CONCEPTUALIZING THE OCCUPATIONS
OF BELGIUM, LUXEMBOURG, AND
THE NETHERLANDS (1933–1944)

Benoît Majerus

When Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914, its preparations had largely been limited to the realm of military operations. At some point, there certainly existed long-term plans concerning the fates of the occupied territories, but nobody seemed to have given much thought to how the mid-term administration of these regions was to be organized. During the preparations for the impending war, the partial occupation of France after the war of 1870 was never mentioned. Only in October 1914 did the German general staff for Belgium – and later for Poland – resort to occupation structures directly modeled on the experience of the Franco-German War. Thus, in 1914 it became necessary to “reinvent” this occupation. The chaos that ensued during the first weeks of the occupation shows that decision makers were quite unclear about the future fates of the territories. They had assumed that the war would be over soon and therefore had not devised any detailed administration plans.¹

When, 26 years later, German forces crossed the Rhine River a second time and occupied Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, the situation was completely different. Occupation had become a Europe-wide experience. Especially in the border regions between Germany and France, occupiers and occupied populations had encountered one another on various occasions; the roles were sometimes even reversed in the course of a few years. Many a young Belgian had experienced the occupation of his region by German soldiers between 1914 and 1918 and then, after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, had himself taken part in the occupation of the Ruhr Area and the Rhineland. Twenty years later, he again found himself under the domination of a German administration. On the German side, many generations had been shaped by similar experiences, which significantly contributed to the evolution of a national identity in this border region between France and Germany.

This chapter traces the conception of the occupation of the Benelux countries the Germans developed at the time. It is not primarily interested in the views of the National Socialist functional elite, but rather in the networks between administrators, historians, and other intellectuals who had an interest in these regions. Wittingly or unwittingly, these individuals took part in a thought process that facilitated German plans for the reannexation of these territories between 1940 and 1944.

In this context it is important to distinguish between two levels of historical time: space of experience (Erfahrungsraum) and horizon of expectation (Erwartungshorizont) (Reinhart Koselleck).² The concept space of experience is particularly suitable for this analysis in that it combines two significant terms: space in its geographical and experience in its temporal connotation. Combining these two elements for the region in question, which encompasses Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, we can discern three important aspects: the First World War, the occupation of the Rhineland and the Ruhr Area, and Westforschung.³ Space and time are intimately interwoven here. Moreover, these aspects had multifaceted impacts on the planning and implementation of Germany’s occupation policies in Western Europe from 1940 onwards.

Three possible spaces of experience

The first space of experience is the First World War. In the West, there existed two occupation regimes between 1914 and 1918. The first was in Luxembourg, whose political elite had remained in the occupied territory: the Grand Duchy retained its neutrality during the occupation. Due to its policy of accommodation, it could more or less remain autonomous politically. Moreover, the Germans did not have to invest a lot of personnel into the surveillance apparatus, which in fact remained quite small over the four years of occupation.⁴ German publicists, however, paid this model little attention during the interwar years (and historians neglect it to this day). Belgium, in turn, was ruled directly as a general government (Généralgouvernement), replacing the Belgian king and government, which went into exile. This model was characterized by a very languid administration. Not only did it require a great number of personnel – which was henceforth no longer available for service at the front – it was also not very successful. During the interwar years, the high expenditure, especially the deployment of so many administrators, was repeatedly juxtaposed with the little benefit it had yielded.⁵ As most of the analyses

Notes for this chapter begin on page 18.
are from the 1920s, very few authors believed that these experiences might serve some practical purpose in the near future. At this point in time, the horizon of expectation hardly encompassed the possibility of their utility in the mid term. As we shall see, this changed in 1939. In addition, many men who held power positions in Nazi Germany had experienced the First World War as young soldiers – among them Adolf Hitler, who regularly visited Brussels. This was also the case for administrators who served in Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands between 1940 and 1944. Alexander von Falkenhause, the military commander in Belgium and northern France, was not only the nephew of the last general governor in Belgium during the First World War, Ludwig von Falkenhause, he had also fought at the western front. Bodo von Harbou, the future chief of the general staff, had taken part in the capture of Liège in August 1914. Eggert Reeder, the future head of administration of the Military Commander in Belgium and Northern France, had fought at the western as well as eastern front. They all, consciously or not, experienced the administration of the occupied territories, be it on the way to the front or be it on a short leave. On the one hand, they were thus able to develop their own conceptions of life at the base, which is generally identified with the occupation. The numerous accounts of this “being in between,” of life between home and front, some of which were written during the war, but most after 1918, have to this day not been sufficiently analyzed. On the other hand, these young soldiers developed conceptions of the “Other” on their travels through Luxembourg, Belgium, and northern France that significantly shaped their views and perceptions in the long run.

The second space of experience is the occupation of the German border regions from 1918 onwards, i.e., the occupation of the Ruhr Area and the Rhineland as well as the mandate over the western Saarland. As Gerd Kruemelich has recently pointed out, the occupation of German regions after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles was a continuation of the war in a certain sense. The reversal of roles between occupiers and occupied is obvious, particularly in the realm of everyday life. The regulations imposed on the Germans by the French and the Belgians had been adapted almost literally from the German regulations enforced in these countries between 1914 and 1918. This experience of occupation had to be incorporated into the new order all the more as many of the former German officials came from precisely those regions that were occupied by French and Belgian forces during the 1920s. Without considering their own practices as occupiers during the First World War, the Germans portrayed the French and Belgians as particularly barbaric.

The third space of experience encompasses what is known as Westforschung. In the Weimar Republic, an academic school came to evolve that concentrated on Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Universities of cities such as Aachen, Bonn, Cologne, and Münster, all in close proximity to the borders of these three countries, developed a science in itself that was based on a blend between history, geography, and folklore (i.e., “folklore”). Scholars involved in Westforschung did not, however, limit their efforts to the academic realm, but rather regarded their work as a contribution to the revision of the Treaty of Versailles. At home in the western part of Germany, already during the Weimar Republic and the early years of National Socialism they led a proxy war with their colleagues in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

These last two spaces of experience – the occupation during the interwar years and Westforschung – are geographically connected, as they concern the same territories. Men such as Franz Thiedieck experienced the interwar occupation, pursued Westforschung, and took part in devising the future German occupation apparatus. In this sense, they can be regarded as a “point of intersection” between the three spaces of experience. Born in 1900, Thiedieck belonged to a generation that was too young to serve in the First World War. Under National Socialism, these men received a “second chance.” In 1923, Thiedieck became the director of the counter-espionage department of the Prussian ministry of the interior against separatism (Abwehrstelle des Preußischen Innenministeriums gegen den Separatismus) in Cologne, where after the occupation of the Ruhr he struggled against the presence of French and Belgian troops on the right bank of the Rhine River. In the 1930s, he was employed in various regional administrative bodies in what is today Rhineland-Palatinate. Among other things, he was active in organizations that pursued a pro-German cultural policy in the regions Eupen-Malmédy. Moreover, his name appears in numerous initiatives affiliated with Westforschung before, during, and after the Second World War.

The planning and implementation of the occupation

In contrast to the First World War, the future occupation of the territories to the east and west of Germany during the Second World War was carefully planned and coordinated from the second half of the 1930s onwards. The German Army High Command (Oberkommando des Heeres – OKH) created task forces that were assigned the job of planning the future war in the West. After the bitter experience of the Polish campaign, where the Wehrmacht had been unable to prevail, the OKH wanted to be better prepared for the new western front. In the army groups A and B, commissions also considered the possible problems a long-term occupation of Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands could entail.

The example of the commission of the army group B illustrates the significance of the three spaces of experience mentioned above. Eggert Reeder, the future head of the administration department, was in charge
of this commission. In May 1933, a few months after Hitler’s seizure of power, he was named district president (Regierungspräsident) of the city of Aachen. As the chief administrator of a region bordering Eupen and Malmedy, which were ceded to Belgium in 1919, he fraternized with Westforschung circles. In 1936, he was relocated to Cologne, where he held the same post. During the war, he established contact with a group of high-ranking German officials around Werner Best.

At least three adherents of Westforschung were also represented in this commission: Franz Petri, one of the most productive scholars in this field, who wrote a handbook for German administrators in Belgian, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands in the framework of the commission; Rolf Wilkening, whose dissertation on the German minority in the Liège region was advised by Martin Spahn, the director of the Institute for Space Policy (Institut für Raumpolitik) in Cologne; and Werner Reese, who in 1939 wrote a habilitation on “The Netherlands and the German Empire” in Berlin. Other scholars were indirectly affiliated with the commission. For one, the Special Group Student (Sondergruppe Student) supported the commission. Its members’ task was to confound the enemy behind the front lines in the Netherlands and in Belgium. They also took part in the commission’s preparatory studies. One member of this special group testified after the Second World War that the experiences of the First World War were extensively discussed at these meetings. Among these young men was also Ludwig Pesch, whose dissertation on “People (Volk) and Nation in the Intellectual History of Belgium” was advised by the already mentioned Franz Petri in Cologne in 1939.

Two civil servants who had already served in the military administration in Belgium during the First World War also participated in these preparations and made “valuable contributions based on their past experiences to the quartermaster general’s first requests.” Although the authors’ names are not known, it is very probable that one of them was Robert Paul Oszwald, as the commission met on the premises of the Dutch Institute in Cologne, which Oszwald, among others, had founded.

The first few weeks of occupation threw the models worked out by the commission into some disarray. However, the military succeeded in putting its plans for Belgium into action by establishing a military administration. Various members of the preparatory commission, such as Petri, found posts in this new administration. Others came from the head of administration, Franz Thedieck, his general secretary, and Harry von Crausshaar, the director of administration. Incidentally, these men were all from Cologne. The topicality of the First World War also becomes apparent in numerous details: for example, all situation reports of the president of the civil administration during the First World War, Maximilian von Sandt, can be found in the stock AJ40 of the French National Archives in Paris, which contains the German files on Belgium and the Netherlands from 1940 to 1944.

In 1941, in his résumé of the first year of occupation, Reeder as the highest administrator in Belgium points out two important levels: “In its work method, the military administration strives to learn from (1) the successes and failures of the German administration in Belgium during the [First, B.M.] World War, (2) the conduct and administration of the Allied occupation powers in the occupied German territories.” Precisely what sorts of “learning processes” did this imply? Reeder distinguishes between four different aspects: Flemish policy, economic policy, administration, and the treatment of the population. According to Reeder, the pro-Flemish policy of the First World War, which among other things led to an administrative splitting, had “encouraged the opposition of the civil servants and the economic leadership to a degree that made the additional deployment of a substantial number of German personnel necessary.” During the First World War, attempts had failed to “sufficiently put the Belgian economy and Belgian labor into the service of the German war economy. ... Exploiting these negative experiences, labor and economic performance have now largely been activated.”

Reeder moreover criticized that the administration of the First World War was marked by an “excessive degree of organization as well as a lack of clear-cut competences in the various assignments.” In order to underline his various points, he relied on the literature from the interwar years mentioned above. He was particularly inspired by a book Ludwig Köhler, head of the section commerce and industry, had published in 1927. As far as the treatment of the local population is concerned, nowhere did the author mention the atrocities committed by the Germans in August 1914 – they are simply denied. Rather, he writes about the “Victor airs ... of the enemy occupation powers in the Rhineland,” which by their conduct “forced the German people into a serious, unyielding resistance.”

No doubt, this historical argumentation served Reeder’s own interests. For him, the most important lesson of this first occupation was that the Germans’ aggressive stance, particularly in the areas of Flemish policy and economic policy, had made an additional administrative effort necessary. For this reason, Reeder desired greater cooperation by the Belgians under German supervision. He instrumentalized the experiences of the First World War in his dispute with the SS, which demanded a more energetic policy. The lessons that Reeder drew from the first occupation were in perfect accordance with the policies he intended to pursue in the future.

The function of the historical commission founded in June 1943 “on the assessment of the General Government Belgium” was quite similar. Its aim was to write a history of the general government that could be instrumentalized to serve present goals. At the outset, various topics
were touched upon: Flemish policy, the organization of the administration, the attitude of the Belgian police, and the use of Belgians in the German army. By the end of December 1943, the commission’s work began to falter due to the growing problems at the fronts and a rising need for soldiers. However, the commission completed a total of three studies: on Flemish policy, on the stance of Cardinal Mercier, and on the Belgian legal system. Petri’s analysis of Flemish policy was even read by Himmler.22

In the Netherlands, the continuity between the three spaces of experience is partly disrupted due to the fact that the military leadership suffered a defeat in their opposition toward the political option of installing a civil administration under the leadership of Arthur Seyss-Inquart. In contrast to Belgium, the Netherlands were not so much governed by administrative elites that came from the border region itself. However, as detailed analyses of this question are still pending, it is difficult to gain an impression of the precise composition of the German administration in the Netherlands. Judging by the few available documents, the apparatus behind the Austrian Seyss-Inquart was also dominated by Austrians.23 Seyss-Inquart himself moreover relied on different personal experiences regarding the organization of a country’s occupation. He had been the mastermind of the Austrian “Anschluss,” and as the first Reich governor (Reichsiibatshcher) was among those responsible for the incorporation of Austria into the Reich. At the end of October 1939, he was transferred to Poland as deputy to General Governor Hans Frank. Although in the case of Austria we cannot speak of an occupation proper, the Germans were nonetheless confronted with similar problems in the administration of the Netherlands, especially regarding the attainment of legitimacy and the conferment of sovereign rights. The different geographical orientation most likely explains the lower significance of men from the field of Westforschung, although they were represented here as well. The most prominent figure in this respect is undoubtedly Robert Paul Oszwald. As a member of the political section of the administrative apparatus operating in Belgium between 1914 and 1918, he had attained a reputation as an expert on the Flanders region during the interwar years. Among other academic institutions, he worked at the Provincial Institute for Westphalian Regional and Folklife Studies (Provinzialinstitut für westfälische Landes- und Volkskunde) in Münster, where shortly before 10 May 1940 he was assigned the task of compiling maps of the Netherlands. He was also actively involved in the negotiations with Dutch elites that agreed to cooperate with the Germans before he returned to Berlin in October 1940.24

Another, less well-known case is that of the research assistant Wilhelm Josef Bodens, who pursued archeological and ethnological research at the University Bonn after 1935. From August 1940 onwards, he found himself employed at the Reich commissariat (Reichskommisariat) as an academic advisor.25 And Walter von Stokar, who worked as an archeologist at a local community museum prior to the invasion of the Netherlands, participated in conceptualizing cultural policy in the occupied Netherlands.26

In Luxembourg, the situation rather resembled that in Belgium, although the army was unable to prevail in the Grand Duchy. The military administration barely lasted for two months. Indeed, at the end of July 1940, Hitler decided to transform the administration of the Grand Duchy into a civil administration. Parallels to the Belgian case can essentially be found on two levels. For one thing, many administrators also came from the bordering regions. The head of the civil administration, Gustav Simon, was district leader (Gauleiter) of the district Koblenz-Trier. Since the second half of the 1930s, he had professed his interest in Luxembourg. Many other administrators came from the other side of the Mosel River, which marks the border between the two countries. Thus, the head of the district propaganda department (Gaupropagandaleiter) of Koblenz-Trier was simultaneously the head of the Reich propaganda department (Reichspropagandaamt) in Luxembourg. The mayor of the city of Trier, Konrad Gorges, became the mayor of Luxembourg City in 1943.27 As had been the case in Belgium, individuals from the field of Westforschung were involved in devising the occupation apparatus. One of the most important figures in this context is Josef Schmitthüsen. As a geographer at the Institute for Historical-Regional Studies of the Rhinelandes (Instituti für geschichtliche Landeskunde der Rheinlande) of the University Bonn, he worked on Luxembourg from 1933 onwards. He argued that the Germanic border did not end at the rivers Mosel and Rhine, but rather extended to the Ardennes and thus included Luxembourg and parts of Belgium. In 1940, he published a new study entitled “The Land of Luxembourg – Nature, Customs and Traditions, and the Rural Economy.” In the same year, he was involved in the establishment of a collaboration movement in Luxembourg, the Movement of Ethnic Germans Living Abroad (Volkdeutsche Bewegung), that brought together various groups that were willing to collaborate with the Reich. At the end of 1940 he left Luxembourg for Russia, but his academic work continued to serve as a justification for the “Germanization” policies pursued in Luxembourg and its incorporation into the Moselland, as the occupiers termed it. His studies became the basis of a book that appeared in 1942, portraying the Grand Duchy as an integral part of the Third Reich.28 It was published by Paul Hermann Ruth, who was also responsible for the publication of the “Hand Dictionary for the German Populations in the Border Regions and Abroad.”

**Summary**

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, various spaces of experience influenced how people perceived the new situation and, accordingly, how they acted. The few examples introduced in this contribution describe
experiences at the meso level. There can be no doubt that at the macro level, the National Socialist paradigm shaped the general patterns of occupation policy. Notwithstanding the argumentation of more recent studies, which advocate a reevaluation of German repression policies, the differences in the treatment of the populations in the eastern and western territories can be explained by the racist character of the National Socialist ideology. At the micro level, a different logic and individual mindsets determined people’s behavior. As already mentioned, the experiences described here are situated on the meso level as far as both the individuals in question and their ideologies are concerned. For Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, three spaces of experience appear particularly significant in this context: the First World War, the occupation experiences in the Ruhr Area and the Rhineland, and Westforschung.

Notes


3. Translator’s note: Westforschung was an academic branch that focused on the history, geography, and “folk life” of the countries and regions to the west of Germany.


11. Marnix Beyen, Oorlog & verleden. Nationale geschiedenis in België en Nederland, 1830–1947 (Amsterdam, 2002), 96–49. As head of the “branch West” of the Reich Student Leadership (Reichsstudentenführung), from 1935 onwards Wilckingen worked on Belgium within the German-Flemish Society (DeVlag).

12. Etienne Verhoeven, De ‘Sondergruppe Student’ (unpublished), 2–3. With gratitude to the author for allowing access to this unpublished work.


14. Horst Romeyk, Verwaltungs- und Behördengeschichte der Rheinprovinz 1914–1945 (Düsseldorf, 1985) does not address this interesting phenomenon, which most certainly affected the administration of the Third Reich.


16. The German policy of favoritism toward the Flemish population in Belgium intended to deepen the rift between the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking populations in Wallonia.

17. “Die Opposition der Beamenschaft und Wirtschaftsführung in Belgien so stark aktiviert und einen nicht unerheblichen Einsat weiterer deutscher Beamter notwendig ge[ma]cht”.

18. “Die Wirtschafts- und Arbeitsleistung Belgiens in nennenswertem Umfang in den Dienst der deutschen Kriegsführung zu stellen ... Unter Ausnutzung der negativen Erfahrungen konnte die Arbeits- und Wirtschaftsführung jetzt weitgehend aktiviert werden”.

19. “Überorganisation sowie mangelnde Abgrenzung der Zuständigkeiten auf den Aufgabenbereichen”.

20. “Vainqueur-Alliën ... der feindlichen Besatzungstruppen im Rheinlande,” which through her Haltung das “deutsche Volk zu einem ersten, einheitlichen Widerstand zusammensetzten.” CECES, GRMA T 503, roll 104; yearly report of the military administration in Belgium and northern France for the first year of occupation (Jahresbericht der Militärverwaltung in Belgien und Nordfrankreich für das erste Einsatzjahr), a8.


23. Friedrich Wimmer (Vienna) as general commissioner for administration and justice, Hans Fischboeck (Vienna) as general commissioner for finance and economy, Hans Albin Rauter (Styria) as general commissioner for security. There were certainly also various higher administrators who came from German port cities such as Bremen and could thus rely on experiences important for the administration of the Dutch ports.


25. NIOD, DOC 1, Wilhelm Josef Bodens’s personal identification file.


