals were ambivalent in their appraisal of the presence of 'the people' at the manoeuvres. Open signs of patriotism – like displaying the flag, or cheering the soldiers on – were interpreted as signs of popular enthusiasm for the army and its performance. Exaggerated enthusiasm, however, was seen as a hindrance. From the 1880s onwards, the presence of civilians was noted as a possible problem in the *Instructions relatives*. The manoeuvre reports include descriptions of civilians obstructing the military proceedings (which could occasionally lead to accidents), and precautions were taken to prevent these hindrances. In the 1896 *Instruction générale*, it was noted that "The police will ensure that spectators do not damage the properties, will show them where they can stand, and will not tolerate any gatherings outside those designated spaces"<sup>55</sup>.

In conjunction with growing efforts to achieve authenticity in the manoeuvres,

the rising number of (lower class) observers was interpreted as a threat to the quality of the exercises. Military observers noted the regrettable tendency of soldiers to provide onlookers with the 'spectacle' of a military exercise that was entertaining rather than educational for either of them. According to *Belgique militaire* this theatricality could be traced to the Ministry of War: "[i]t is the Ministry of War that resists this current of truly military ideas and that wants, above all, to offer an interesting spectacle to the public and stories favourable to the Ministry to journalists"<sup>56</sup>.

It is difficult to ascertain if this move toward spectacle indeed became stronger in the second half of the century (as contemporary observers seem to have felt), but the inclusion of *brancardiers* in the manoeuvres in the 1880s certainly provided the troops with the means of staging more elaborate and theatrical performances. The obligation (realistic, but apparently difficult to enforce) to 'remain dead' after having been marked as shot likewise points to a certain overlap between the military objective of training realistically and the audience's hope of seeing an exciting range of exercises<sup>57</sup>. These innovations made the manoeuvres more unpredictable and 'real' for their participants,

55. "La gendarmerie (...) empêchera les spectateurs de commettre des dégâts aux propriétés, leur désignera les endroits où ils pourront se placer, et ne tolèrera pas de rassemblements en dehors de ces endroits" (*Instruction générale*, 1896, p. 40). 56. "Le département de guerre seul résiste à ce courant d'idées vraiment militaire et tient par-dessus tout à fournir un spectacle intéressant au public, et aux journalistes un sujet de réclames en faveur du ministre de la guerre" ("Notre opinion sur les grandes manoeuvres exécutées cette année dans le Condroz", in *Belgique militaire*, 1882 (2), p. 322). 57. On the theatrical nature of the manoeuvres, see JOSEPHINE HOEGAERTS, "Manoeuvring men, masculinity as spatially defined readability at the grandes manoeuvres of the Belgian army, 1882-1883", in *Gender, Place and Culture*, 2010 (17), p. 249-268.

but they also provided a narrative for the audience.

For the bourgeois section of the audience, that narrative had already been presented elsewhere : military and civilian journals were available to detail the course of future manoeuvres or explain those of movements already observed. Unlike the presence of ‘the people’, the attendance of bourgeois onlookers was universally appreciated and interpreted as a sign of the social and political relevance of the manoeuvres. Like foreign visitors, the presence of local men of substance served to legitimize the manoeuvres and stand as a hallmark of their quality. Descriptions of throngs of onlookers in suits were included in reports of the manoeuvres to underscore their national importance and cement the army’s reputation. Such spectators were, moreover, explicitly invited to visit the manoeuvre area. In 1882, special trains were organized to “bring as many curious eyes as possible to the theatre of war”<sup>58</sup>. In the same year, a tourist brochure was published on the *grandes manoeuvres*<sup>59</sup>. Thus, despite resurgent criticism of the ‘spectacular’ character of the manoeuvres, their designation as *theatre de la guerre* was apparently unproblematic – as long as that theatre was sufficiently gentrified. In other words, the manoeuvres, and especially the parades within them, were explicitly con-

ceived to ‘display the army to the population’, but the population was expected to behave like a well-trained and polite theatre-audience.

In that sense, the manoeuvres were as much a means of distinguishing between the military world and civil society as they were a point of contact between the two. The identification of the civilian population by their recognizable suits visualized this distinction in the reports. In ‘popular’ circles, contact between soldiers and civilians could be extremely direct – for instance, locals lodged and fed the troops – but between officers and the (upper) middle classes, the process of mutual observation and militarization was much more stylized, and indeed consciously theatrical. Most evocative of the stylized and polite character of bourgeois-military communication, perhaps, was the stress journals placed on banquets and parades<sup>60</sup>. Journals such as *Belgique militaire* saw the presence of journalists, especially those from abroad, as a sign of interest in the military operations. In 1881 *Belgique militaire* reported that “[a]most all the newspapers in the country have sent correspondents to accompany the troops and report on the operations. Several foreign newspapers, including *Le Figaro* and *Le Galois*, from Paris and the *United Service*, from London, have also sent reporters”<sup>61</sup>. In addition to the actual

58. “Pour amener le plus de curieux possible sur le théâtre de la guerre” (“Notre opinion”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1882 (2), p. 322). 59. 1882, *grandes manoeuvres de l’Armée belge, guide du touriste*, sold for 50 centimes (according to *Belgique militaire*) in all bookshops. 60. According to Jeroen Janssen, banquets were seen as a means of national and international conciliation. JEROEN JANSSEN, *De Belgische natie viert...*, p. 156. 61. “Presque tous les journaux du pays ont délégué des correspondants pour accompagner les troupes, et rendre compte des opérations. Plusieurs journaux étrangers, entre autres le *Figaro* et le *Galois*, de Paris, le *United Service* de Londres, avaient également envoyé des reporters” (“Les Manoeuvres de 1881. Quelques mots de rectification”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1881 (2), p. 475).

course of the manoeuvres, however, journalists were also overtly interested in the presence of 'famous' and politically relevant spectators. The *Journal de Flandre* limited its reporting to notes on the King, the Minister of War and a handful of prominent military men travelling to the camp<sup>62</sup>. W. De Heusch, who published a series of articles on the 1890 manoeuvres, explicitly commented on the political relevance of the banquets attached to the manoeuvres. He not only noted the presence of politically relevant diners, such as Prince Albert and the Minister of War, but he also reported having heard "patriotic speeches full of hope (...) on the subject of recruitment reform"<sup>63</sup>. The 'Anti-socialist' newspaper *Het Volk* (a vehicle of the General Christian Worker's Union) had a slightly different perspective. Its reports on the 1896 manoeuvres focused equally on the presence of the King and that of other dignitaries. On 5 September the newspaper reported that upon the King's arrival "[t]he people cheered him on with great warmth"<sup>64</sup>. The newspaper also reported twice on a banquet held that same day<sup>65</sup>. However, in addition to the political connection between political

actors and the military command, contacts between soldiers and 'the people' also held an important place in *Het Volk*'s reports. For instance, on 2 September, the warm welcome received by the troops was described extensively: "[t]he city of Hoei looked festive on Sunday. (...) Soldiers and officers were welcomed very generously by the population"<sup>66</sup>. The people's enthusiasm was, moreover, not without benefit to the troops: "[t]he military doctors declare that the health of the troops is excellent. This is largely thanks to the splendid hospitality, the cordial welcome the soldiers have received in the cities in which they have been billeted"<sup>67</sup>. In *Het Volk*, the people play an active role in welcoming the army and initiating contact with the military, which seems to support Nel de Mûelenaere's recent assertions that the militarization of Belgium in the run up to the Great War was a local rather than centralized, politically organized affair.

The army command and the ministry of war seemed to have attempted to gentrify the audience of the manoeuvres. They insisted upon specific modes of theatricality (and

62. "Bruxelles, 25 juillet", in *Journal des Flandres*, 26 July 1835, p. 2; "Bruxelles, 28 juillet", in *Idem*, 29 July 1835, p. 2; "Bruxelles, 31 juillet", in *Idem*, 1 August 1835, p. 2; "Bruxelles, 2 août", in *Idem*, 3 August 1835, p. 2; "Bruxelles, 6 août", in *Idem*, 7 August 1835, p. 2; "Bruxelles, 31 août", in *Idem*, 31 August 1835, p. 2; "Bruxelles, 20 septembre", in *Idem*, 21 September 1835, p. 3. 63. "De patriotiques paroles pleines d'espérance (...) au sujet de la réforme du recrutement" (DE HEUSCH, *Les manoeuvres*, p. 48). 64. "Hij werd door het volk warm toegejuicht" ("De groote legeroefeningen", in *Het Volk*, 5 September 1896, p. 2). 65. "De groote legeroefeningen", in *Het Volk*, 2 September 1896, p. 1-2; "De groote legeroefeningen", in *Het Volk*, 3 September 1896, p. 2. 66. "De stad Hoei had zondag een feestelijk uitzicht. (...) De soldaten en de officiers werden zeer gulhartig door de bevolking ontvangen" ("De groote legeroefeningen", *Het Volk*, 2 September 1896, p. 1). 67. "De krijgskdoktoers verklaren dat de gezondheidstoestand der troepen allerbest is. Zulks is grootendeels te danken aan de uitmuntende gastvrijheid, de hartelijke ontvangst die de soldaten hebben in de steden waar zij gekantonneerd zijn geweest" (*Ibidem*).





BELGIQUE. — Grande revue de Beverloo et défilé devant le Palais royal de Bruxelles. — (Dessin de M. Ferdinandus, d'après le croquis de M. Van Elst, notre correspondant belge.)

Parades such as this Grande Revue brought military personnel and civilian spectators closer together, and were extensively reported upon in the press. Litograph published in *Le Monde Illustré*. (Ferdinandus, Grande Revue de Beverloo et défilé devant le palais royal de Bruxelles, in *Le Monde Illustré*, 1875, p. 133)



denounced others as mere spectacle). They focused on the visible distinction between civilian suits and military uniforms, and they regularly drew attention to the political relevance of the manoeuvres (embodied by the national and foreign dignitaries at the banquets and by the notable presence of the King). Nevertheless, the manoeuvres also drew an audience that was perhaps not fully intended and which was also included in triumphant reports on national enthusiasm for the army and spontaneous – often emotional – displays of patriotism. In many journals and newspapers, ‘the people’ were cast in the collective role of an intuitive – and to a degree uninvited – observer, whose presence coloured the scenes of the theatre of war. Less present in the reports, but almost invariably displayed in images of the manoeuvres’ spectators, were women. A lithograph of the 1875 *Grande Revue* in *Le Monde illustré* shows numerous women with bustles and parasols eagerly following the proceedings (a handful of children are depicted as well). They too, it seems, contributed to the theatrical audience for whose benefit the manoeuvres were staged, despite their relative irrelevance to the militaristic endeavour. As they were neither potential voters nor future soldiers, their relations with the army and their views on international politics or the country’s neutrality were of no direct consequence. Nevertheless, in order to cultivate the army’s reputation as a fundamentally national organization con-

nected to the nation in more profound ways than the merely institutional, the easily sentimentalized presence of women and children at the manoeuvres was, indeed of great relevance.

#### IV. Conclusion

The unifying character of the manoeuvres thus worked on two levels : it led to internal unification within the army during the exercises and to unification of the nation through rapprochement between the civilian and the military world. Communication and cooperation between the two, moreover, worked both ways : the army command and the Ministry of War endeavoured to bring the army closer to the population by sparking interest for the army among the politically involved (upper) middle classes. The Minister of War, who belonged to both the military and the political-civilian world, played an important role in this process<sup>68</sup>. He wrote instructions, was present at the manoeuvres and received reports from the commanding officers after the exercises; however, he was not really expected to participate (when General Brassine did so in 1895, the fact “appeared abnormal” to the writer of an article in *Belgique militaire*)<sup>69</sup>. Before, during and after the manoeuvres, the minister’s task was to build bridges – for example by showing civilians and foreign visitors around. However, lower class civilian

68. Between 1831 and 1914, only eight Ministers of War had no military rank, all the others came from an explicitly military background. (Luc De Vos, *Het effectief van de Belgische krijgsmacht...*, p. 370-372). 69. “Autour des grandes manoeuvres”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1895 (2), p. 446. Brassine had participated (as the head of the ‘second division’) in the manoeuvres of 1888, before he became the Minister of War (“Manoeuvres en terrain varié de 1888”, in *Belgique militaire*, 1888 (2), p. 346).

spectators found their own ways to bond with the army and its members. Throughout the nineteenth century, both their numbers and their enthusiasm for the manoeuvres seem to have grown, indicating rising acceptance of the national character and legitimacy of the army (if not acceptance of the recruitment laws) in all classes of society from the 1880s onwards.

The growing ‘militarization’ of Belgium noted in analyses of the military parades and national celebrations thus seems to be confirmed by the increased civil involvement in the military exercises<sup>70</sup>. The radical change in the organization of the manoeuvres in 1881 may have contributed to this process. On the one hand, the *manoeuvres en terrain varié* brought soldiers and officers into closer contact with the country and its population: it turned the army into a more profound school of nation. On the other hand, the heightened publicity given to the troops and their greater approachability bore testimony to the increased confidence of the army command in the quality of its men, their national and political relevance and their international reputation. The numerous observers at the manoeuvres were interpreted by contemporary journalists as proof of the popularity of the army and the patriotism of the people. To us, these reports demonstrate that the manoeuvres attained at least some of their communicative goals: even if the military exercises of the nineteenth century were to be of little use in the trenches, their social and political

dimensions were highly significant for the newly independent nation.

The evolution of the organization and stated objectives of the manoeuvres can indeed be read against the background of changing definitions of national independence and Belgium’s careful search for autonomy in the context of the fragile balance of power in Europe (and particularly between Belgium’s direct neighbours). The discourse on the manoeuvres and their value can be viewed as a barometer of Belgium’s confidence in its own place on the international military scene and its perception of foreign threats. In the 1830s, the situation was very clear: the danger was situated on the northern border, and for the protection of its newly gained independence, the country called upon its southern neighbour, which also heavily influenced the construction of what would become the Belgian army. The period between 1840 and 1881 presents a time of cautious emancipation from French military custodianship, which coincided with the decline of the international reputation of the French army (reaching a particularly low point in the Franco-Prussian war). From the 1880s onward, confidence in a now explicitly Belgian army was reinforced by triumphalist narratives of the exemplarity of its training. The perceived threat from Germany, a powerful, newly formed neighbour to the east known for its military prowess, was combatted by a concerted effort to inspire enthusiasm

70. NEL DE MUELENAERE, “In het gelid der groten? De militarisering van de Belgische nationale feesten, 1870-1914”, in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, (forthcoming).

for the troops – and by insisting on active neutrality<sup>71</sup>.

Belgium's neutral status had been internationally enshrined in the 1839 Treaty of London. Whilst this neutrality limited its military possibilities (thereby exacerbating the problematic status of the army already inherent in the recruitment laws), it was largely embraced as part of the nation's identity in the second half of the nineteenth century and interpreted as part of its particular brand of independence. According to this discourse, Belgium's autonomy was

not based on its particular strength but on its carefully calibrated international position. The annual manoeuvres were powerful showcases of this militarily enacted, 'active' neutrality. Within the maelstrom of shifting powers and alliances in Europe, the Belgian army claimed military expertise precisely by distancing itself from the actual battlefield whilst staging an impressive theatre of war for an international audience. This was not a show of military strength; rather, it was a display of control and of carefully trained and orchestrated neutrality.

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71. BERNARD LEHOUCQ, *Het antimilitarisme in België, 1830-1914*, p. 28-41).