

## Néo-socialism : The belgian case

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by Steven Philip KRAMER

Department of History. University of New Mexico.

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With the advent of the Great Depression and the resulting upsurge of fascism in Europe, culminating in the rise to power of Adolf Hitler, the socialist movement was thrown into disarray. The seeming failure of long-time party leaders to develop a viable strategy against fascism led to a significant revolt on both the left and right of the movement. Although the "new right" found proponents in several countries, it had its greatest impact in Belgium. In Belgium only were leaders committed to neo-socialism elected to high positions in a socialist party (1).

How French socialism attempted to deal with the fascist threat — through the development of the Popular Front — has been well documented. Not so the history of neo-socialism in France. Largely ignored too has been the rise of neo-socialism in the Belgian Labor Party (Parti Ouvrier Belge or Belgische Werkliedenpartij). By investigating the development of neo-socialism in Belgium, this paper may lay the groundwork for a comparative study.

### The socialists and the depression.

The study of Belgian socialism in the 1930's revolves around the personalities of a very small number of people (2). This is due to the

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(2) The only serious history of the Belgian labor movement is Mieke CLAEYS-VAN HAEGENDOREN, *25 jaar Belgisch Socialisme*, Antwerp, 1967, which includes a good bibliography. M.A. PIERSON, *Histoire du socialisme en Belgique*, is party propaganda. Léon DELSINNE, *Le Mouvement syndical en Belgique*, Brussels, 1936, has information

strongly *ouvriériste* quality of the Belgian movement. The POB, unlike the French socialist party, remained the party of the industrial proletariat. The party operated on the principle of collective affiliation. Any member of a socialist trade union, cooperative, or mutual insurance society was automatically a member of the party, and a system of interlocking directorates existed. This arrangement provided financial stability, but meant that the party was strongly influenced by institutions which had a stake in the capitalist system. Most party administrators were far more concerned about the day to day functioning of the party than its general policies (3).

The most influential leader of the POB was a man of bourgeois background, Emile Vandervelde, the « patron » (4). Orator, intellectual, party chairman, former president of the International, leader of the parliamentary party, Vandervelde was the POB incarnate. As an "orthodox reformist" Vandervelde believed in the peaceful triumph of socialism through democratic means. It is important to bear in mind the distinction between "reformism" and "opportunism". Reformists favor a total transformation of capitalist society but believe that it will occur through evolutionary means. Opportunists attempt to achieve tangible results but do not justify them in terms of a goal of total socialist transformation. In Belgium, the reformists constituted, in a sense, the center-left of the party. Vandervelde not only considered himself a marxist, but felt that his role was to reconcile a party that was essentially opportunist with reformism, to reconcile political necessity with doctrinal purity. Vandervelde was the Belgian counterpart of a Léon Blum or an Otto Bauer. Vandervelde's leadership was hardly questioned in the 1920's. By 1933, however Vandervelde was growing old. He was increasingly deaf. Even more serious, he lacked a clear idea of how to cope with the depression.

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on the early history of the movement. What little documentary sources as exist may be consulted in the library of the Institut Vandervelde, where they have been well classified by Robert Abs, and at the Bibliothèque Royal, both in Brussels.

(3) Information on the structure of the POB may be obtained from B.S. CHLEPNER, *Cent ans d'histoire sociale en Belgique*, Brussels, 1958, a masterful study of social and economic history which almost makes up for the absence of a history of the POB. Also, Emile VANDERVELDE, *Le Parti Ouvrier Belge 1885-1925*. Jean PUISSANT, « La Fédération Socialiste Républicaine du Borinage, 1919-1939 » in *Res Publica*, Brussels, 1968 number 4, pp. 607-679 gives an idea of the way in which one federation operated. Puissant concludes that the party structure, if not anti-democratic, tended in that direction. « The POB did not lose its electoral clientele but lost the immense possibilities of action which the Borinage working masses provided... » (p. 645).

(4) Robert ABS, *Emile Vandervelde*, Brussels, 1973. Aside from Vandervelde's numerous journalistic and theoretical publications, his *Carnets 1934-1938*, Paris, 1966, are indispensable.

At Vandervelde's side was his friend, Louis de Brouckère, the party's fundamentalist. Although he served the party in a variety of functions, De Brouckère had no interest in public office. He probably was the only important member of the POB who opposed ministerial participation on principle after 1918. De Brouckère was the schoolmaster of several generations of socialists. He had always evoked a response from the workers by preaching the old socialist gospel, but, by the thirties, his theories had lost touch with reality. In fact, De Brouckère consecrated his energies, not to the creation of a socialist society, but to defending the party from neo-socialism and appeasement of fascist imperialism.

The Great Depression destroyed the marriage of theoretical reformism and practical opportunism which had characterized the Belgian labor movement. The socialists had no solution for the crisis and they could only fight against the deflationary decree laws enacted by a series of conservative Catholic-Liberal governments. The opposition to the old party leadership in the POB was due not so much to inherent antagonism towards opportunism, but to the fact that opportunism could no longer function under conditions of economic crisis.

The limitations of Vandervelde's perspective were made clear at the Congress of May 1933. Vandervelde stated that there were no remedies for unemployment under capitalism, only palliatives. Since the government had done nothing for the workers, farmers, and middle classes, they looked to the POB. "We must tell them that there are no miracles but that the people must defend itself." But Vandervelde rejected both revolutionary methods and participation in a government in which the party did not play a pivotal role. One speaker declared that he was moved by Vandervelde's speech, but regretted that it did not have a conclusion! (5) The socialist leaders had no solution for the crisis short of socialism — but had no way of implementing socialism. Vandervelde and other old socialists had no idea that capitalism itself could be reformed, and shared Blum's fear of "intermediate forms of social organization" (6). Vandervelde's fatalism about the economic situation did not dim his optimism about the inevitable triumph of socialism, but meant that he could not lead the party. It was obvious that younger

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(5) Conseil-Général du POB, *Compte rendu officiel du XXXXVI<sup>e</sup> Congrès tenu le 18 décembre 1932 et du XXXXVII<sup>e</sup> Congrès tenu les 27 et 28 mai 1933 à la Maison du Peuple à Bruxelles*, n.d., pp. 23-27 (Congress transcripts hereafter referred to as *Congress* + date). The comment was by Louis PIÉRARD, p. 39. For Vandervelde's reaction to this charge, cf. « En revenant du Charleroi », *Peuple*, 6/25/33.

(6) Cf. George LICHTHEIM, *Marxism in Modern France*, New York, 1966, p. 43. At the same time, Vandervelde was not likely to fear fascism as a real threat in Belgium. He was a free-mason, and personally knew the members of the « political caste » as a result of the war experience. On this point, cf. Marcel-Henri JASPAR, *Souvenirs sans retouche*, Paris, 1968, pp. 185-186.

men would try to fill the leadership vacuum. Two who attempted to do so were Paul-Henri Spaak, quintessential opportunist, and Hendrik de Man, who became the theorist of neo-socialism and later of neutralism.

It was not easy for them to fill Vandervelde's place. The reformist leadership was not, as in other continental countries, based on and organically related to the actual proletarian structure of the party. On the contrary, it was imposed upon the proletarian base, and although the majority of the workers trusted Vandervelde (at least since the end of World War I), this relationship of patriarchal trust and blind following was shaken during the depression. But the incongruity between leadership and base manifested itself more clearly when Vandervelde began to fade out. The old trust could not be transferred to new leadership, least of all, to the leadership personified by De Man and Spaak. Both were strangers to the masses of the party. Both De Man and Spaak vacillated continuously in their positions, at least in part because they experienced uneasiness within the party. De Man saw himself as a stranger in the party and felt rejected. That was an important component in the whole range of his decisions, which brought him so near the King, and made him ultimately a tool in the process of rationalizing the collaboration with the Nazis.

Spaak was leader of the Action Socialiste, the left opposition within the POB (7). The Action Socialiste, which published a weekly of that same name, included a motley crew of *trotskyisants*, *communisants*, and *gauchistes*. It had considerable influence in Brussels (just like Pivert had influence in the largely non-working class Federation of Paris), but also had some in the provinces (Walter Dauge, for example, had strong backing in the Borinage). Continually charging the government with bonapartist intentions, the Action Socialiste felt that the only guarantee against fascism was to take power by means of a general strike and insurrection. It accused the trade union leaders of selling out. The latter depicted their accusers as young university graduates willing to throw away fifty years of working class achievements by rash action and constantly called for the expulsion of the Action Socialiste. The Action Socialiste was as short on theory as its opportunist adversaries, but refused at least to share their fatalism. Though a general strike would have been suicidal, to some socialists any action seemed better than none.

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(7) On the Action Socialiste, cf. *L'Action Socialiste, Hebdomadaire d'Action et de Combat*. For the reaction of the trade unions, cf. *Le Mouvement Syndical Belge*, esp. Cornelle MERTENS, « Le Mouvement syndical et les politiciens », 2/10/33. Josef BONDAS, « L'Echec de la grève de textile de Verviers », 8/20/34. The controversy over discipline in the party led to an extended debate in the special party congress of 27-28 October 1934, cf. *Congress...* pp. 68-161, or coverage in *Peuple*.

Thus, at the Congress of May 1933, about 20 % of the mandates favored a referendum on the organization of a general strike. The Action Socialiste could not be written off as a handful of hotheads.

The left opposition was correct in its critique of the unions, the unions correct in their critique of the Action Socialiste's demand for a general strike and insurrection — for which not the slightest preparation had been made. It was apparent that neither side had an answer. Unless the POB could be drawn out of its immobilism, the future of the labor movement in Belgium was grim. When Emile Vandervelde asked Hendrik de Man to return to Belgium, he was confessing his inability to deal with the situation.

The return of Hendrik de Man to Belgium was another step in the strange peregrinations of an iconoclastic Flemish intellectual (8). The young radical marxist who had collaborated with De Brouckère in a scathing critique of reformism had now become a critic of marxism; the pacifist had donned the uniform and become a *jusqu'au boutiste*. In an effort to convince the revolutionary regime to remain in the war, he had gone with Vandervelde to Russia in 1917. If his attitude towards the war had marked his breach with marxist internationalism, his encounter with the bolsheviks marked his renunciation of revolutionism :

After all, I was a *jusqu'au boutiste* because I wanted [to achieve] the revolution by means of the war. Well, here I found almost the only men who had previously shared my revolutionary faith, the radical marxists. They wanted to go towards the revolution straight away, that is to say, not by means of the war, but through the revolt of peoples against the war and its authors (9).

It would not have been difficult for a reformist to reject bolshevism without fundamentally rejecting his socialist heritage. Vandervelde did not return from Russia a new man. But it was impossible for someone who considered himself a revolutionary marxist to reject the revolution without cutting himself off from his past. De Man could not become a traditional reformist and had ceased to be a revolutionary; his work, intellectual and political, became a never-ending search to find a way out. He wandered around America; he wrote the *Psychology of Socialism*. In this book he attempted to destroy the historicist elements of marxist thought, to go "beyond marxism" through the discovery of the role of sentiment and

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(8) For a thorough bibliography on De Man cf. Peter DODGE, *Beyond Marxism, The Faith and Works of Hendrik de Man*, The Hague, 1966.

(9) DE MAN, *Après coup*, Brussels, 1941, p. 123.

ideal in social change, and the affirmation of the need for a socialist party which was not restricted to the industrial proletariat. Named to the chair of Social Psychology of the University of Frankfurt in 1929, De Man observed the death of the Weimar Republic and the SPD. He thought he understood why German socialism had failed, and agreed to Vandervelde's request that he return to Belgium. De Man believed that fascism could be stopped, and working with a research team that included some of the brightest young people in the party, prepared an economic plan designed to eliminate the causes of fascism (10).

De Man's analysis of fascism took note of the discontent of the middle classes, aroused by their threatened proletarianization and directed against the proletariat. De Man stressed that socialism had become a special interest group, a seeming defender of existing institutions. Antifascism alone was not an effective way of fighting fascism; a merely negative attitude was what destroyed the SPD. The party had to orient the anticapitalism of the middle classes towards socialism. This was all the more necessary since the size of the middle classes, rather than that of the working class, was growing. De Man stressed the importance of helping the unemployed, who were on the way to becoming a fifth class, hostile to a labor movement which appeared to be defending only those with jobs. De Man felt that it was essential to find a common denominator for all these groups. The fight against employers interested only the workers; a struggle for reforms of distribution was rendered difficult because capitalism was now in a regressive stage of development. A Labor Front emphasizing structural reforms had to be created against finance capitalism. It had to strike against under-consumption and unemployment, the actual causes of the crisis. A mixed economy would have to replace the faltering capitalist economy. These changes had to be accompanied by a reform of the State.

The lynch-pin of the Plan was the nationalization of credit, "the principal means of a managed economy to develop the buying power of the masses of the population, in order to assure to all a useful and profitable job, and to increase the general welfare." Basic industries that were under monopoly control would be nationalized. A commissariat of Transportation would be created. The rest of the economy would remain in private hands, subject to the general directives of the government. Among the many specific goals of the Plan were the stabilization of profits, reduction of working hours, establishment of collective bargaining proce-

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(10) For the rationale behind the Plan, cf. a series of articles by De Man in *Peuple* from October to December 1933. Also, De Man's comments to the trade unions in « Un Plan économique pour la Belgique », *Mouvement Syndical Belge*, 8/20/33; De Man's speech to the Party Congress of 1933, cf. *Congress*, December 1933, pp. 11-36.

dures, increase in foreign trade, creation of a complete system of social security. In addition, changes in the political system were called for. Parliament would be transformed into a streamlined unicameral body elected by universal male suffrage, assisted by consultative councils, whose members would be chosen by virtue of their expertise from outside Parliament. Organisms set up to direct the economy would be endowed with executive powers to assure "rapidity of action and concentration of responsibilities" (11).

The Plan seemed to have several political advantages as well as economic. First, it would enable the party to take the offensive. Second, it seemed to eliminate the issue of participation by linking participation to "the Plan, the whole Plan, nothing but the Plan". Third, it attracted a generation of young socialists like Jef Rens, Isabelle Blume, Max Buset, Maurits Naessens. Isabelle Blume explained that her generation

... saw its life ruined and destroyed by the war. Those who had already attained adulthood had their program developed, their thoughts formed. But the war seized us at a time... when we needed a path to follow. And since the war, the men and women of my generation search not only for economic equilibrium... but for moral equilibrium... (12)

Some of the young people who were De Man's most ardent supporters became disillusioned later on. Fourth, the Plan seemed to offer a solution to the acrid debate between the left and right of the party. De Man offered the grand vision of Belgium's becoming the "starting place of a vast counter-offensive against capitalism... that will show the world that it is through liberty, and only through liberty, that the order which it seeks with all its strength can be actualized" (13). De Man received the virtually complete support of the unions, as well as the praise of Spaak. But the Christmas Congress of 1933, which adopted the Plan and elected De Man vice-chairman of the party did not bring about party unity, partly because the Plan meant different things to different people. The Action Socialiste and the trade union continued their conflict, neither side really changing its position. Moreover, Vandervelde and De Man did not see eye to eye. Vandervelde stated that the Plan was not a substitute for the party platform, which he had written. Although De Man did not say so publicly, it was no secret that he intended to overhaul both the party and its doctrine.

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(11) For text of the Plan, cf. DODGE, pp. 232-236.

(12) *Congress*, December 1933, p. 118.

(13) « Un Plan économique pour la Belgique », *Mouvement Syndical Belge*, 8/20/33, p. 298.

The conflict between De Man and Vandervelde was the result of a combination of personal and ideological differences aggravated by the Spanish Civil War. Much tension certainly existed between De Man and other socialists, for personal as well as political reasons. Many old socialists distrusted De Man because of his frequent changes of position. De Man made new enemies because of his tactless attack on the *cumul* and his efforts to limit how much money party mandatories could earn (14). The fact remains that what divided the socialists most was the basic question of policy. Not everyone appreciated De Man's interest in gaining the support of the middle classes, his advocacy of a strong interventionist state, or his willingness to work within the national context.

One of the differences between De Man and his opponents was evidenced in the debate over corporatism. In a series of articles in *Le Peuple*, De Man argued that corporatism was one of "certain options which we must not permit our opponents to monopolize. There are certain improperly magnetized expressions which we must, on the contrary, try to demagnetize". Through a dubious historical examination, De Man argued that corporatism had been a progressive movement, the origin of modern trade unionism, which was its logical extension rather than its antithesis. Moreover,

...the mixed controlled economy, the present objective of the worker movement, implies a mixed organization of the system of production, placed under the rubric of the autonomous organization of occupational interests, that is to say, corporatism, rather than that of centralized bureaucratic coercion, that is to say, statism.

De Man was rushing where Christian-socials feared to tread. He was emphasizing the word "corporatist" at a time when they talked about "organization of the occupations", at a time when Mussolini, Dollfuss, and Salazar had appropriated the term for their own purposes. Understandably, De Man's article provoked replies from Léon Delsinne and the venerable Louis Bertrand, to the effect that socialist corporatism existed only in De Man's head (15). Other terms that De Man attempted to demagnetize were *socialisme national* and *démocratique autoritaire* (6). Unlike Vandervelde and Blum, De Man did not feel that all that fascists did should be

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(14) Cf. *Après coup* for De Man's unflattering comments on party leaders.

(15) For De Man's articles on corporatism, cf. *Peuple* July to September 1934. Delsinne's replies: 10/5/34, 10/12/34, 10/19/34, 10/26/34, Bertrand's: 8/20/34.

(16) For some comments from the right on De Man's efforts, cf. Thierry MAULNIER, *Mythes socialistes*, Paris, 1936, pp. 167-171.



rejected *a priori*. Such an attitude created suspicion among old party members.

De Man and his friends were soon to have the opportunity to try to put their ideas into action. The collapse of the Theunis government, confronted with the need to devalue and with increasing opposition from Christian trade unionists, led to a Catholic-Liberal-Socialist coalition headed by Paul Van Zeeland, a Christian-Social. The government included five socialists: Vandervelde as Minister without portfolio, Soudan as Minister of Justice, Delattre as Minister of Industry and Labor, De Man as Minister of Public Works and Reabsorption of Unemployment, and Spaak as Minister of Communications and Transport. The new government ordered an immediate devaluation. In his governmental declaration, Van Zeeland promised to bring about through new methods the economic renovation of the country.

A Congress of the POB approved participation by a large margin, but created much bad feeling. The Action Socialiste was stunned by Spaak's sudden and unexplained defection, and his evasive explanations. Spaak's statement advocating authoritarian democracy, wherein leaders would first make decisions and only then return to their constituents for a vote of confidence, excited further confusion. De Man's associates, likewise, were dumbfounded by his abandonment of the "whole Plan, nothing but the Plan". They had not been aware of his contacts with Van Zeeland. De Man may have feared that if the party waited till elections to enter a government, a vast strike movement which could sabotage the creation of a new government might take place. It has been suggested that De Man "let his civic sense get the better of his political sense", or that Van Zeeland's apparent promise to step down in favor of De Man after a year also played a part in De Man's support for immediate entry into the government (17).

The new government's policies resulted in a marked increase in production and a decline in unemployment. The number of totally unemployed workers was almost halved in the first year of the Van Zeeland ministry. The gross national product rose, profits increased notably. The renewal of confidence came at the expense of the workers. The buying power of the working class remained stationary. There was a transfer of buying power from workers who had been employed in 1935 to formerly unemployed workers who now obtained jobs. A great wave of strikes following

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(17) The idea that De Man was motivated by the threat of strikes emerges from his public statements; the explanation of «civic sense» comes from an interview with Gust de Muyneck at Hoellart, Belgium, 7/13/73; Van Zeeland's promise was suggested by Jef Rens and supported by Vandervelde's *Carnets*, p. 51.

the French example of May 1936 erupted spontaneously, bringing about wage increases, paid vacations, recognition of the right of association, and the development of collective bargaining procedures. Thus, per capita worker buying power returned to pre-devaluation levels, but total employment increased (18).

There was little, however, in the way of structural reforms. The banking system was reformed, but the Control Commission remained in the hands of bankers for the most part. The Office of Economic Recovery (OREC) was no more successful in laying the groundworks for industrial planning. As one scholar argues, "The Van Zeeland government is a government of élites, of professors and technicians. It is as far removed as possible from the French Popular Front Government in its very conception of the art of governing (19). The Van Zeeland regime had a profound impact on the POB. A coalition emerged between Spaak and De Man, proponents of permanent participation, and the unions, who deemed themselves the beneficiaries thereof. The aging Vandervelde was pushed into the background, both because of his doctrinal reservations and because of his internationalist foreign policy views which were incompatible with the right's desire for a "wholly Belgian" foreign policy. The price of participation was the abandonment of international socialist solidarity. As the international situation worsened, this price became too high for many socialists.

### **Belgian socialists and international fascism.**

In 1936, for the first time since the War, international politics played a major role in socialist congresses. When King Leopold had addressed the Belgian cabinet on 14 October 1936 and called for a policy of independence, his position was endorsed by all members present. The socialists did not interpret the speech as a return to neutrality or a renunciation of collective security. For the socialists, it seemed to guarantee that Belgium would not be entangled in alliances and secret treaties. Their attitude was based more on the experience of World War I than on contemporary conditions (20). Foreign Minister Spaak,

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(18) Louis R. FRANCK, *Démocraties en crise : Roosevelt - Van Zeeland - Léon Blum*, Paris, 1937. On the strike, J. BONDAS and J. RENS, *Nouveau départ, la grève de juin 1936*, Brussels, 1936.

(19) *Ibid.*, p. 31.

(20) The two best sources on Belgian foreign policy in this period are David Owen KIEFT, *Belgium's Return to Neutrality*, Oxford, 1972 and Fernand VAN LANGENHOVE, *La Belgique en quête de la sécurité*, Brussels, 1969. One may also consult the *Documents diplomatiques belges*.

however, had already made it clear in July 1936 that he didn't support his party's policy on collective security. In a speech to the Press Association, three months before Leopold's speech to the cabinet, Spaak asserted that he intended to practice a foreign policy based on realism. In dealing with foreign countries, he would "completely forget his preferences for such or such political, economic, or social system". Since Right was difficult to determine, his policy would be based on the maintenance of peace rather than Right. The role of Belgium was to promote moderation and conciliation. But since it was clear that peace was being threatened by the fascists, Spaak's speech roused a storm of anger in the party (21). The implications of Spaak's policy became clear in the next months.

For many socialists, the Spanish Civil War was the first battle of the next war. But within many socialist parties, sympathy for the Republic was balanced by fear that the Civil War would lead to a European war. Some socialists felt that this was what the Soviet Union really wanted. In France, Léon Blum's personal inclinations were strongly in favor of aiding the Republic. But Blum was opposed not only by the Radicals but by large segments of his own party. A similar situation existed in Belgium.

With acute foresight, Louis de Brouckère wrote about the Spanish situation in *Le Peuple* of 9 August 1936. Although the Republic had arms superiority, it risked being defeated as a result of fascist intervention. But in that case, the Western democracies would be defeated with her. The Spanish War would become a general war: neutrality was impossible. Each concession would bring war closer. What would happen if the Germans organized a revolt in the Sudeten provinces of Czechoslovakia and asked for neutrality? Now is the time to save peace, De Brouckère declared, by saving the Spanish Republic (22). The problem faced by De Brouckère, Vandervelde, and Rolin was that Léon Blum had not only been forced into a position of non-intervention, but had made great efforts to defend that position publicly. Belgian socialists supporting non-intervention could claim that they were following Blum. There was certainly a contradiction between calling for "active sympathy" for the Republic in party congresses and supporting a government which espoused non-intervention, and whose socialist Foreign Minister advocated a path of "Neither Rex nor Moscow" (23). But since the party was not willing to leave the government, its foreign policy resolutions were merely platonic. It could

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(21) For an account of Spaak's speech, cf. *Peuple*, 7/21/36. For the ensuing debate in the General Council, *Peuple*, 7/28/36. The issue was raised by Arthur Wauters, editor of *Le Peuple* and friend of Vandervelde.

(22) Louis de BROUCKÈRE, « Voyage en Espagne », *Peuple*, 8/9/36.

(23) Cf. *Peuple* 10/26/36 for debate over foreign policy at the Congress of 1936.

have done little in any case. The party was a minority in Belgium, and Belgium itself was too insignificant to bring about a major change in French or British foreign policy.

The deepening international crisis and the emergence of the French Popular Front naturally provoked calls for a Popular Front in Belgium. Those who advocated collective security with Russia on the international level were often brought to ask for the inclusion of the communists in a domestic anti-fascist coalition. Yet a Popular Front was hardly possible within Belgium. The Communist Party was weak, Christian-socials and Liberals refused to cooperate with the communists, and trade unionists had little desire to draw nearer to a weak, but hated rival. Vandervelde, who supported the Popular Front in France, felt that it was impossible in Belgium, since it would be condemned to perpetual opposition. Although a few socialists like Fernand Brunfaut (excluded from the party in 1939) upheld such an alliance and although the Jeunes Gardes Socialistes at one point fused with their communist counterparts, most internationalists simply supported the idea of an alliance of all democratic forces in Belgium and took a strong stand against anti-communism. A leading advocate of the Popular Front, and a strong internationalist, was the weekly *Combat*, edited by Victor Larock, who later edited *Le Peuple* during the Resistance. On the other hand, trade unionists, whose perspectives were almost exclusively domestic, supported the foreign policy of Spaak and the Van Zeeland government in exchange for the fruits of participation, and because of especial dislike for the communists. Their support kept Spaak in power as Foreign Minister. Although Spaak's "realism" may have been utopian in the long-run, the party was not strong enough to force another policy on the government (24). The main criticism that can be made of Spaak's role was that he followed with such gusto a policy which was not that of the POB. Spaak may have had the sentiments of the majority of the party against him, but he had their votes. Isabelle Blume said, "Spaak did not prevent a majority from existing, but kept it from affirming itself", but the same thing might well have happened without Spaak. In France, it was not until 1938 that Léon Blum reached the conclusion that there was no solution but collective security to the world crisis. However, his efforts at forming a coalition "from Thorez to Louis Marin" failed. Was it any more likely that the Belgian right would support collective security? And, if the party could not impose such a policy, should it remain in the government?

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(24) For a discussion of this subject cf. Ivo RENS, « Spaak et la politique d'indépendance de la Belgique », *Revue d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*, Paris, April, 1973.

(25) Interview with Isabelle Blume Brussels, 6/11/73.

### Socialisme national ?

The uneasiness and confusion within the party were heightened by two important events : Spaak's and De Man's advocacy of *socialisme national* in interviews accorded to the non-socialist newspaper *L'Indépendance Belge*, and the resignation of Emile Vandervelde from the government on 26 January 1937.

Spaak and De Man made plain their commitment to a socialist party which supported planning, working within the democratic structure by constitutional means, and which had abandoned "outdated" revolutionary dreams (26). Spaak stressed "order, authority, and responsibility", an echo of the French neo-socialists' "order, authority, nation". *Socialisme national* would take into account national realities (*le fait national*), and would create an organization of the occupations. Spaak declared that communism was "proletarian fascism" and thought it "extraordinary" that socialists should call upon communists to help defend democratic liberties. The editor of *L'Indépendance* quite rightly pointed out that Spaak was trying to "give a doctrinal base to the path on which he had embarked". In his interview, De Man qualified some of Spaak's statements, distinguishing between *socialisme national* and *nationalisme socialiste*. The socialists were out to attain the common good by "governmental socialism" rather than by remaining nostalgia-bound to the old revolutionary romanticism.

In short, De Man and Spaak wanted to accelerate the tendencies within the party towards integration into existing society. This meant a *volkspartei* rather than a party with a predominantly working-class base. It meant the use of exclusively legal tactics in practice and a theory which committed the party to working within the system. It meant the elimination of such doctrines as internationalism and class struggle, even where they existed merely in the realm of ideas. It meant that the ultimate goal of socialism was not "revolution", even a peaceful revolution. It meant not "socialism against the State" but a national socialism whose purpose it would be to institute a mixed economy together with organization of the occupations — thus socialism by the State. Within the context of this period, this also meant a purely national foreign policy, rejection of collective security, the general unwillingness to resist fascist imperialism, or even to admit its existence (27).

(26) Spaak's interview appeared 2/9/37, De Man's 2/17/37.

(27) An acerbic and pointed critique of this position appeared in 1938 under pseudonym « Austria » in *Der Kampf* and was reprinted in French as « Le Socialisme gouvernemental d'Henri de Man ». On tendencies towards integration, cf. Val LORWIN, « Working Class Politics and Economic Developments in Western Europe », *American Historical Review*, January 1958.

The resignation of Vandervelde from the government immediately preceded these interviews. The precipitating cause was differences with Van Zeeland over the Borchgrave affair, as well as friction with De Man. De Borchgrave, an employee of the Belgian embassy in Spain, had died under suspicious circumstances. The Belgian government demanded compensation; the Spanish Republic refused. The right attempted to use this issue to break diplomatic relations with Spain. Spaak envisioned going as far as recalling the Belgian chargé at the cabinet meeting of 25 January. Vandervelde objected. Spaak then criticized Vandervelde's interference with his ministry (as party chairman, the Patron felt he had the right to call any socialist minister to order) and was followed, perhaps by prearrangement, by De Man, who harshly attacked Vandervelde for allegedly inspiring attacks by the extreme left on Spaak. Vandervelde made it clear to the Prime Minister that he was ready to submit his resignation; Van Zeeland accepted it the next day.

The combination of the two interviews and the resignation (which was not explained in the socialist press) was disquieting; the conflict was papered over, not resolved. Vandervelde did not push the issue, perhaps because he believed participation essential, or was afraid of destroying party unity, or because he felt that since De Man and Spaak had the support of the trade unions, they would win in a showdown (28).

### **De man's bid for power.**

Van Zeeland's victory over Degrelle in the special by-election of 12 April 1937 was the apogee of the Prime Minister's career. In the following months, stories began to circulate concerning certain financial improprieties involving the Prime Minister's former relationship with the National Bank. Many socialists did not want the ministry's fall, fearing that it would be exploited by the Rexists. Hendrik de Man, however, made no secret of his ambition to succeed Van Zeeland, perhaps because he felt that Van Zeeland had reneged on his promise to step down in his favor. De Man's speech at Antwerp was interpreted as the program of a putative De Man government (29). De Man's maneuvers were opposed by his ideological opponents, but when Van Zeeland resigned, there was no open opposition to a De Man candidacy. Perhaps his socialist enemies knew that his efforts would be stillborn. It was the Liberal Party, angered

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(28) These events can be best understood by reading the *Carnets* and accounts of meetings of the General Council in *Peuple* of 2/11/37, 2/19/37, 2/23/37, 2/27/37.

(29) For account, cf. *Peuple*, 10/16/37.

by the Antwerp speech, that vetoed the De Man candidacy (30). The crisis following De Man's failure as *formateur* (Prime Minister designate) convinced Vandervelde that De Man wanted all combinations to fail so that he could form a bipartite cabinet with the Catholics. On 6 November 1937 Vandervelde wrote :

This past week has finally convinced me that his "new socialism", a sickly mixture of thomism, premarxism, returning to the slogans of before 1848, to the appeals for justice and good will, presents the most disturbing analogies with certain forms of fascism.

Vandervelde therefore threw his support to Spaak, as a lesser evil (31). Spaak was De Man's sometime ideological ally; he was also his political opponent. The crisis ended with a government under Liberal Paul-Emile Janson. But on the fall of Janson, Vandervelde played the Spaak card again.

De Man's failure as *formateur* was an important factor in his political evolution, as was his unhappy experience as Finance Minister in the Janson government, which was cut short because of a case of food poisoning. In the words of Jef Rens:

When he failed as minister, he came progressively to the conclusion first that it was the politicians who were not at the level of their responsibilities, and then that the Belgian parliamentary institutions were badly organized. Then gradually he came to criticize democracy itself as a political system. I think from that moment on he was a lost man.

Rens believes that there must have been a crossing point between the curve of De Man's failure as a politician and that of Hitler's conquests. This probably occurred about the time of his departure from the Janson government (32). This would explain his apparent detachment from the Spanish Civil War. According to Gust de Muynck, his brother-in-law, De Man privately opposed anyone's intervention in Spain. He expressed sympathy for neither the Republicans nor the Nationalists, believed that

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(30) Camille Huysmans had already made « transparent allusions » on 19 September to « certain socialists too pressed to become Prime Minister », and had confided to Vandervelde that he had spoken unfavorably about De Man when consulted by the King : « I don't like gatecrashers » (*Carnets*, pp. 48, 55). On Liberal attitude, JASPARD, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-240.

(31) *Carnets*, p. 66. Vandervelde realized that there was nothing any Belgian government could do to help change the international situation so long as the Great Powers maintained their present positions (p. 71).

(32) Interview, 7/2/73.

the Republic had made a mess, and had erred in exiling Franco to the Canary Islands. Showing sympathy for the Republic would antagonize Germany. De Man opposed war at all costs. By the end of the Spanish Civil War, De Man expected a European war culminating in a German victory. Belgium's only hope was to stay out (33).

### Spaak and Burgos.

The fall of the Janson government led to the formation of a ministry by the former Prime Minister's nephew, Paul-Henri Spaak. Although socialists were delighted that "one of their own" should finally become Prime Minister, the experience intensified conflict within the party. Spaak's formation of a government without prior consultation of the party irritated some socialists. But Spaak had made important concessions to Vandervelde concerning the Spanish question. The right had taken up a campaign to send a Belgian "commercial agent" to Franco's capital at Burgos — obviously a first step towards recognition. Spaak assured Vandervelde that "if he had sacrificed his ideology to governmental necessities, he was quite resolved not to submit to the ideologies of other parties" (34). A promise which would not be kept .

Belgium was not a party to the Munich agreement. But Munich weighed heavily in discussions on collective security and Burgos. Vandervelde, De Brouckère, and Rolin emphasized the need to take sides in the coming conflict of fascism and democracy. Rolin went so far as to exclaim that Spaak had taken the initiative in disrupting the idea of collective security, had become "an active agent of international defeatism". De Man defended Spaak's foreign policy, while attempting to torpedo Spaak's government, hoping to succeed him. De Man argued that war would solve nothing, that the democracies could not prevent three million Germans from belonging to the country they preferred, and called for a General Congress to revise treaties, redefine colonial empires, and assure a rational distribution of raw materials. The internationalists may have believed earlier that war could be averted by getting tough with Hitler. But this had not happened, due in part to the preoccupation of the US with its own affairs. After Munich, they must have felt war was inevitable (35).

(33) Interview, 7/13/73.

(34) On socialist irritation, Max BUSET, « En toute hypothèse contre le fascisme », *Peuple*, 5/21/38 ; on promise to Vandervelde *Carnets* p. 91.

(35) For positions on the international situation, cf. *Peuple*, reports to and proceedings of the Congress of October 1938. For an account of De Man's secret missions for Leopold, cf. Jules ROMAINS, *Seven Mysteries of Europe*, New York, 1940. Archival material can be found at the Centre de Recherches et d'Etudes Historiques de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, Brussels, De Man archives, items 40-106.



The Burgos issue provoked a great crisis in the party. With almost no exceptions (other than De Man), the party supported the Spanish Republic. Belgians went to fight for the Republic, other socialists adopted Spanish orphans. The vast majority of the party also supported governmental participation, fearing a return to deflationary economic policies. If the party had to choose between defeating Franco or remaining in the government, it would probably have chosen to defeat Franco. But if it had to choose between the symbolic gesture of sending a commercial agent to Burgos or leaving the government? The party agonized, but "pragmatism" prevailed. The right used Spaak as a stalking horse for attaining its objectives. Confronting three congresses in four months, Spaak defied with impunity the majority's decision that sending a commercial agent to Franco was "an absolute moral impossibility", proceeded to do so (thereby breaking his promise) and then offered his resignation. He then had the pleasure of being urged to remain in office by some of his most vociferous opponents. Spaak and Burgos had become the right's price for participation, and Hendrik de Man was waiting in the wings. In the midst of this turmoil, Emile Vandervelde died, eliminating the one real symbol of party unity and continuity (36).

The party had sacrificed principle for participation, perhaps also for unity. But with poetic justice, it soon lost its ill-got gains. The Spaak ministry fell, over an absurd and "wholly Belgian" issue, the appointment of a Flemish doctor, who had accepted appointment as Professor in the German created Flemish University of Ghent during World War I, to the Flemish Academy of Medicine. To surrender on Burgos, only to fall over Martens !

The events of the following months were dominated by Spaak's and De Man's efforts to follow up their victory and bring about reform of party doctrine and structure, efforts which angered the more orthodox leaders and federations. De Man and Spaak wanted more coverage in the socialist press. *Le Peuple*, whose editor was Arthur Wauters, and whose foreign affairs column was written by Jexas (Josef Sachs), was a citadel of internationalism. De Man wanted a special congress to revise party doctrine, but the war aborted this plan. The De Man — Spaak offensive was paralleled by a strong spurt of anticommunism, which began well before the Nazi-Soviet pact. It was based on opposition to collective

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(36) For an account of the debates of the congresses relevant here, cf. *Peuple* 11/6/38 - 11/8/38, 12/6/38, 12/9/38 (enlarged executive), 1/12/38 (executive), 1/13/39 (General Council), 1/16/39. See also relevant sections of the *Carnets* to grasp the inside maneuvering. The debates of the congresses are fascinating; positions, if not ideas, change. Spaak was able to count on the Flemish federations and the trade unions in crucial votes.

security and on trade union determination that the POB remain a party of government. The cold war within the party was reflected in the delay in filling the party chairmanship. The opposition to De Man attempted to stop him by adjourning the election until after a decision on party doctrine, but De Man and Delattre were finally elected as chairman and vice-chairman half a year after the death of the Patron (37).

The party was by then in the opposition, having done poorly in the elections of April 1939. As might have been predicted, the communists benefited from resentment over Burgos. The defeat reinforced divisions within the party, each side blaming the other (38). Although formal unity remained, two irreconcilable positions existed within the POB. The outbreak of war only exacerbated the situation.

### The socialists and the war.

When World War II broke out, Belgium declared its "neutrality". But what did neutrality mean? The same conflict that had gone on between internationalists and appeasers was transformed into a debate over the meaning of neutrality.

In 1939 the party had created two reviews concerned with doctrine. The French language review, *La Revue Socialiste*, was edited by Max Buset, the Flemish, *Leiding*, by De Man. These reviews became the vehicles of the great debate raging within the party. In an article entitled "Enough Sabotage of Neutrality", written under a pseudonym, De Man complained that while the government had taken a clear position in favor of neutrality, and was supported by a vast majority of the population, various organs of the press and politicians refused to support it. Neutrality could not survive without neutralists. De Man denied that the war represented a clearcut conflict of good and evil. It was impossible to establish responsibility for the outbreak of war. To the argument that a German victory would destroy Belgian freedom, De Man replied that no state could win this war without becoming totalitarian (39).

Victor Larock argued that it was impossible for any democrat to be neutral in conscience, that it would be a "criminal aberration" to maintain

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(37) De Man's candidacy was opposed by representatives of Charleroi, Liège, and Huy-Waremme. Spaak supported De Man. The vote defeating adjournment of the General Council was 55 : 32. The ensuing election was then by acclamation. For discussion, *Peuple*, 5/25/39.

(38) Recriminations took place at the General Council of April, *Peuple*, 4/18/39. For the special Congress which decided not to enter the Pierlot government. *Peuple*, 4/18/39.

(39) « Genoeg Sabotage van de Onzijdigheid ! », *Leiding*, October 1939, pp. 605-612. A French translation appears in *La Revue Socialiste*, December 1939, pp. 1-10.

an "equal balance" between those fighting for liberty and those fighting against it (40). Max Buset reproached De Man for blaming the victims of aggression without condemning the very fact of aggression (41). De Man's article was received very badly not only by the internationalists, but also by the editorial board of *Leiding*. In the course of a four hour debate, Rens asked De Man how it was possible for him to remain neutral. Rens says that De Man was unable to answer. No one on the board supported him. Underlying De Man's position was the belief that France could not hold out for more than six weeks (42). Interestingly, although De Man refused to condemn German aggression, he condemned the Russian attack on Finland (43). Some of De Man's most important supporters were breaking away from him. Rens, whose position on foreign policy was typical of the trade union leadership, wrote in March 1939 in the official monthly of the trade unions that the *coup de Prague* proved that Hitler was bent on world domination. Elsewhere, he supported Belgium's joining a military alliance with the democracies (44). Likewise, Hermann Vos said that Germany's aggression against Czechoslovakia terminated the "feeble hope of ending up with a rapprochement". The Polish question was a pretext. The choice was between a German desire for a sphere of influence in central and southeastern Europe, and the English desire for equilibrium, which permitted the survival of small states, cultural diversity, human dignity, and individual freedom. War would decide the future of human civilization. In *Leiding*, Vos also stated his uneasiness about De Man's renewed campaign for authoritarian democracy, reinforcement of the authority of the State to end the inefficiency of parliamentary democracy: "... when discontinuity in political development is praised, and when the very basis of Western freedom and individualist culture is being undermined, reform must be undertaken with the greatest caution" (45).

De Man also received a good deal of criticism from Buset for an editorial in the January 1940 issue of *Leiding* suggesting that the mobilized

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(40) « La Neutralité belge et la guerre contre Hitler », *La Revue Socialiste*, October 1939, pp. 11-16.

(41) For Buset's position, « Réponse à *Leiding* », *La Revue Socialiste*, December 1939, pp. 10-17 and « Deuxième réponse à *Leiding* », *ibid.*, January 1940, pp. 16-24.

(42) Interview with Jef Rens, 7/2/73.

(43) At the Congress of December 1939. Cf. *Peuple*, 12/25/39.

(44) « L'Impérialisme hitlérien se démasque », *Mouvement Syndical Belge*, 3/20/39, p. 74; « Les Conditions de notre indépendance », *Le Journal de Charleroi*, 3/21/39.

(45) For Vos' position on foreign policy, cf. « Le Chemin vers la catastrophe, Un aperçu des principaux événements internationaux de 1919 à 1940 », *Mouvement Syndical Belge*, 9/20/39, pp. 75-81; for a good summary of De Man's *Leiding* articles, Dodge, pp. 173-187; for Vos' views on the reform of the State, « Regeering en Parlement », *Leiding*, August 1939, pp. 468-475. The citation is from p. 469.

army constituted a new class, which the socialists must win over (46). (De Man had returned to the uniform, heading the Œuvres Elisabeth, a post which put him into close contact with the King.) De Man's theory was patently ridiculous, but the editorial was indicative of De Man's state of mind. De Man had become convinced of a German victory, and events seemed to justify his opinion. In June, De Man thought the war was over. He did not believe that England would fight (47). He did not realize that America might enter the war, and that the Russians would ultimately be attacked.

De Man had become close to the King. The King now seemed to him the last hope. De Man had emphasized the importance of national unity in keeping Belgium out of the war. When Belgium was occupied, he stressed its importance in maintaining the Belgian state. In a program written for the King dated 19 June 1940, De Man offered eleven points, including fidelity to the King, replacement of Parliament by consultative institutions on a corporatist basis, abolition of political parties, protection of the race (48). In his notorious "Manifesto to the Members of the POB", De Man looked upon the German victory as an opportunity for European peace and social justice (49). There is no doubt that De Man had high hopes of playing a leading role in occupied Belgium. De Man had entered the dreamworld of collaboration. He had ceased to be a socialist; he was soon to become a fugitive from justice. In the meantime, other socialists went to London or prepared the way for the Resistance. The great debate between internationalists and appeasers, when seen in retrospect, appeared to foreshadow the choice between resistance and collaboration. In fact, however, many appeasers became resisters, and not all internationalists followed their own exhortations. Nevertheless, it was out of the Resistance, internal and external, that the post-war Belgian Socialist Party was reborn.

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Neo-socialism in Belgium was not a mass movement, but the work of a small number of individuals. It emerged to fill the gap left by a

(46) « Editoriaal », *Leiding*, January 1940, pp. 1-3. Buset's response « Une Idéologie khaki ? », *La Revue Socialiste*, February 1940, pp. 2-13.

(47) Interview with Gust de Muynck, 7/13/73.

(48) De Man archives, Centre de Recherches et d'Etudes sur la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, Brussels, item 142. The King had already made clear his interest in « reasserting » his executive powers (Höjer, p. 299).

(49) Dodge has a complete text of the « Manifesto », pp. 196-197. For an introduction to the complex situation at the time, and De Man's role, cf. J. GÉRARD-LIBOIS and José GOTOVITCH, *L'An 40, La Belgique occupée*, Brussels, 1971. Of great interest is a report by Hermann BALTHAZAR, « Henri de Man et la révolution avortée », delivered at the De Man colloquium of June 1973 at Geneva.

reformism which had functioned in times of prosperity, but could not deal, on either a theoretical or practical level, with the problems of the Great Depression. It accelerated the trend towards integration of socialist parties into capitalist society, a trend that was already far advanced in Belgium. Neo-socialism was a reformism compatible with a new form of capitalist development, with a capitalism that had abandoned the free market and moved towards state intervention, with the capitalism of Keynes rather than that of Adam Smith. In that sense, neo-socialism was the direct precursor of that contemporary form of European socialism practiced above all in Germany, which accepts the mixed economy as a given, and claims the ability to run it more effectively than the parties of the right.

The problem was that the neo-socialism of the 1930's did not operate in a political vacuum. It did not escape from what Rosenstock-Franck calls the "psychosis of neighboring examples" (50). The leaders of neo-socialism were not men deeply rooted in the historical labor movement. De Man was a wandering intellectual; Spaak, the scion of a Liberal family, was above all an opportunist. They did not feel that they were a part of the POB as Vandervelde did. They did not identify with the working-class as De Brouckère did. Perhaps, for that reason, they were more open to the influence of fascist countries. For there, apparently, the State was intervening and intervening effectively in the economy. When neo-socialists talked of authoritarian democracy and *socialisme national*, they were consciously or unconsciously modeling their ideas on the fascist example. The fact that these men never really had the full understanding of party militants, that they experienced considerable frustration with the other parties and Parliament, disenchanted them with the democratic system itself. Spaak was lucky enough to end up on the winning side, and lived to become "Mr. Europe". De Man, more consequent in his behavior, became the victim of the dialectic between his theories and his personal failure as a politician. It was because of his personal frustration, and because the dictatorial powers seemed so much more effective, that De Man concluded that the revolution was really on the right. He paid the price for his error.

### Summary

*The inability of reformist socialism to cope with the rise of fascism and the Great Depression led to a significant challenge by neo-socialists.*

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(50) ROSENSTOCK-FRANCK, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

*In Belgium, this challenge was led by De Man and Spaak. In 1933, the POB accepted De Man's Plan as its program of action; in 1935 it entered into the Van Zeeland government. Although in many ways, the neos showed greater understanding of the nature of advanced capitalist society than the orthodox reformists, they displayed an alarming tendency to try to preempt fascism by emulating certain fascist positions. De Man and Spaak broke with socialist internationalism and collective security. De Man became convinced of the bankruptcy of democratic institutions and of the democratic states. This attitude ultimately led him from neutralism to collaboration, in the belief that fascism was indeed the wave of the future.*

