

## MISCELLANEA

### BELGIUM IN 1940 AND THE PROBLEMS OF RECENT HISTORY

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*The introduction to the complete text of the symposium held on the recent history of Belgium, can be very short. It is sufficient to state its objectives. In the first place it is an attempt to break down a revered tradition. Traditionally a new scientific work is introduced by a learned review. The reviewer tries to be on his mettle because the review is not only a description or a value judgement, but also a test of his own knowledge of and acquaintance with the subject. As we would like to see the scientific study of history evolve towards a more open confrontation and a closer cooperation, we think that a dialogue between authors and critics will best serve the sincerity of historical research. In the second place we want to examine by means of this dialogue certain implications concerning research into recent history. The works quoted fulfilled this double purpose admirably. We realise that the results are not yet perfect, but the experiment is under way and we therefore open the columns of our "Journal" in the hope that wide and critical echo's will follow.*

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**Jan Craeybeckx** : Welcome, ladies and gentlemen.

It is sad that Prof. Dhondt cannot introduce or preside at this small symposium any more. During the past few years, in his notes in the Chronicle of the Journal, his chief interest has been in the years around 1940. The incentive to hold this symposium comes from the editors of the *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* (1).

(1) *Belgian Journal of Contemporary History*.

First of all, I want to thank my colleague Balthazar who, instead of the traditional procedure of giving reviews of some recent books, preferred to invite the authors themselves. They are in this order : Messrs Schepens, J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch, and A. De Jonghe. The three books are specifically concerned with the opening months of the War in 1940 (2). There is also the book by Mrs Claeys-Van Haegendoren "Hendrik De Man, a biography" of which an important part covers the same period (3). I now call upon colleague Balthazar to conduct the coming discussion for which he has drawn up a scheme.

**Herman Balthazar :** Thank you. Mister President, dear colleagues, you have all received the scheme and I shall try to be brief. I only wish to remind you of the general purpose of this "Round Table". On the one hand, I think, it is the analysis of the problems which arise about the study of the recent history of Belgium, of which the authors, sitting round this table, are the pioneers and in which they take a special interest.

First of all, the authors will take the floor and after that we, the public, shall ask them questions and make comments. It seems expedient that each author should speak for a few minutes to introduce his work. The president has already put forward the works in chronological order. This seems to be a good method of procedure and I ask Mr. Luc Schepens to take the floor.

**Luc Schepens :** The plan of my "1940, Dagboek van een politiek conflict" (4) can be put briefly : it is a *status questionis*. I am not a professional historian; I consider myself an average interested amateur and I had already read a few books, when the "Mémoires" of P.H. Spaak were published. Like everybody else, I expected sensational novelties but such was not the case. I then went on looking for things which Spaak did not recount. After the example of Benoist-Mechin (5) I wished to do the same for the

(2) L. SCHEPENS, *1940. Dagboek van een politiek conflict*, Tielt, Lannoo, 258 p.

J. GERARD-LIBOIS et J. GOTOVITCH, *L'An 40. La Belgique occupée*, Bruxelles, C.R.I.S.P., 1971, 517 p.

A. DE JONGHE, *Hitler en het politieke lot van België*, 1, Antwerpen, De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1972, 488 p.

(3) M. CLAEYS-VAN HAEGENDOREN, *Hendrik de Man. Een Biografie*, Antwerpen, De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1972.

(4) *1940, Diary of a political conflict*.

(5) BENOIST-MÉCHIN, *Soixante Jours qui ébranlèrent l'Occident. 10 mai-10 juillet 1940*, t. I-III. Paris, Albin Michel, 1957-1960, 3 vol.

Dutch-speaking area, convinced that nobody could tell what happened in a chronological order. Having said this, I suppose, there is really nothing more to add. It was the first work and perhaps you will not mind if I also say, that I have the impression, that this work was not completely useless, especially when I see how it has been consulted, sometimes more than the foot-notes of the studies had presumed.

**H. Balthazar** : Thank you, Mr. Schepens. I suppose that everybody agrees with this last point. The publication of your book had certainly increased the interest in the subject. It now is the turn of the author of "L'an '40".

**Jules Gérard-Libois** : I first want to say that "L'an '40" is a book published with a certain public in mind, i.e. the material is treated less with regard to the wealth of unpublished sources which we could have had, than with regard to those which we wanted to deal with. The subject was essentially and nearly exclusively : occupied Belgium, i.e. the occupied country during the 7 and a half months of 1940. We wished to concentrate our attention on the behaviour of groups, on the opinions expressed, on initiatives, on movements and problems in the different classes of the population. The year '40, considered from the standpoint of a military campaign, has rather been badly treated by us, the authors, who, of course, were not military experts. They were astonished that the section on the 18-days campaign continued to set loose every passion in the clubs of the "Fraternelles" of ex-service men. But we do not have the impression that we brought something new or original. But still, May 1940 is an important period. It put an end to the period of neutrality, and one could not ignore that Belgium had been neutral, that during that period of neutrality groups were taking shape and that there was also a certain geographical pattern with regard to the neutrality. We have treated that period of neutrality, less in itself than in that geographical pattern which was to appear later on during the occupation, either in Belgium or abroad. That rupture of May '40 was so important, that we have tried to point out what the flow of the population to France had meant to Belgium, during the campaigns. We have pointed out the collapse of political institutions and especially the behaviour of the government in France. In a marginal way, we have turned our attention to the reorganisation of power in London. As we have the plan of the book, I want to enlarge upon it a bit. Of course, we have an important partner, the occupying force. We were wondering how the members were

organized and what they wanted. We have stressed their intention in economic matters, in law and order, matters which finally resulted in advocating an internal autonomous régime for all Belgium. Whilst the members of the occupation force govern day to day, the administration and the economy are managed by Belgian. To counterbalance this, we have tried to see the behaviour of what we have called the Belgian power in the upper classes - the powers of leading citizens - i.e. bankers, financiers, business men, magistrates and to certain extent the secretaries-general. In regard to these, too, we have tried to describe, to state the situation and to tell you what they were thinking about the economic and administrative recovery in Belgium, leading towards the emergence of this conscious state, from the two points of view (the one of the occupying force and the one of the real power in Belgium in May-June '40) on the problem of recovery and of internal autonomy. But they did not perceive distinctly that they were swindled and that the situation would concretize by change of the secretaries-general, by the Pyrée-affaire, etc. From the point of view of powers, I think that the two main factors in Belgium were, the power of the occupying force and the de facto power. Of course, one had to make out to what extent the power in occupied Belgium was, either real, or simply a kind of hullabaloo in some social classes. Was there any project of a Belgian government? In the same chapter, we have tackled the organization, or the attempted organizations of the Workers. There was the power of the occupying force, the Belgian power, but there also was the population who could not determine its own destiny. We think that the problems of the Belgian population have been determinative for the history of that period : hunger and work, and then what we have called the organization of refusal, which could be, in a certain way, the genesis of the Resistance or of a certain popular resistance. As supplement, we have dealt with the problem of the Jews and the problem of a small town. In the circumstances we have picked out Verviers and Mr. Williams, who wrote the section on Verviers, because we thought that the book would be out of balance if we were looking at the problem from Brussels. In a concrete way, we wanted to see the significance of the year 1940 on the level of a small Walloon town. In fact, I think, this was the plan and the intention of the authors.

**H. Balthazar :** Thank you very much, Mr. Gérard-Libois. Mr. De Jonghe will now take the floor.

**Albert De Jonghe :** During the second World-War the German

*Belgienpolitik* developed on two levels : a) the higher, where this policy is planned, traced out and dictated by Hitler and Himmler, the Higher Command and the supreme leadership of the party; b) the lower level : the occupation administration in Brussels which applies the dictated policy. I limit myself to the higher level of the *Belgienpolitik*, which we are becoming familiar with from Hitler's instructions in the *Militärverwaltung* in Brussels, and, this is very important, from the many years' exchanges of views about the desirability of replacing the *Militärverwaltung* by a *Zivilverwaltung*. It is well known that, after many changes of attitude, Hitler finally decided upon that in July 1944. The real subject of my study is the many years' previous history of the establishment of this *Zivilverwaltung* in Belgium and Northern-France. Hence the title "Hitler en het politieke lot van België" (6). Because, I think 1<sup>o</sup> that Hitler's conception of the occupation régime and the royal question were interlaced and 2<sup>o</sup> that Berchtesgaden ended a period of an Hitler-Leopold relationship, therefore the first part was published with the sub-title : "Koningskwestie en bezettingsregime van de kapitulatie tot Berchtesgaden" (7). This is from 28 May until 19 November 1940. The second part will deal with the many years' exchange of thought, on the highest level, about the occupation régime and the circumstances which led to the substitution of the *Militärverwaltung* for the *Zivilverwaltung* in July 1944.

At and just after the capitulation, Hitler's policy with regard to king Leopold should be called a seductive policy. The king was not insensible to it : he was allowed to stay in the country (maybe the influence of his sister, Marie-José, had something to do with it), the castle of Laeken was at his disposal and at that of his family and suite. On 31 May, two emissaries of Hitler arrived with the surprising invitation to an interview with the German head of State. Whatever has been said by the followers of Leopold, the king accepted the invitation in principle, but asked that he should go there incognito. On 4 June, the king learned that Hitler was pleased with the "yes" in principle, but that he considered the incognito condition as impossible and proposed to come back to the subject after the end of the military operations on the continent. I want to draw your attention to the date 4 June 1940. From that day dates the first instruction from Hitler via the O.K.W. (not the O.K.H.) to the *Militärverwaltung* about the proposed procedure to be followed. One

(6) *Hitler and the political destiny of Belgium.*

(7) *The Royal Question and the occupation régime from the capitulation till Berchtesgaden.*

reads that the Führer intended to appoint a *Reichskommissar* for Flanders later on, but not just then. I also want to draw your attention to the fact that Hitler thereby changed an already expressed intention : on 25 May he had told Himmler to be very *einverstanden* with the establishment of the *Zivilverwaltung* and some days later, certainly on the 31st, he even spoke about the right man. Why did Hitler change his mind ? Because, I suppose, in the meantime he received the good news of Leopold's "yes" in principle. It was impossible for him to throw the establishment of an occupation régime in the face of the king; this régime which implied a tendency towards annexation of Belgium, or part of it. Hitler's hint to the king did not go unanswered. On 26 June, during a talk with his guard, colonel Kiewitz, the king again mentioned his willingness to meet the Führer. About three weeks later, on 14 July, the king met with a refusal : no meeting. Four days later, on 24 July, it came even sharper in the order to von Falkenhausen : "*Eine politische Betätigung des Königs der Belger ist zu unterbinden*". The king has to be kept under political control. Again the question : why this complete change of face by Hitler ? What had happened to make him change his initial trust in the political utility of the king into a profound mistrust ? Not all reports about Laeken which reached Hitler, are known : in my opinion, the Führer was doubtful about the one of 7 July. That was Reeder's special report on the Royal Question in which Leopold was personified as "the crystallizing point of the Belgian stabilization plans". About the relationship between Hitler and Leopold in August and September 1940, insufficient is known. More information seems to be available about the next two months, October and November. On 17 October, Hitler received the visit of princess Marie-José at Berchtesgaden. About one month later, on 19 November, king Leopold was also entertained by the Führer in his Bavarian residence. About the previous history of this second interview, the Leopold version gives a distorted version. The king went there only after, and because he had heard from his sister that Hitler had threatened reprisals, being displeased at Leopold's refusal of his invitation of 31 May. It could also have been a decisive fact that Hitler invited the king. Only the latter is true, but it has been taken out of context in the Leopold version. Indeed, it conceals that on 14 October, Marie-José went to Munich on the instructions of her brother, in order to prepare the interview. She therefore came to fetch the desired invitation. One can not speak about reprisal threats made by Hitler because Leopold did not refuse the proposed interview of 31 May but accepted it in principle. Leopold went to Berchtesgaden not only because of humanitarian

reasons. He was determined to make a special plea for a reassuring declaration by Hitler, about the political destiny of Belgium (and he did it often). Moreover, the declaration sought for was intended for Belgian opinion, which to my mind, is incontrovertible evidence that, on 19 November 1940, Leopold realized that he was not going to talk with the future vanquished leader. The outcome of Berchtesgaden is not worth mentioning.

On 29 November, nine days after the interview, Hitler confirmed his severe July-instructions.

As a postscript to this pertinent summary, I want to say a few more words about the connection between two political problems : the one about the presence of the prisoner of war, head of state in the occupied country, and the other about the occupation régime. I already told you that these two problems were closely intertwined in the conception of Hitler. This is without doubt so for the beginning of the occupation : on 4 June, for the time being, Hitler abandoned the establishment of a *Zivilverwaltung* in Flanders, after having learned that the king, in principle, accepted the interview proposed by the Führer. But you can raise the question : how is that later on Hitler did not replace the *Militärverwaltung* by the *Zivilverwaltung*, being very suspicious of the king ? Only in July 1944 did the *Militär Befehlshaber* have to give way to the *Reichskommissar*. I tried to find an explanation. For the four years (from June 1940 till July 1944) there seems to be no other, valid, remaining explanation, than the presence of the popular king who exercised a restraining influence on Hitler. And again it can be answered : Hitler was so powerful that he did not feel restrained by the popularity of a king who was prisoner of war. At a stroke of the pen he could have sacked von Falkenhausen. It is a fact, however, that he did not do so. If you ask me why, I could only answer that it was the political authority of Leopold's presence.

My study deals with a politically charged subject. The source material shows regrettable lacunae. It is obvious that not only the determination of the facts, but even more the attempt to an appropriate interpretation, will call forth criticism. I think that, on account of the available material, the Leopold version of the events, especially the thesis about the political passivity of Leopold III, is historically ill-founded. When I now say that I am not afraid of criticism, it is not because I think that I am right. It is my experience that a fair criticism excites because it tends to make people think. I hope that such a criticism, even by competent personalities, will lead to the publication of documents which refute my interpretation. This is not a challenge but an invitation.

**H. Balthazar :** Thank you very much, Mr. De Jonghe.

Finally, we now have Mrs. Claey's-Van Haegendoren, author of "Hendrik De Man. Een biografie".

**Mieke Claey's-Van Haegendoren :** It probably would be better if I just tell you how I have conceived this biography, and from that, deduce how the period 1940 is included in it. The study took place in three phases : first, a sketch of the period in which H. De Man was living, in which he was politically active; it is based on published sources. For 1940 and the war period, the works which are presented during this symposium were most important sources. The second phase was an attempt to identify the man concerned, - H. De Man. How did he react to given situations? The third phase consists of a more detailed analysis of the power play which, already in 1933, made of H. De Man a "coming man"; but already in 1940-41 he had to retire from political life, because he experienced his utter powerlessness. During the second and third phase, in the main, I was guided by four questions :

- To which new value-orientation would the former marxist H. De Man adhere on the principle of his personal experiences, the changes which arose in the socialist party and the general social evolution between 1910 and 1920 ?
- How did he translate them into his political actions ?
- What were the reactions inside and outside the socialist party ?
- What were the marks of H. De Man's political leadership ? Why has he finally been rejected ?

I started the study of H. De Man with these questions. I tried as much as possible to stick systematically to the questions, so that the biography has been conceived not thematically but chronologically. The period of 1940 is part of the last question.

**H. Balthazar :** We shall now start the discussions. You will notice that I have pointed out some items in four main lines towards which we can more or less direct our discussions. First of all, I have asked this question : why is it that only now is such a great interest being taken in the events around 1940 ?

Indeed, quite suddenly a number of authors have begun to issue their works about this period and much interest is being taken. In itself this is an interesting subject for analysis. A case, in point, is the fact that the authors of "L'an '40" have taken a very interesting initiative; one year after their book was published, they issued "Commentaires et réactions" on their work, in one of the "Courrier" of the C.R.I.S.P.

For us, the historians and promoters of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, this is of special interest because we wonder if it is a real, unique phenomenon which only concerns an interest in that specific year 1940, or does it mean that this interest and the fact that so many people are working on it, could be a stimulus to a break-through in Belgium, towards a deeper understanding of recent history which has been treated rather indifferently in comparison with other countries and in which we are only an inchoative phase.

**L. Schepens** : I have the impression that, on this point, we must distinguish between the interest in true military matters and the interest in political history. I have reason to suppose that in Belgium, the interest in true military facts is something permanent. It is the interest in the skill. But I have the impression that we, in Belgium, may not be blinded by the success of "L'an '40", which is striking. From my own experience, and I think that the other authors could confirm that, it seems that a book on political history is hard to sell in Flanders. I don't know why, but every editor will confirm that. We can just explore the development which was already being taken in the first World-War, some years ago, and which in Flanders was more important than the interest taken in the second World-War. There were many more sentimental ties and it was naturally a completely different period. Finally, one emerged a victor of the periode '14-'18, which was not the case in 1940. Because of all the publications on 1914-18, something has been set afoot and only one more step was necessary - and I took it myself - to evoke interest in '40-'45. The success of "L'an '40", in Flanders as well as in Wallonia, is also attributable to the French T.V. when in "Les dossiers de l'écran", systematic problems about the war have been raised. The interest in the war is obviously greater in France than in our country.

**J. Craeybeckx** : I am asking the following questions : there must be a certain motive for the interest in a particular period and it also would be interesting to know exactly who constitutes the reading public. An inquiry about this, has probably never been undertaken. Are the readers young, middle-aged or old ? I know by experience and by some contacts, that the middle-aged, who were young during the war, have a rather great interest. Maybe, also in view of to-day's regional problems, they have a certain need of an understanding of the origin. Finally, they also find there something about their youth. Because, strange though it may seem, when one was between fifteen and twenty years old during the war, despite the atrocity, despite the friends whom one saw dragged to the concentration camps, etc.,

there still remains an aspect which is quite touching nowadays. Must we look in this category for that interest, or is it the younger people? I do not know. In fact, one should somewhat identify the readers. For example concerning their reactions to "L'an '40": are there also testimonies, questions or comments of young people, who have not been through the war, or do all reactions come from people who, in one or the other way, have been through it?

**José Gotovitch** : Perhaps one could say that the problem has been solved by somebody who, talking about the success of "L'an '40", has written that a very well-organized publicity campaign made a bestseller of "L'an '40". It thus would amount to a problem of marketing. Yet, the reactions and contacts, which we could have, do not tempt me to concur with this account.

The interest seems to have been aroused in the age group which was mentioned by Mr. Craeybeckx. The verbal and written reactions came from people who have been through the war, who have perceived the effects but perhaps, did not understand the real dimension, nor perceive the lines of force. After the lapse of years, they are asking for the 'why' and the 'because' of the recession of time; they find out that the given explanations were made through polemics: the repression and the Royal Question. To-day, they are looking for a more real explanation, nearer to the facts. On the other hand, I do not think that youth, whether of university class or not, are really interested in this period. To-day, a general interest in the study of the political currents of the 20th century has been aroused. These political currents originate from the pre-war period and are, may be, carried on through the war: the right, fascism, communism, the search for the past in order to explain the present. But I do not think that they are specifically from the war.

**Gérard-Libois** : My position is two-fold: the one of the co-author of a book and the one of the editor. When we wrote the book, we thought with Gotovitch that we had done everything to make a book that would not be a great success with the public.

Indeed, the most controversial points, in my opinion, are treated in a diffuse way. We did not deal with the individual actions of "heroes"; we did not isolate the Royal Question: which were selling factors. Of the occupation period, we left out a period in 1940, because otherwise we would have dealt with things which nobody likes: the behaviour of high magistrates, which, perhaps, could have been of interest to bankers. But then we should have been obliged to treat all the subjects in a hierarchy, intellectually predetermined, and to me

that seemed to be a bad argument for selling. This is so true that, as an editor, I became anxious. The more so, because I published a book of which I was the co-author and I did not want to transact a bad business deal. We published the book in 3,000 copies. A fortnight before the publications we were still wondering if we should bind the 3,000 copies. We did not know if our book would evoke any interest. Of the questions which were asked, there were two things to be taken into consideration : first "who was interested in the book ?" and second "why this great success ?" - because this is not quite the same. One can have 500 readers and make a sociological analysis of these readers, but when the phenomenon becomes collective, it is another matter. I must admit that I am no wiser than before and I am a bit at a loss to explain the success. As regards the sociological matter, I should change a bit what José Gotovitch has said about the young people who conceived a passion for that period. Indeed, I do not think that many young people conceived a passion for that period. But I note that during lectures, young politically interested people - and I stress the word politically interested - have the impression that they did not get good information, nor any explanation after the war. They think that a period of the history of Belgium has been whisked away. This impression may or may not be groundless. The test of the young people is not conclusive. I am sure that the same book published at 80 F instead of 480 F, would have the same public as it had. The question of the young people is not settled as one would like to think, after having looked at the selling figures. Anyway, during lectures, those who ask most questions, are the young.

**A. De Jonghe :** As has been the experience of Mr. Gérard-Libois, I too have found that, after a lecture, most questions are asked by young people. Thus, there does exist a certain interest.

But I am asking the question in another way. What response is to be made to meet that interest ? There was an interest, the proof is there : the big success of "L'an '40". And if you allow me to speak about myself : my book, too, had met with a certain degree of succes, or, so says the editor, who is very pleased. An interest did exist, but people were left in the air, there was nothing. Are there any facts in the recent past which could have worked as a stimulus ? I think that one of the stimuli was the Verbelen trial.

In order to explain the lack of interest one has, secondly, to take into account university education. And again I ask : how is it that there is so little interest in university circles ? Is it because of the domination of the medievalists, or of some important personalities at

the university ? I remember the time at Louvain : in 1931, I was the only one with a thesis on contemporary history, after Prof. Terlinden, who presented his 30 years before.

**M. Claeys-Van Haegendoren :** I just intended to say the same thing : that interest always existed, how is it that the response to that interest is forthcoming just now ? Note another significant fact, that all these studies took place outside the universities. Indeed, how is history taken up or how was history taken up at the universities a few years ago ? And how has the need of the public been answered ? At a certain moment, these works have given the answer. But outside the traditional channel of science.

**J. Craeybeckx :** It all happened quite suddenly. When I was a student, and I am not that old, one began with the Middle-Ages. Whether one liked it or not, one was a medievalist. It is only after the second World-War, that professorial chairs of contemporary history were established in a serious way. In Ghent, for example, there was a chair of "modern and contemporary history". The holder of that chair, the late Hubert Van Houtte, placed emphasis on modern history. He didn't go further than the French Revolution. Of course, the reason is a top-heavy university, which did not know how to identify with the world in which we now live. A distorted vision of history which mistakenly took the view that one could only be objective about periods in the distant past is connected with this. In fact, the entire science of the historian consisted more of criticism of texts and a lot less of questions which could be asked. Above all one didn't want to commit oneself and was inclined to give less treatment to possible burning problems. Indeed, those who dared to tackle a burning problem, as did Mr. De Jonghe in his "Taalpolitiek van Willem I" (8) did so at the risk of damaging their future career.

**A. De Jonghe :** The subject has broken my career.

**L. Schepens :** You said that the interest always existed. But we have the post-war period, which made the thing taboo. Why was nothing done ? Because one did not dare to stir up passions. Before I published my book, somebody who was involved in the matter, told me : "that will be a bomb". It was not a bomb. The generation who lived through the history of '40, is still so sentimentally bound to it and we feel that in their reactions : "The king came off well" is said

(8) *Language policy of Willem I.*

by the royalists, or "finally they are saying the truth about the king" is said by the non-royalists. Obviously, it has been a grave traumatic experience for the generation who witnessed it.

**J. Gotovitch :** We are here approaching the problem which, in my opinion, is basic, namely the absence in our university of the *Zeitgeschichte*. That is the result of a very heavy past which is a burden upon our historical school and it also is the result of a simple political problem. In my opinion, it is impossible to do *Zeitgeschichte* without certain risks, and I think that the professors of universities are, or, at least, were afraid to get mixed up in the business.

The historians who are, and perhaps often rightly, much more prudent than others, allow more scope to the political science which is, I think, of no purpose to history. I want to add that, if to-day attention is given to this, one may not neglect the importance of the mass-media, of television which is closely related to current events, to people and especially to recent events. A habit has been built up, or rather a favorable presumption with regard to the possibility of dealing with up-to-date subjects. In view of the important impact on the public of these broadcasts, I think that a new light has dawned upon the minds of scientists and of men of letters who realize that it is also possible to write about this subject. This new way of studying very recent history cannot do without this way of expression, without this means of communicating with the public.

**H. Balthazar :** I am pleased that the problem of the university has been put. For three years now, in the course of historical critique, I have tried to work with the students upon very recent history and the problem of '40 is also under discussion. I must admit that the students are making laudable efforts to treat this theme. I also found out - and I think that the same phenomenon has been happening these past two or three years at the State university of Ghent - that in the case of students, asking for theses, many ask for subjects on *Zeitgeschichte*. There is a process under way and the universities must try to catch up with it as quickly and as fairly as possible. For that purpose, I hope that a similar discussion will be concerned with one of means.

**A. De Jonghe :** I would like to make a slight alteration to my previous statement. Perhaps I was unfair when I spoke about the domination of the medievalists. I think that one university went ahead with the interest in contemporary history : the U.L.B. with

Prof. Van Kalken. There, more than anywhere else, interest has been shown in contemporary history.

**H. Balthazar :** Thank you for this amendment. We can now pass on to other questions in this debate. About the works, which we are discussing here, questions are asked on methods and plan. How must we do it ? On the level of reaction, two generations clearly have the floor. The older generation who, thirty years after the events, are still going in for retrospective auto-suggestion; each word, written about 1940, is compared in a defensive or offensive way with their own reminiscences and experiences. The younger generation wants to approach 1940 as a specific aspect of society and wants to learn its workings better. Here the question about the starting-point is operative. The four works, about which we are speaking here, have a different starting-point in each case. This was abundantly clear during the introductions. Mr. Schepens said : "I was at the beginning of the problem, I asked myself questions and I drafted a status questionis about everything I was able to bring out about that point." In "L'an '40" it is rather the theme itself, an analysis of society. With Mr. De Jonghe, we have a very classical method, a textual criticism exposé, maybe medievalistic. First of all, it is the document which is of value and it is striking - I wrote that somewhere - that he sometimes explains the war at its sources.

**A. De Jonghe :** This is said in a rather sharp way ...

**H. Balthazar :** ... Finally we have the biography. In the introduction, Mrs. Claeys said "I wanted to place that one person in the general image of the time". We then have four completely different starting-points. How do we place them ?

**J. Craeybeckx :** Let us take one aspect. Because the authors of "L'an '40" have not consulted all the sources, they probably have used care in connection with the attitude of the king during the summer of 1940. They more or less, do not commit themselves, maybe by way of precaution because they could not go that far in view of the plan of their broader, conceived work. Mr. De Jonghe, textual critically, step by step, proceeding like a detective, in the light of texts, came to a view of the attitude of the king, which is of course, more explosive than the view given in "L'an '40". But I think, that this cannot be avoided in a certain way. Otherwise, one would have to reproach the authors of "L'an '40", not only because of this point but also because of all the other points, for not having written the

definitive history. Finally, this is also the advantage of a work such as "L'an '40": the public cannot wait ten or twenty years for a definitive study. It is better to write a book that fulfils the present needs. This just is the great lack of the historians: they dare not write a book, unless about a well-outlined subject, where they are sure not to walk on thin ice.

**H. Balthazar** : The students very often ask the question : when the historian treats a subject that lies far behind him, is he so sure, or is it only a false certainty. When we approach a problem, such as 1940, there are two facts. First, the availability of the sources. Without entering into the case, it is thus, that we are suddenly snowed under by a lot of problems, documents and information which otherwise, if for example we were quietly studying one or the other event in 1836, we would not encounter. Secondly, when faced with a plethora of information, one has to look for a starting-point of method. What then is important? Must one make the case very narrow, or must one try, on the basis of some questions, to get a general picture as soon as possible? I am for ex. thinking about the phenomenon "public opinion" in 1940. A lot has been talked about it but I doubt if it ever came forward in such a sharply defined way. Through the studies about 1940, we now know that the fixed image, that has been pressed a posteriori upon us by political tension, never really existed. Rather we now have an image of the general confusion in 1940. Nevertheless, I think that one has to make a distinction in this general confusion. There is a more nebulous public opinion which is not sharply defined and there are other groups which will take political option in this confusion.

**J. Craeybeckx** : I want to point out that topicality need not necessarily always depend on time. In history, there are burning points. I am thinking for ex. about the revolt of the Netherlands, of the French Revolution. The historian, who is engaged in recent history, could sometimes react to past situations in an incisive way, using an approach, conditioned by modern thought-trends.

**A. De Jonghe** : The question is asked : with what must one start? With a broad history which is "problem stating", or in a traditional way, with a limited subject? I don't think there is any contradiction between both possibilities. Finally, everything is a question of temperament. Personally, I would not dare to do what Messrs Gérard-Libois and Gotovitch have done. I only manage with a limited certainty within a limited field. I am sure that "L'an '40" has been

working in an exciting way. Most students at the university, who are interested in the second World-War, start with "L'an '40". This does not preclude our pursuance of the "clerical work", which is a firm basis. It thus becomes, what the gentlemen called "l'histoire traditionnelle". I think that this "histoire traditionnelle", this "histoire académique" or this "histoire politique" has been considered by them in a pejorative way. Though it is playing a very important part as a basis.

**Jan Craeybeckx :** In fact, a view of history has validity only on the synthesis level. Each historian has to elucidate some problems. It is possible that a historian, working in a traditional way, but very text-critically within a limited domain, would conceive the case in a completely different way when he reached a larger synthesis. The question is if, whatever be the subject, the society, which was the back-ground, has to be rebuilt. I think that one must always try to refer to that back-ground, even when one is not able to carry out an original work on that matter.

**J. Gérard-Libois :** Linking up with this, I think that there is a need for a debate on the fundamental question of method, the way of writing recent history. I do not think that there are two ways of approaching the subject : the study which you call "traditional" and the other which should be "new".

I am offended by the way of appraising an event, not by studying it, but by seeing it in the light of its consequences as in the work of Mr. De Jonghe. I think that there are two opposite conceptions : our book and the way Mr. De Jonghe was working. If one wants a general, scientific and true vision of a recent period, I think that it is dangerous to evaluate a historical moment simply through the attitude of one or two personages. I also think that it is out of date to make the history of a period by the oversimple method of debunking a thesis about that period. I do not think that it is a good way to throw light on the history of 1940 or even on the relations and attitude of king Leopold III and Hitler, by doing it through the destruction of the Leopold view, which is an evaluation made after the event. I think that to-day there are very few people who do not doubt its perfect authenticity. It is dangerous for many reasons, because the history of such important events, as the occupation of a country by a power such as Germany and also the problems which are posed could not be reduced to a king-Hitler duality. I think it difficult to depict a period only through what may be called the source, nothing more than the source and nothing outside the source.

In recent history one has to feel a bit more free with regard to the source and not be limited by the idea that outside the printed documents, events do not exist. If this is done in *Zeitgeschichte*, the net result will be historical distortions, because we know that the document, the exact source on every thing does not exist and the contemporary historian has to attempt to reconstruct the atmosphere and to appeal to psychological notions. What I am going to say will perhaps, animate the debate - up till now it has been very urbane. I was shocked to see that king Leopold III has been described with such superficiality, in such an allegedly thorough study, so remarkable for studying the moments, nearly hour by hour, without asking the question : who is the king, what were his pre-war thoughts, in which political context (individual or even psychological) has he thought such or such an act ? This seems to reduce the value of the interpretation given to his acts. In order to understand his attitude of 1940, one would need to consider his attitude in 1936 and judge whether the king did or did not maintain his position. It is not a defence of the king, as expressed by an unwarranted campaign against our book that stated that we cast down our eyes when passing Laeken. The war ended, the king put up with Nazi Europe, with a Europe dominated by Germany. It is clear, it is settled. But explaining everything in the light of documents without integrating them in a context, psychological or otherwise, and without reference to past years, this leads to a distortion of history. I cannot believe - Mr. De Jonghe would say "bring the document" (but this is a difference of conception) - that the future of Belgium has been determined by the two poles : Hitler-Leopold III. To me, Belgium is not only the king. He is the incarnation of something and I am thinking about a small detail : the king, the royal family, are they, yes or no, part and parcel of the Belgian financial world ? I am thinking for example, about the importance of the definite position adopted by Gallopin and the Société Générale in order to determine the future of Belgium in 1940 and I cannot disjoin the king from that complex. One has to ask questions, also when Mr. De Jonghe says "the *Zivilverwaltung* has not been maintained for the future". He says that it was the presence of the popular king that restrained its establishment. Indeed, when one studies the texts concerning Hitler, Lammers, etc., which is done in an exemplary way by Mr. De Jonghe, I think that it would be difficult to take away the important factor which is economic collaboration during the war. Any occupying force knows that modifications of its occupation system would cause a very reticent attitude in economic quarters from which it is expecting an important and satisfactory collaboration.

**A. De Jonghe** : It is in the second part.

**J. Gérard-Libois** : Yes, but you set the problem. The main point is this : reducing the history of a community to the relations between two persons, seems to me a distortion of recent history. One has to include in this the social, economic and political powers and I suppose that we are here facing two opposite conceptions of recent history. I am sorry that I kept you so long on this problem, and, even now I feel I have not dealt with it completely.

**M. Claeys-Van Haegendoren** : As a non-historian, I should like to put in a word. To me the fact is important that, through the work of a historian, I can form an opinion of what was happening. When I had a look at the three works, I must admit that they were all useful. It stands to reason that, if one thinks that history is a conflict between two persons and nothing else, then the datum is poor. I think that the work of Mr. De Jonghe is very important, but with its own limitations. "L'an '40" also has its lacunae, for ex. the conflict between the king and Hitler has not been worked out thoroughly. In a word, to me it is not a conflict but only liberties one can take with historical science.

**Els Witte** : Mrs Claeys made it clear that she does not consider her work as an historical one. Does she consider it as typical of what political science in Belgium is achieving at present ?

**M. Claeys-Van Haegendoren** : I do not think so. Political history is only one branch of the political sciences.

**J. Craeybeckx** : The preface is by a political scientist.

**E. Witte** : Personally I think that there is a certain discrepancy : in your introduction you give an outline of a political tendency in the interpretation of the facts. I expected the same approach in the interpretation of the facts elsewhere. That is not the case.

**M. Claeys-Van Haegendoren** : Of course, there is the question : what meaning do you attach to "political tendency". I did not ask myself if my work was political, or historical, naturally, I have written, starting from my training and background. This is especially apparent from the introduction. Then, with that vision in mind, I started to work in an historical way.

**H. Balthazar** : Of course, these marginal discussions between political science and history are very nebulous.

**J. Gérard-Libois** : I want to stress that I do not agree with Mr. De Jonghe about his use of the word "politics". He tells himself that politics "in the clear meaning of the word, in the proper sense of the word" means the destiny of Belgium, and that destiny is treated as if it were the problems of the two personalities involved : Hitler-Leopold. Consequently, he brushes aside what he claims is not really political, i.e. the economic, social, cultural, etc. Though this seems to me a totally unwarranted assumption, because if one wants to do the political history, I cannot accept that one refers to a conception of politics which seems to me completely false. The destiny of the country is to be sought elsewhere. Furthermore I cannot consider that politics, in the real sense of the word, brushes aside everything that is economic and social and ignores the cultural tension in a country. This was an apprehension of principle which seems to justify the remark of José Gotovitch. I share his point of view, not for scholastic reasons, but because of the conception of what politics really is. Perhaps De Jonghe deals with the history of political matters, but if one does political history, one has to know what politics is.

**A. De Jonghe** : I first shall answer the remark of Mr. Gérard-Libois. Indeed, I am aware, that politics is much more than the lot of the state. But one has to start somewhere. If I look at politics in a restrictive meaning of the word, then indeed, the State only is concerned. I then come to what has been said by Mr. Gotovitch; but first of all an introductory comment. The "Tijdingen voor de Aulæen Spectrumreeks" have published a very short review of my book. In that review a comment has been made which has also been pointed out by Mr. Gotovitch. I want to agree to this immediately. I should have considered the situation of Leopold before 1940 in order to make it clear why he first capitulated and then, after the capitulation, why he stayed in the country. In my book, Leopold appears as if he were out of the blue. Indeed, I start with the Royal Question on 28 May. My general answer is this. It is again a question of temperament and also a question of the past, of training. First of all, one has to gather material. Once the material has been gathered, viz. firmly based monographs, then one can start on a more comprehensive work. Messrs. Gérard-Libois and Gotovitch, I want to point out that in your preface, you too have said that your work came too early, because about ten monographs are missing. Well, I

only want to add another stone of solid material. I must admit that one stone is not a house, that even a lot of stones make up only part of a house. I must admit that all the questions you just have stated, had to be put. I too have asked these questions : what pressures did the king have to endure ? What forces motivated his actions ? Again and again I have stressed in my book : we are facing essential and surprising lacunae in the whole story. I just can not answer your questions. Finally I must say this : my work is limited. I leave it to the historians who will come next and who have a different concept of the practice of a profession. With the help of what I have written, they will erect the total edifice.

**J. Gérard-Libois :** I rather agree with Mr. De Jonghe, but he does not say that in his book. He specifically claims it to be his ambition to examine the destiny of Belgium, but in fact he treats it as if the problem of the Belgian state was simply a matter of the outcome of the personal conflict of Leopold III-Hitler. I really must dispute this conception because if you had made an analysis, a book which had been called "Leopold III and Hitler", then I would find this book remarkable. Let me make a more fundamental criticism : it is not true that you have dealt with the political destiny of Belgium, because that destiny in 1940 was determined elsewhere than in Laeken. Thus, it is a fundamental criticism which does not detract from the interest with which I read the documents. This interpretation is a fundamental criticism of the ambition which you say you hope to achieve. I consider that the book does not square with the proclaimed ambition.

**J. Craeybeckx :** Look at it this way. I do not think that there is a profound contradiction. I just said that history exists on the level of synthesis, whereof the whole structure of society is a portion, and that next to this there is room for monographs. Nevertheless, I am susceptible to the remark of M. Gérard-Libois. It is evident that out of ten monographs, one is not able to build a synthesis; because he who writes a synthesis must first draft a questionnaire. Then answers must be sought in the monographs; outside the monographs, and in the sources. The rest, unfortunately, has to be supplemented by hypotheses. This is evident. Next to this is the right to write a monograph in which one explores a detail, makes a kind of building stone; but it is prudent, from the preface onwards, not to give the impression that one will do more. Of course, I do not want to deny the importance of the monograph, because it demands a high degree of subtlety in analysis. We must not forget that this too is a quality.

Subtlety in analysis and in textual criticism is not given to everybody; it is the fruit of training and of mental relation. There is also the textual critical research which retains its value later on, in succeeding generations, because it can still be used. I want to stress that there may not be a contradiction involved.

**A. De Jonghe :** There is another remark - not with a malicious meaning - which I want to make to Mr. Gérard-Libois. I remember well his last sentence "...le livre ne correspond pas du tout à l'ambition proclamée...". Now then, Mr. Gérard-Libois and Mr. Gotovitch, I also want to say that your book does not respond "aux ambitions proclamées" in your preface.

**H. Balthazar :** When M. De Jonghe says "at the end of my book, I also have found out that there still are a lot of lacunae", then, there is in this something which contradicts what Mr. Gotovitch has said about the value itself of the document. This also occurs in a very noteworthy article by Schlesinger in "Daedalus" about the historian as participator in the historical process. True enough, the process which we describe lies thirty years behind us, but in fact we too are participators somewhere, because we are living within the living generations who witnessed it. There is that paradox of the document in recent history : when one only counts the amount of papers, there are more and more of them; but the value of the document becomes fundamentally different and this for many reasons. The number of documents becomes too great and the intrinsic value itself of what is mentioned in the document no longer has the same impact and value as the one in the earlier texts of the 16th, 17th centuries or even earlier ones. We must explore the mystique of the document in a closer way. I think that we must demystify it.

**J. Craeybeckx :** I too am asking : "How must contemporary history be written ? ". There is not only the difference between a swift and total synthesis, which is not purely academic, and a monograph.

**A. De Jonghe :** I have dealt with one main problem : the future of the Belgian State as we learn it from the instructions by Hitler, and from the summit discussions which prepared the change of occupation régime. This is one main problem.

**J. Gotovitch :** To-day we have for instance a doctorate thesis on this matter. Must, let us say, the hypercritical conception of Mr. De Jonghe been given as a model ?

**J. Craeybeckx** : That depends on the subject. Indeed, a subject can give a building-stone and here and there such a building-stone is necessary. It can be very useful. Of course, I should rather prefer something larger. But I think that it is difficult to ask somebody for such a large subject on recent history; perhaps he would need his all life to get it ready, if he must examine all aspects at the same time. Consider only the fact that so many people have been, for the past ten or twenty years, busy with the social structure of a town in the 19th century. I do not see how, for a doctorate, one should manage something that is so wide, than one has to uncover all structures.

**H. Balthazar** : It is probably not a question whether the subject has to be broad or narrow.

**L. Schepens** : Well, I want to point out, that the value of a document is very relative nowadays. I am working in an administration and I find out, and this is true on all levels, that so many things are discussed and decided, of which one never finds any written trace. Neither can it be found out in the papers what is the background of the matter, because there is the telephone, there are individual talks and at the end much more is solved that way than in the written way. Hence, that is why I am afraid that when one sticks only to documents, one is not necessarily nearer to the truth, because there is a danger that one does not know the background of the matter.

**E. Witte** : I also think that if, in recent history, one wants to find out the mechanisms of human behaviour, one needs, first of all, the key-information. And I now wonder if the archives are already released to such an extent, that this key-information or at least sufficient information is available for the very recent period. It is true what has been said by Mr. Schepens, that the most important decisions, especially nowadays, are taken by telephone, when formerly correspondence was more generally used, and written sources were left behind. I think that for the period up to 1914, more key-information is on hand.

**L. Schepens** : Hence the importance of the televised interview and the like, because there one gets the information which one would be less likely to find in texts.

**J. Gotovitch** : Let us take an example in the period under discussion : the official reports of the secretaries-general. It is evident that the very, very important problems are not dealt with in these

official reports. No information is given about the process of the decision nor about the decision itself. That is the reason why it is dangerous to start from the principle that outside of the document, an event does not exist.

**A. De Jonghe :** But my contention is that documents must always be checked. But if you say that there is so much "en dehors des documents" that is not accessible, then I say that the first thing one has to consult, is the document. Take, for example, a decision by Hitler, the instruction of 14 July. I am looking for the settlement : it is not there and the only thing I can possibly say (and I have often said it) : "it could be, it is obvious, may be ...". There are gaps in the sources. If one is to discard the use of the document then, to what will one attach value ? The past is at stake and the past can only be known through a source...

**J. Gérard-Libois :** It is a very interesting debate, and much has been said about the difficulty of using documents. But I want to stress another danger which I note in the book of Mr. De Jonghe, i.e. an abundance of documents about a relatively subordinate event and nothing about the important event. The temptation is strong, especially for the investigator who wants to prove the Leopold thesis of Laeken or another thesis, to accord an importance, out of all proportion to the real problem, namely to know if Leopold III would stay in Belgium or not. This is said in one line.

**A. De Jonghe :** Oh no ! I have studied the available sources.

**J. Gérard-Libois :** Indeed, I want to make it clear in this debate. The point of sources and the point, which was a controversial one after the war in the Leopold versions, are of great importance. You see that my critic associates itself with the criticism made by Gotovitch, i.e. the Laeken story has been developed because of the sources. But whereas one was studying the country and even the Leopoldic problem, the real problem was to be sought somewhere else. There is a temptation to take advantage of the existing documents and when they are not there, the proportion of cases is not respected; when one does not have the code of a document, there is the danger that one is not able to read the bureaucratic or diplomatic document properly. I have the impression that in the bureaucratic and diplomatic language, one must know the code. I now shall make the criticism on the question of the royal answer in June. I have not been convinced, but I am ready to be... I am still

wondering if, in the context of that epoch, the answer of Laeken (i.e. that they did not want any publicity) was not a "no" in diplomatic or political terms. Concerning this, I have not been convinced by the pages of Mr. De Jonghe. Having some experience of bureaucracy, every day I ascertain that when somebody enquires into the correspondence between individuals, and if he does not have the code but wants to point out something, he just makes assertions and he can be completely wrong. If one does not have the code, these documents are difficult to handle. And this is my criticism of the way that documents are treated in the book of Mr. De Jonghe. I am very suspicious about people who cannot decode. It is a question of practice.

Mr. De Jonghe asks Mr. Gérard-Libois to repeat his last remark. The latter says that Mr. De Jonghe is not capable of decoding.

**A. De Jonghe :** Thank you.

**H. Balthazar :** I think that we are discussing on two levels at the same time, and that we went from the methods to the sources. In the sources, already two matters came to the forefront : first, the lacunae and secondly, the sort of sources and the method of approaching these sources. The aspect of decoding has been broached, but there is something else about which I should like to get the opinion of the authors, because I think that at least three out of the four have worked with a kind of source which itself is linked with contemporary history, i.e. the living witness. When we are speaking about the difficulties of inaccessibility of the sources of contemporary history, first of all one thinks about the personal dialogue and the introduction of living witnesses.

**L. Schepens :** Living witnesses as sources, create problems. A living witness can only be of any use, when one comes as much as possible into possession of his material. If one goes unprepared to a witness, it is of no use. First, via other means, one must study the whole period in order to put the right question and to find out immediately where the account of the witness does not concur with the documentation. In fact, an examination of the witnesses is only dependent upon the moment when one is able to confront the witness with the existing sources, with the written and published sources.

**J. Craeybeckx :** This is so for all historical texts : one can only interpret the text when one has enough data about the whole

context.

**L. Schepens** : The advantage of a witness is that he gives the atmosphere and one does not find enough of that in written sources.

**J. Gotovitch** : I must confirm what Mr. Schepens says, when he makes, let us say, a prudent remark. Even the atmosphere can, a posteriori, be interpreted in a different way. For example, I interrogated quite a few ex-service men of the "Légion Wallonie"; well, I have learned a lot from their accounts, when describing the events of that epoch, they incorporated the interpretation which was given for their defence after the war. They used the big words of the defence and the explanations, which proved them to belong to the period '39-'40. This obviously, is one thing that one must distrust. I think however that history, the *Zeitgeschichte*, is indissociable from the collection of evidence of the witnesses and of the actors, weighed and assessed with due reservations. And I am putting stress on what you have just said that, before meeting somebody, you must know his life better than he does. It is with the shock of events which he does not remember anymore, that one specifies and restricts, that one can remind him of things, which are still in his memory, but which he has failed to interpret. Otherwise, they are telling their own stories as they have fixed them. I remember a famous resistance worker, whom I interrogated, and I really enjoyed it when I heard him repeat the version which he had given in 1945 in an atmosphere of polemics and with a political intention. To himself, he was really honest when repeating his own story. Well then, I really think that one must distrust to some extent, but one must use the evidences because somewhere, even in the turn of a phrase one finds the atmosphere, or maybe the event and above all one finds the connections. When one interrogates people, one of the most important things is for example, to find out some connections which do not appear in the documents or even in what was written during that epoch or later. In giving an account one may say for example "During my primary education, I was at school with so and so", such an opening gives a valuable clue. Again one knows how people introduce themselves with regard to somebody else. This sometimes opens up new avenues of investigation. I am linking up with what I have said earlier on that the utilisation of the mass-media has to be done in concert with recent history. I think that our universities would have a great advantage and a great interest if they followed what is done, for example, by radio, television, insofar as the students take an interest in it, but also because it gives rise to

new sources and evidences. I think that there is an extraordinary disregard for what is public, for what is sometimes called commercial. I am thinking about the confrontation between Alain Decaux and Robert Devleeschouwer. Devleeschouwer is a serious historian and with a flourish, he rejected everything done by radio and television, saying "it is not serious and that is not the way to make history". I think it wrong to look at things that way. In recent history, we must incorporate this vehicle of information and when I say vehicle of information, it is not only towards the public, but on the contrary, towards history, itself - from public to history.

**J. Craeybeckx :** It is funny, but fault seems to be found with recent history for having what every historian regrets not to have had for another period. In connection with that, Dhondt wrote that it was a big mistake to think that "ce qui n'est pas dans les textes n'est pas", and he really put on the rack medieval witnesses such as Gilbert from Bruges, in order to squeeze out what we eventually, though not perfectly, could learn from people who were concerned in it. I think it foolish that we should use such an argument against the techniques of recent history. The historian of any earlier period would never think this possible, but considered afterwards, how would one like to take by the collar somebody who was involved in it.

**A. De Jonghe :** My own experience is rather limited. I only called on three persons, all three at the top of the period in question : General van Overstraeten, P.H. Spaak and Minister De Schrijver. I have the impression that the interpretation of their answers did not present difficulties, but my questions were very precise. Of course, it will be of more importance for the second part.

**H. Balthazar :** Anyway, you attach great importance to it.

**A. De Jonghe :** Yes, taking into account what has just been said by Mr. Gotovitch. If I consider what the Germans, who played a part in the Third Reich, are telling now, then I must agree with Füller, the English military critic, who said about Hitler : when one is listening to the people who were with Hitler "*nicht dabei gewesen, niemals dabei gewesen*", then one must agree that Hitler was a genius, because he could hold out against everybody, for a period of twelve years. One has to take into account the fact that the interrogated personalities have integrated their past, perhaps in the light of defensive reactions (I also do so).

**M. Claeys-Van Haegendoren** : Indeed, I think that the interview is a very important part of research-work, but it presents many problems, especially when dealing a period thirty years ago. I was very astonished that the people, interrogated about that period, have simply forgotten so many things. Very often, when they are confronted, they do not give you any information - why, one does not know.

**A. De Jonghe** : I think that memory is a faculty that forgets. Mrs. Claeys, there is a case that you know : the meeting which took place between De Man and some prominent Flemings, on the eve of the publication of his Manifesto. Elias - and I believe him - does not remember that. Van Roosbroeck, who was with Elias, says categorically "he was there" and I do not think that Elias is in bad faith. He has nothing to lose and nothing to gain if he told the truth.

**M. Claeys-Van Haegendoren** : But for the atmosphere of that period such an interview could be a disclosure. If one views documents from a different standpoint, it could mean an enrichment.

**J. Gérard-Libois** : I do not think that we must minimise personal contacts with witnesses as means of obtaining documentation. This is my experience for "L'an '40" : meeting people for the first time did not give any result, but when one saw them a second time, they remembered that they had something in their attic. The chapter on the suspects has mainly been made that way, i.e. contacts with a person who played a part but did not have a clear memory, made mistakes with figures, but there were treasures in his attic. About the secretaries-general, I had the same experience. One of them has a rather dim recollection; he explained facts with facts which came later, but after a few meetings he told us that he had a treasure in his attic, including the minutes of the secretaries-general. At that time, we did not have access to that source. There is another aspect. One contacts a lot of people of whom one never would have thought for an "a priori" plan. About a precise fact, they suddenly give us a document, something he was interested in, because he is a fanatic, or because it had touched him personally. I do not say that it is representative, but it is a way of provoking. Sometimes more than they think.

**J. Gotovitch** : I should like to raise the case of the Centre of the second World-War, which is used to work in that way, and to emphasize the results. The different public appeals have called forth

what is almost of fundamental value for the study of public opinion which is so difficult to catch, i.e. personal diaries. During a broadcast in which the problem of domestic accounts had been raised, mention was made of some very small villages and also of people, whom we never would have interviewed, because we did not know them. This is an extremely important aspect, because in Belgium we have people in radio and television, who are ready to work in that field.

**L. Schepens** : I agree with this, because it is striking that again and again, radio and television have presented interviews with interesting persons, but they were interviewed by a reporter who, unfortunately, did not know enough about the matter and who, all the time, was talking beside the point and did not go further into the essential matters. I think that there should be a closer contact between people who are well informed in the matter, and the mass-media.

**J. Gotovitch** : I should like to stress another aspect : it stands to reason that the publication of works, whatever their quality and whatever limitations they may have - (I am thinking especially about "L'an '40" with all its defects and failings) - opens, not only on the level of individuals but also on the level of institutions, new doors in the matter of accessibility of sources. With the publication and the study (still more and more important) of this recent period, there is a process which favours such an opening. For example, I would like to refer particularly to the defence of the thesis by Marc Van de Wyngaerde, on the secretaries-general. It has allowed the opening of the official reports of the secretaries-general and other documents which deal with the secretaries-general; until now these were excluded from research. Recent history is making itself.

**H. Balthazar** : Mayby we could start the last discussion-round during which everybody could take the floor.

**L. Schepens** : It is striking that we are facing two, I hesitate to say, diametrically opposing concepts of history. However we are witnessing the development of a new tendency, i.e. a kind of existential approximation of history. How can we, from the recent past, explain what happens to-day ? We ask history not only about the facts but rather, about how people lived. A broad approximation of the recent past would be the explanation of the period we are living in.

**Romain Van Eenoo** : Criticism has been levelled against the given

sources. The study of recent history would take another direction, and would require a divergence from the sources. This is not very clear : when I hear the enumeration of sources which could be used a long list of very traditional sources has been enumerated. One spoke about the reports of the secretaries-general, about papers, diaries, correspondence, etc. These are the known sources with their traditional problems, the same sources which can be used for the modern time and for the contemporary time and for the most recent time. Undoubtedly, the volume has increased. In short, I only see one new source, the contemporaries and one problem i.e. the way one can make them talk, let us say, through interviews, radio, television, etc.

**J. Gotovitch** : Of course, for events which happened twenty years ago, one is in a position to judge which reasonings and declarations have a degree of probability. Because one has personal experience of the atmosphere. On the ground of what is said in "L'an '40" about public opinion, I can see it happened that way. In that book, many things were said for the first time, because one was afraid to be called a bad patriot or something similar. I really can judge the degree of probability of interpretation, something I could not do in the case of an event that took place for ex. in 1900.

**L. Schepens** : For that, one had the correspondence, the newspapers... I should like to add something to this : I do not think that one expects a historian, when he has examined all the sources, to give an answer and take a stand. One expects from a historian that he gives his opinion, especially on recent history.

**Jos De Belder** : I think - and this is a very personal opinion about what history has to give to the works which are discussed here - that they are important for many reasons : the main one being that they go halfway to answering participants' questions, hence the great interest. But in the framework of appreciation of history, these works are a positive contribution. I personally think that history, conceived as a political science, can use a critical history of events as a framework of references, but can do nothing with an analysis of society in the recent past, if this is not verified by a theory based on the study of the same processes in the past.

**J. Craeybeckx** : When you are engaged on the 19th century, you may perhaps be unaware that you are starting from problems suggested by your own time and by the progress of social science. It is no thanks

to this, that you can examine the mechanism of policy and the mechanism of acquisition of power. Because the historians of 1900 for ex., considered that history is only a question of examination of texts. This is partly true, but it is more than just that. Do you not have a different approach to your own work on the 19th century, but nevertheless, for the greater part, modified by the epoch in which you live ?

**J. Gotovitch** : I think that the period which we handle, has to be studied in a classical way. We are saying : we have worked properly, the output was considerable. Of course, one day, one has to take the figures and work them out as we are doing for the 19th century. Concerning the immediate works, the problem could be reduced to two cases : first, (and this has been said in another way) seize or write down, on the basis of a first approach, a historical moment at a period where comprehension of mentalities is still very close, where one can still reach it, if only through the reactions of the people we know. Second, (I think it has been stressed) keep the documents where the traditional institutions do not expect to find them, because nowadays, the centres of decision are much more dispersed and are more aloof from the properly so called state archives.

I should like to say a last word and it shall be my inference : I really think that a work as "L'an '40" will be out of date within ten years, because by then thorough studies will have been made of all the points. On the contrary, I should like to say to Mr. De Jonghe, that I do not think that his work will be out of date, because it is a fundamental work. And if criticism has been made, it is because he had a conception of history which is, evidently, opposed to ours. On the other hand, I should like to say that I learned a lot while reading his book, though I have worked on that period, and I think that his work, his type of work, is indestructible.

**M. Claeys-Van Haegendoren** : I think that we shall never find the key information of some matters in the political science - this could be the same in the exact sciences - and this should teach us a kind of humility in our science. Within a few years, a problem could be completely outdistanced - and this is certainly so in the case of a biography - because one always works in an incomplete and partial way and a lot of things may be missed or passed over.

**J. Craeybeckx** : Historiography is also part of history ...

**R. Van Eenoo** : It is because one always tackles sources in another

way. There are a lot of sources which contain key information, and others do not. This is the work of the historian : with the questions and information at hand, he has to read and re-read the sources. He has to approach the matter in another way, till he somewhere finds part of the answer. One may never give up. I must admit that I do not profess humility on this point.

**M. Claeys-Van Haegendoren** : I agree that one may not give up, but one must also admit that one never provides a work that is completely finished.

**A. De Jonghe** : Mister president, ladies and gentlemen.

Following the last word but one, which I have said - I said "thank you" to Mr. Gérard-Libois - I should much prefer not to have to say this. I did not come here in order to criticize the works of my colleagues. I also have said that I am not afraid of criticism, but I am a bit shocked, and I say what I think, by that dash of brutality - maybe it was not intended that way, but I have understood it that way - when I heard that I cannot decode ! My answer is simple : I tried to decode, to decipher. Of course, it is easier not to decode than to try to do it. Here, I am very precise : Mister Gérard-Libois - I am adresssing Mr. Gérard-Libois as co-author of "L'an '40" - you have never tried to decode 31 May nor Berchtesgaden.

**J. Gérard-Libois** : That's right.

**H. Balthazar** : We can now end. The concluding word will be said by the president. I only wish to say this : when one writes a review and he does it in a sharp way, then it is always impudent. This happens often. The advantage of such symposium as this is that impudence can be answered immediately, with new impudence if needed. I hope that this lively form of review is a bit more interesting than the most individual expression with which we are otherwise familiar. For my own part, I thank you all whole-heartedly.

**J. Craeybeckx** : First of all, I thank colleague Balthazar, who took the initiative in this symposium and acted as animator. I think that we may look back on a fruitful debate; through discussed studies, we reached problems of method and even problems which are related with historiography in general. I especially thank the authors who were willing to come here and take part in this lively, if sometimes somewhat sharp exchange of thoughts.

Finally, to me there is only one history, or there should be only one,

either existential or non-realistic. I think that it is a very good touchstone for the historian, first of all, to understand his own time and on that basis, to sharpen and renew his interest in the past. I also think that historiography as well as political science and sociology, applied to our time, are giving us more means of checking, than when applied for ex. to the 18th century. The great interest in recent history, which is a history no less than any other, the experience of our time through historical, political and economic works, is an enrichment of the study of the past. Because the history of the middle ages is not necessarily a stringing together of chronicles about land obtained by abbeys, as we have learned from the sources. To-day, the dominating tendency in history is - we already have that in the "Annales" - to put people in that existential framework. This expression has indeed been used by Braudel. Recent history is an important enrichment for the historian and can contribute to the renewal of some rigid and antiquated conceptions of the past.