

Mining for Sources on Diplomacy - Belgium

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The origins of the diplomatic archives of the Kingdom of Belgium are almost contemporary to the country's independence in 1830. Some decades later, Europe discovered the nation as the leading source of political legitimacy. Following the example of German and Italian unification movements, other countries deemed it necessary to stress the historical roots of their nationhood, since increasingly only such countries were considered legitimate political entities. Belgium was no exception. In the middle of the nineteenth century a nationalistic movement flourished, arguing the right of Belgium to survive as a full member amidst the other European nation-states. For Belgian foreign policy this issue was all the more important, since its powerful neighbours, France and Prussia, repeatedly had questioned the country's continuing existence, using historical arguments to put into doubt the roots of Belgian nationhood.

One of the most prolific defenders of the thesis of the centuries-old existence of a Belgian 'area' in Europe was to become Emile Banning, philosopher and historian. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belgium judged his (voluntary) historical research on the relations between Belgium and the Netherlands as decisive in the negotiations between the two countries. These negotiations led in 1863 to a treaty, which established full Belgian sovereignty over the Scheldt and thus constituted a crucial commercial victory for Belgium. To assure Banning's continued collaboration, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ch. Rogier appointed him the same year as the official archivist-librarian-translator, a job newly created, for Banning, within the ministry.

From then on Banning would not only become involved in most of the major topics of Belgian foreign policy (and close associate of King Leopold II), generally offering a scholarly long-term view on the topics under discussion. His appointment was also the starting point of a hitherto neglected systematisation of Belgian diplomatic correspondence. This first effort by Banning and Seeger, his immediate successor, led to a prestigious collection of 900 leather-bound and indexed volumes, covering the general political correspondence of legations and consulates from 1830 until 1910, as well as some major thematic topics and private papers. Due to the colour of the leather, this collection is sometimes referred to as the 'black volumes'.

The archives led an eventful life. During the First World War they fell in their entirety into the hands of the occupying armies and became, as in many other countries, part of a propaganda war between the Belgian government and the occupier (the so-called *Kriegsschuldfrage*). To avoid a repetition of this, the archives were temporarily transferred to Wales (Caernarfon Castle) on the eve of the Second World War, after some long and torturous peregrinations.

In 1960 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs acquired the entire legacy of the Ministry of Colonies, dissolved at the independence of Congo. The African Archives thus became the companion

archives of the Diplomatic Archives. In 1979 a separate Archives' Directorate was created. It is now part of the Directorate of Communication and Documentation.¹

1. Primary archival sources

The Diplomatic Archives and the African Archives are the main sources for the study of the history of Belgian foreign relations. Since the Ministerial Order of 1981 a thirty-year rule is now being used as a yardstick for the consultation of Belgian archives. For documents dating back more than thirty years and less than fifty years, prior approval is required from the Diplomatic Committee, comprising of a high-level representative of each directorate-general of the Ministry. For documents dating back more than fifty years, access is authorised by the Archives' Directorate, limited only by the general criterion of non-disclosure of documents whose contents might 'harm private or public interests'.

Requests for consultation are to be addressed to the Head of the Archives' Directorate. Foreign students are no longer requested to produce a letter of introduction from the cultural section of their embassy.

The Diplomatic Archives are divided into a series of collections, of which the most important are described below.

The 'Political Correspondence/General Series' comprises the original diplomatic correspondence according to country and in chronological order, starting from 1830. For the periods 1832-1890 and 1900-1910 the consular correspondence is kept in separately bound volumes. Until 1914 the bound volumes contain a summary of all documents.

The Thematic Collections were originally part of the 'black volumes' and contain the political correspondence on specific themes and were part of the original. They cover various dossiers, such as the Conference of London (1830-1839), the Conference of Brussels (1874), the French-Prussian War of 1870-1 and military policy (covering the period 1835-1940). Some dossiers concerning the early years of Belgian colonial policy are part of this collection. They cover subjects such as the International Association of the Congo, the Conference of Berlin, the Anti-Slavery Conference, the Geographical Conference of Brussels.

The third major collection covers a whole range of political and economic documents. Its main outlines reflect the changes in the Ministry's tasks and structure. They contain for instance general files concerning the domestic, economic and international situation of other states; specific files in bilateral and multilateral relations where Belgium has played (or is still playing) a role of some importance (major conferences, high level visits, border issues, ...); files relating to a multitude of international organisations (OECE, Benelux, American aid, ...); and, finally, files dealing with domestic and external commercial aspects, including many files on private companies (chiefly 19th and the beginning of the 20th century).

A fourth collection covers thematic subjects that have been indexed separately. 'AF' contains a number of pre-independence African documents (usually until the sixties, depending on the

¹ I would like to express my thanks to dr. Françoise Peemans, Head of the Archives' Directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and to dr. Gustaaf Janssens, Head of the Archives of the Royal Palace, for their help in the research for this chapter.

independence date of the countries involved). 'Classement B' contains more than 400 dossiers, resulting from the effort to unite files that were previously dispersed. Subjects range from Luxembourg and Russia to arbitration and some aspects of the First World War. The Belgian policy at the Versailles Treaty and the reparation claims towards Germany at the end of the First World War also form homogeneous entities.

Finally, there are a personnel and administrative collections, a huge amount of press dossiers (especially for the period 1890-ca. 1950 and also interesting for the research into domestic politics) and the microfilm collection. This latter collection is indexed according to respectively the political (P) and the commercial (B) character of the documents, filmed for conservation reasons (copies of existing paper files) or prior to their destruction.

The African Archives run from 1885 until 1962 and are broken down into record groups corresponding to the departments of the Congo Free State (many documents, however, were destroyed when Belgium acquired its colony in 1908) and the former Ministry of Colonies or comprising documents which cover a particular field regarding the Belgian Congo, Rwanda and Rwanda-Urundi. There is also a section compiling some 90 private bequests. The main subject areas are politics, administration, justice, security, vital statistics, economy, infrastructure, education, religion, ethnography and official acts from 1885 to 1962. Lack of means and personnel, however, has been responsible for an important backlog of non-indexed archives concerning Central Africa. Published indexes, especially the one established in 1981 (and the later addendum) by M. Van Grieken-Taverniers, greatly facilitate the research in these archives.

Private papers, in particular those of the ministers of Foreign Affairs and some high officials, are to be consulted in several locations. The two main depositories are the Ministry itself and the National Archives in Brussels (Algemeen Rijksarchief/Archives générales du Royaume). M. Dhoore recently completed a comprehensive index of private papers deposited in the National Archives (*Archives de particuliers relatives à l'histoire de la Belgique contemporaine, de 1830 à nos jours*. Brussels: Archives générales du Royaume, 1998, 2 Vols.). Some private papers remain in the family or are deposited at University libraries (such as those of Walthère Frère-Orban and Paul Hymans at the University of Brussels, ULB) or in specific foundations, including the private papers of the minister of Foreign Affairs Paul-Henri Spaak. A useful source of information can also be found at the Archival and Documentary Centres close to the political parties.

2. Published sources

Belgium has no tradition in publishing its diplomatic record. There exist however two series of published documents. The first was published between 1964 and 1966 by Ch. De Visscher and Fernand Vanlangenhove (*Documents diplomatiques belges 1920-1940*. Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique). The five volumes however only deal with the interwar security policy of Belgium.

A new series of Belgian Diplomatic Papers is being published since 1998, covering the period 1940-1960 (*Belgische Diplomatieke Stukken/Documents diplomatiques belges 1941-1960*. Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique). The first two volumes deal with the Belgian government in exile (1941-1944) and defence policy (1941-1960). Other volumes are being

prepared on the Benelux, European integration (2 Vols.), international crises (Korea and Suez), United Nations, African territories and the specialised international organisations.

Only partly compensating the lack of a regular publication of diplomatic files, some archival sources on specific themes and periods have been published, some by the Ministry itself, some by its officials. On the first decades after Belgian independence, A. De Ridder, Director-General of the Archives and the official historian of the Ministry, has published several books, offering an abundant amount of archival sources (*Histoire diplomatique du traité de 1839*. Brussels: Vromant & Co, 1920; *La crise de la neutralité belge de 1848*. Brussels: Librairie Kiesling & Cie/S.A. M. Weissenbruch, 1928, 2 Vols.; and *La Belgique et la Prusse en conflit, 1834-1838*. Brussel, Vromant & Cie, 1919). The study of the relationship between Belgium and France at that time can be based on the collection of files edited by E. Discailles, *Un diplomate belge à Paris de 1830 à 1864* (Brussels: G. Van Oest & Cie, 1909).

An excellent selection of files on the difficult relationship between Belgium under a liberal government and the Vatican in the nineteenth century was put together by Emile Banning (*La Belgique et le Vatican. Documents et textes législatifs concernant la rupture des relations diplomatiques entre le Gouvernement belge et le Saint-Siège*. Brussels, 1880-1881, 3 Vols.)

On the origins of the First World War, F. Van Langenhove, an old-hand at the Ministry, published *Le dossier diplomatique de la question belge* (Brussels: Van Oest, 1917). On the same subject, there is the official *Belgian Grey Book* (London: Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1914-1915, 2 Vols.). In 1941 the Ministry published its official story on the Second World War in *Belgium: The Official Account of What Happened* (London: Evans, for the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1941).

3. Memoirs and diaries

It used to be said that the Belgian diplomat never writes about his career. This proves to be untrue when taking into account the wealth of memoirs and diaries. No systematic list exists on the subject, but the bibliographic repertoires (mentioned below) provide some guidance.

Not all are of course of an outstanding historic value, but many of them remain useful testimonies. These include memoirs by ministers of Foreign Affairs, such as Goblet d'Alviella, Beyens, Hymans and Paul-Henri Spaak.

Numerous diaries written by diplomats sometimes offer very detailed accounts of their discussions and instructions. The account given by J. Davignon of the pre-war situation in Nazi-Germany gives an interesting insight in Belgian attitudes towards Nazi-Germany (*Berlin 1936-1940. Souvenirs d'une mission*. Paris/Brussels: Editions universitaires, 1951). A parallel point of view on this period, seen from Brussels, is given by the then Political Director P. van Zuylen, who used many internal documents, some of them which had disappeared, in his *Les mains libres. Politique extérieure de la Belgique 1914-1940*. (Paris/Brussels: Desclée De Brouwer, 1950).

An close associate of king Leopold II, E. De Borchgrave (*Souvenirs diplomatiques de quarante ans, 1863-1903*. Brussels: Vromant & Cie, 1908) provides for a rare account of the inner circle around the second king of Belgium. This is also the case of two other royal associates, whose memoirs, however, are not devoid of some partiality (R. Capelle, *Au service*

du Roi. Brussels: Charles Dessart, 1949, 2 Vols.; same author, *Dix-huit ans auprès du Roi Léopold*. Paris: Fayard, 1970; R. Van Overstraeten, *Albert I-Léopold III. Vingt ans de politique militaire 1920-1940*. Brugge: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949).

4. Relevant official publications

The first port-of call for research on the evolution of the Ministry and the official formulation of Belgian foreign policy, is the yearly budget request of the Ministry. This request, preceded by its introductory Explanatory Memorandum, and accompanied by the subsequent debate in Parliament, is to be found in the Parliamentary acts of the Chamber and the Senate (Parlementaire Handelingen/Annales parlementaires). The specialised commissions of both Chambers, such as the Foreign Relations or the Defence Commission, publish their own acts.

The other main entry as far as the official publications are concerned, is the Statute Book of Belgium (Belgisch Staatsblad/Moniteur belge). All international treaties since 1845 can be found here, the government being obliged to submit any treaty to the Parliament for approval.

Since the beginning of the fifties, the Ministry publishes at irregular intervals a series of booklets called 'Texts and Documents', containing official statements, articles or miscellaneous documents. This series has not been indexed, but is nevertheless a major source of information on contemporary aspects of Belgian diplomacy.

Many official statements and commentaries can also be found in *Studia Diplomatica*, the bimonthly publication of the Royal Institute of International Relations in Brussels (Koninklijk Instituut voor Internationale Betrekkingen/Institut Royal des Relations Internationales). It is the successor publication to *Chronique de Politique étrangère*, created in 1947. Some thematic editions deal more in detail with specific aspects of Belgian foreign relations. Especially noteworthy are the publications on Africa and the European integration.

A semi-official publication of crucial importance for the study of the administrative and organisational development of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is the century-old *Annuaire administratif et judiciaire de Belgique* (Brussels: Bruylant, 1864-). This invaluable yearly guide details the structure of all Belgian ministries, as well as the names of leading officials and Cabinet members. For the distribution of Belgian legations around the world, the *Almanach Royal* is a good tool, at least for the period 1840 until 1939. The same goes for the *Annuaire diplomatique et consulaire*, that was published between 1901 and 1970.

The *Recueil Consulaire Belge*, established in 1855 by the powerful Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs A. Lambermont, is an inexhaustible source of information on the external economic and commercial activity of Belgium for the period 1856-1914. This source is all the more important since at that time economic expansion clearly came first among the preoccupations of Belgian diplomacy.

5. Beyond the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Since foreign relations are no monopoly of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, research should also make use of sources other than those of the ministry. The important role in foreign and defence policy played by the King, more in particular until the Second World War, makes the

consultation of the Archives of the Royal Palace imperative. These are organised along the successive kings. For the research on Belgian foreign policy especially the archives of the ‘Cabinet of the King’ and (for Albert I and Leopold III) those of the ‘Secretariat of the King’ are to be consulted. As a rule, only documents older than 50 years can be consulted. A good survey of the archives of the Royal Palace was written by G. Janssens, Head of the Archives (“Het Archief van het Koninklijk Paleis”, in: *Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique*, 62 (1991), pp. 307-342; same author, “La conservation et la consultabilité des documents aux Archives du Palais royal”, in: *Museum Dynasticum*, 8 (1996, fasc. 1); same author, “Das Archiv des Königspalastes in Brüssel”, in: *Der Archivar*, 50, kol. 600-607). All requests must be addressed to the Head of the Archives of the Royal Palace. Their consultation is only possible upon appointment.

M.R. Thielemans has edited the letters and the war diaries of king Albert I: *Le Roi Albert au travers de ses lettres inédites 1882-1916* (Brussels: Office International de Librairie, 1982) and *Albert Ier. Carnets et correspondance de guerre 1914-1918* (Paris/Louvain-la-Neuve, Duculot, 1991). Victor Neels edited a compilation of the speeches of king Baudouin (*Wij, Boudewijn, Koning der Belgen: het politiek, sociaal en moreel testament van een nobel vorst*. Balen: Eurodef, 1996, 2 Vols.)

For the royal role in Belgian foreign policy until the beginning of the twentieth century, the recent disclosure of the ‘Goffinet archives’ was a major contribution to the archival treasury. The Goffinets were both the official archivists and the confidants of Leopold I and Leopold II. The Goffinet Fund offers many new insights into the policy and the motives of the first two kings of Belgium (*Nouveaux regards sur Léopold I & Léopold II. Fonds d’Archives Goffinet*. Brussels: Fondation Roi Baudouin, 1997)

The minutes of the internal deliberations of the Council of Ministers are kept at the National Archives. They have only been filed from February 5th, 1916 onwards and are conserved on microfilm. They are open for consultation until the Council meeting of August 31th, 1944. In the year 2000 the minutes until the Council meeting of December 23th, 1949 will be made accessible. K. Devolder drew up the list of items on the agenda of the Council meetings (with reference to their microfilmed location): *Notulen van de Ministerraad/Procès-verbaux du Conseil des Ministres (1916-1949). Agenda’s en aanwezigheidslijsten/Ordres du jour et listes de présence*. Brussels: Archives générales du Royaume, 1994 (4 Vols.).

Research on the Second World War (broadly defined from the inter-war years until 1960) has greatly been facilitated in Belgium by the creation of a specialised research unit. This institute bears the name of ‘Centre d’Études et de Documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines’ (formerly ‘Centre de Recherches et d’Études historiques de la Seconde Guerre mondiale’). It accommodates archival sources, as well as a library.

6. Research tools

A number of bibliographic tools are available when starting with the study of the foreign policy of Belgium. For the period 1831-1940 the researcher can start with the three volumes edited by the ‘Centre interuniversitaire d’histoire contemporaine/Interuniversitair Centrum voor hedendaagse geschiedenis’ (*Bibliografie van de geschiedenis van België/Bibliographie de l’histoire de Belgique*). For publications since the Second World War, the late historian Jan Dhondt and (since 1974) Romain Van Eenoo have pursued this bibliographic effort as a

yearly survey in *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*. From 1997 onwards, a regularly updated bibliography on Belgian foreign policy is posted on the website of the Department of Political Science (www.psw.rug.ac.be/polwet).

R. Coolsaet wrote the only comprehensive history of Belgian foreign policy from independence in 1830. His book carries an extensive bibliography (*België en zijn buitenlandse politiek 1830-2000*. Leuven: Van Halewyck, 2001). A partly translation in French, covering the period 1940-2001) has been published (*La politique extérieure de la Belgique. Au coeur de l'Europe, le poids d'une petite puissance*. Brussel, De Boeck Université (Pol-His), 2002, 391 pp.) Two bibliographic essays also give a good survey of the existing literature on the subject: J. Willequet, "La politique étrangère. Un bilan historiographique" (in: H. Hasquin (eds.), "Histoire et historiens depuis 1830 en Belgique", in: *Revue de l'ULB*, 1981/1-2, pp. 157-174) and more recently, M. Dumoulin, "Vingt ans d'historiographie des relations internationales de la Belgique, 1964-1984", in: *Relations internationales*, 1985, 42, pp. 169-182).

7. Addresses

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(www.le.ac.uk/csd/dsp/resources/sources-belgium.html)