

Memorandum.

Basle, July 23, 1939.

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The last three weeks were spent in investigating the situation on the Western borders of Germany. I spent some time in Brussels, with excursions to Antwerp, Liège, the Albert Canal, Sougné, Remouchamps, Malmédy etc. Then Luxembourg, with a hurried automobile drive in the countryside. And now Switzerland. . .

If Belgium would escape unhurt from the present crisis then she had more luck than ability to foresee events. But apparently there will be no war this year, and then naturally the people who made Belgium's present day policy can tell: "There you are: We were, after all, right."

Belgium's policy is directed by the king (King Leopold III.). I asked for an interview with the king, and I must say that I found much sympathy in the entourage of the ruler, but the king would not give an interview, and just for a talk it was not worth while to wait longer. But during my efforts to secure the interview I made useful connections with the secretaries of the king and thus I was able, in hours' long conversations, to learn much more what I would have learned from the king. The two gentlemen involved were Count Aspremont-Lynden, secretary of the king's chancellery, and Count P. de la Capelle, private secretary (chef-de-cabinet) of the king and head of his foreign political bureau, -- the very man whom I wanted!

I give here the gist of a long conversation with Count de la Capelle in the way in which he explained to me the policy of his ruler.

According to Count de la Capelle the European situation was extremely dangerous, and he thought that the war could hardly be avoided, -- "but the king thinks that everything should be done to postpone the crisis until September or October and then perhaps the war can be avoided".

The Count, however, was optimistic about Belgium's fate. He thought that the only policy to follow was the one which Belgium embarked upon under Royal guidance. It was essential for a small country like Belgium to humor her big neighbor." What was our policy?" he said. Until 1936 the Locarno treaty was protecting Belgian neutrality. When the Germans marched into the Rhineland and the allies did nothing, it was obvious for Belgium that she had to use the utmost care not to become the apple of Eris between the litigant Powers. Locarno was abrogated by Germany and Belgium was now in a precarious position. In face of this situation it was impossible for Belgium to maintain her policy of neutrality which brought her into the war in 1914 and which caused her invasion (a strange point of view, but this is how the Count explained it), and the king in his speeches of August (respectively October) 1936 declared himself for a policy of absolute independence. Belgium, in consequence, asked her allies to be freed from all former obligations, military treaties, general staff agreements etc.)

In April 1937 France and England, in letters addressed to the Belgian government, offered a unilateral guarantee of Belgian independence, and in October of the same year Germany offered the same guarantee, provided that Belgium was not making military or other treaties with Powers, thus alienating her independence.

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I asked the Count whether his ruler attached much importance to this German guarantee ? Count de la Capelle answered:

"If you mean that whether his Majesty gives any value to German promises after his repeated breaches of word of honor, then probably the answer to your query is: "No" ! But if you want to know whether His Majesty attaches importance to the 1937 declaration of Germany, then the answer is in the affirmative. King Leopold believes that Germany will keep her word, for various reasons. First, he realizes that an invasion of Belgium would create again a tremendous indignation in the world and would help the United States to fall into the Allied front sooner than would be otherwise. Second, a German invasion of Belgium would again automatically bring in England into the war. Third, would Germany attain anything substantial by an attack on Belgium ? The Belgium of 1939 is not the Belgium of 1914. The purpose of the attack was a swift outflanking movement against the French fortress line at Verdun-Belfort -Nancy. In 1914 Belgium had no real professional army; now our army is excellent. Moreover, our fortifications can withstand the attack of Germany for a long time, probably two month, but it is possible that it will be four month. (This optimism of the king is not shared by many politicians, who speak of a resistance of three-four weeks only) . And what has Germany attained after four month's hard struggle ? She did not break the French line; she just arrived at the French fortification line built on the Belgo-French frontier ! Thus in 1939 the " invasion " of Belgium would not give Germany the advantages as in 1914, all the more, because, fourth, the attack on Belgium would lengthen Germany's already very long front by 150 miles ! "

When I asked the Count whether there was no other danger, namely that if the Germans would batter the Maginot line for weeks and weeks and they will see that they have no chance of breaking it, whether then the Germans would not decide to make a "detour" through Belgium ?

Count de la Capelle answered:

"His Majesty does not believe that such a policy would be followed by the Germans. If they wasted months and months at the Maginot line, the Germans would hardly try to attack us. After all, by then we will be strong and still unused, while the Germans have weakened themselves. And in the meantime we can make our fortifications even more formidable than ever " .

Summing up the Count said that, while the king was very pessimistic about the general world situation, he (the king) sought that his policy of August 1936 was fully justified in the light of the events.

The head of the present government of Belgium, M. Hubert Pierlot, is just a " yes " man of the king. He is a Catholic politician, timid and unprepared. When I asked him to give me an interview, he admitted that he was frightened to give an interview. He knows nothing on foreign politics. " If you would ask me on agriculture, that would be different...."

The present policy was, however, supported by the right wing of the Socialists, and after the king the most prominent protagonist of this policy of absolute independence was M. Spaak, the Socialist leader. But both the Catholics and the Socialists are split on this question. The left-wing Socialists believe that

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this policy of independence is ruinous for the country, that Belgium is unable to defend herself alone. This view is shared by many prominent Catholics of the Left wing of M.Pierlot's own party. I was able to discuss it with various politicians, but the views of this section were best put by M.Emile Hambresine, a publicist and leader-writer of the Catholic paper "Avant-Garde".

M.Hambresine himself investigated this problem, and he believes that it is a great mistake for Belgium not to engage herself in general-staff conversations with France and England. He thought that it was a great mistake to abandon the fortification works near Sougne-Remouchamps in the Ambleve valley. These fortifications were required to stop the gap between Liege and Luxembourg, and then, apparently under German pressure---Germany regarded this fortification work as a sign of "ill-will" against her and thought this was no real neutrality - the constructions of these forts were abandoned. Hambresine, like the Socialists, feared that Belgium could not withstand the German attack for a sufficiently long time and for this reason conversations with the French General Staff were essential.

Against this M.Jacobs, the leader writer of the Catholic "Vingtiem Siecle" explained the government arguments against this as follows: It is not Belgium's fault that there are no general staff conversations. Whenever in the past Belgium was engaged in such conversations, the French gave magnificent dinners, asked everything from Belgium, but said nothing about their part. Consequently, when the Belgians saw they were treated as school children, they had no further wish of conducting further conversations, the more because such "unserious" and onesided conversations would only provoke Germany's anger without producing any benefit for Belgium. As far as the Sougne-Remouchamps fortifications were concerned, the fortress steel parts and guns are ready, and in case of war they just have to be put into action. (How naive: to mount them when the Germans have already started to march !)

My opinion is that probably Belgium could withstand German attack as long as Czechoslovakia was calculated to defend herself - three to six weeks. There is a gap near Luxembourg where they have just "Blockhauser"-block posts- but as the Luxembourg Premier explained to me in a confidential talk, should Germany try to march through Luxembourg, the French would march into Luxembourg immediately too.

Nevertheless, in face of the small value of Germany's alleged promises Belgium should have started general staff conversations with France and England--this would have angered Germany, but would have even more difficult for her to attempt to invade Belgium.

I had a long talk with M.Paul van Zeeland, the former Belgian Premier, belonging to the same party as M.Pierlot, the present Premier. He was interesting about the world situation and Germany. Van Zeeland is convinced that Germany does not want war. He just came back from Germany (I was not in Berlin, he said) and he said that a man in a very high position whom he absolutely trusted, reviewed the situation as follows: The economic situation was appalling. Hitler, however, does not think of making war, though he tries to attain his aims by "armed preparedness". But as it was proved before, Hitler can wait. If he must wait for Danzig a year, then he will wait for another year. Meantime Germany is badly needing help and Zeeland thought

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that some sort of compromise on an economic-financial basis was possible. The master of Germany was Hitler, everything dependent on him. Ribbentrop, according to van Zeeland, is only a messenger boy; Himmler is now again carefully keeping in the background; Goebbels is hated, and Goering is out of favor. We will hear a lot about Schacht and Lammers, he said. Don't pay any attention to the Lammers rumors, said van Zeeland, his name will be permitted to circulate ~~x~~ to make the world believe that there is a change, but the real man is Hitler, and only him. Lammers will be only a messenger boy.

In the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg I had the opportunity to have a long talk with M. Joseph Bech, the State Minister of the country. M. Bech's name is well known from the League of Nations where he played a prominent role during the last fourteen years. Bech was convinced that there will be no war this year, though a serious crisis will come, but he was very pessimistic. After all, if war will not be, the tension will continue and that is terrible for a small country. Bech realized the difficult situation of his own country. Luxembourg is jammed between the German and French fortification lines, and she has no comfortable existence. Belgium has block posts on the Luxembourg frontier, but not sufficiently fortified. Is that not an inducement for Germany to attack Belgium via Luxembourg? Bech thought that it was not, because if Luxembourg's

neutrality was violated, then France would immediately invade her too. This would be terrible for Luxembourg, because it would become the battlefield between the two warring groups. But Bech thought that Germany will respect neutrality for the simple reason that Germany required Luxembourg's iron ore and steel production which, in case of an attack on her, would lose all. This is a sensible argument, because Luxembourg's iron ore production in 1937 was 7.7 million tons, as high as Sweden's exports to Germany, and twelve percent of Germany's iron ore requirement! But will France not prevent this ore to go to Germany? Here Bech could say that he hoped that France would respect Luxembourg's neutrality and then--shrugged his shoulders.

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