Sambaluk on van Tuyll van Serooskerken, ‘Small Countries in a Big Power World: The Belgian-Dutch Conflict at Versailles’

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Hubert P. van Tuyll van Serooskerken explores a small piece of early twentieth-century military diplomatic history in a manner that helps illustrate not only Dutch-Belgian relations but also the workings of Versailles diplomacy and the shadow of war-era strategic concerns and grievances.

The events of World War I foreclosed congenial relations between Belgium and the Netherlands during or after the conflict. Although both were geographically small states, adjacent to each other, and with some overlapping cultural traits, the Netherlands and Belgium had distinct priorities and political origins even before the war. German invasion of Belgium guaranteed that the two would endure very different wartime experiences. The author makes clear that the sovereignty of the Netherlands rested on a proverbial knife’s edge, although in the wake of the conflict too many Dutch incorrectly estimated that the role of the country’s neutrality (as opposed to its comparative readiness for defense) helped guard against invasion during the war. While insecurity, economic strain, and diplomatic challenge marked the Netherlands’ experience, the hardships of occupation endured by Belgians far outstripped that suffering. The disparity in experience was a contributing factor in Belgian suspicion that the Netherlands had been pro-German, rather than strictly neutral.

The borderlands of southern Netherlands (and especially their strategic implications) raised serious points of contention between the two countries. Dutch ownership of land on its extreme southwest complicated the position of the Belgian port of Antwerp. The extreme southeastern tip of the Netherlands held disproportionate strategic significance too. German strategists on the eve of World War I, convinced that Dutch forces would fight to defend all Dutch territory, studiously avoided passing through southeastern Netherlands in the course of their violation of Belgian neutrality. Yet at war’s end, the Dutch permitted German forces upon the armistice to traverse the same Dutch soil. In Belgian eyes, such actions contributed to a sense of suspicion and betrayal toward their neutral northern neighbor.

To improve Belgium’s security, its political leaders pressed at Versailles to end the state’s heretofore mandatory neutral status and to secure more defensible boundaries by garnering concessions at the expense of the southern Netherlands and Luxemburg. This effort was a failure, due in part to savvy Dutch diplomacy, Belgian diplomatic shortcomings, and various factors among the key figures representing the United States, Britain, and France.
Van Tuyll believes that this study, beyond the bounds of its own relevance to Dutch and Belgian history, sheds light on the complicated workings of diplomacy at Versailles. He also argues that the case marks an inflection point of sorts, in which foreign policy was slipping from the hands of the aristocrats to a potentially wider set of players. Many of the personal and microeconomic aspects of diplomacy had previously been dominated by aristocrats who were singularly prepared for the environment; the more aristocratic Dutch prevailed in the competition over southern Dutch soil, marking for van Tuyll something of an exception late in the transformation to a new diplomatic rule.

Contingency plays an important role in events, and van Tuyll toys with the idea that, had events occurred differently (as, for example, a German invasion of Holland in 1914 or Dutch intervention during the war later), Dutch-Belgian relations might have been substantially different during the interwar period. Perhaps, he ventures, this might have helped the two countries serve at least as a strategically relevant speed bump. “Had the Dutch and Belgians been allies they could have formed a decent defense between Antwerp and Breda. They could not have stopped the Germans but they could have slowed them down” and possibly have affected the course of World War II (p. 241). While unknowable, the point does indicate to the reader how seemingly minor events can cast long shadows in other arenas.

The sources examined include extensive materials from the Dutch and Belgian archives, as might be expected, and additionally documents providing important insights regarding the United States, France, Britain, and Germany. This is particularly advantageous for giving the reader an informative and detailed vantage not only of the Dutch and Belgian participants but also of German strategists and planners whose prewar and wartime decisions influenced the relationship and of the perspectives and infighting among the most powerful of the victorious states which theoretically had the opportunity to address the Dutch-Belgian controversy while awash in the momentous and chaotic issues of the postwar world. Small Countries in a Big Power World is a valuable, interesting, and meaningful book that earns its place on the shelves of diplomatic and World War I history.


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