

# From Liberators To Occupiers? The British ‘Occupation’ Of Belgium In The Early Cold War.

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“No Russians, but no English either! [...] We want to fight for Belgium! [...] BUT FOR NO STRANGERS!!! AWAY WITH ALL THE STRANGERS!!! And away with the Traitor Government that sells us out!!! [...] First one betrays the King! Then one betrays his most loyal supporters: the Kempen People, the farming people. [...] FARMERS! [...] STAND UP! [...] THE KING IS GONE!!! AND IMMEDIATELY FOREIGN OCCUPATION!!! TO ARMS AGAINST THIS TREACHERY!!!”<sup>1</sup>

The above quote is drawn from a weekly published in late August 1951 by a Belgian far-right group of ultraroyalists who wished to capitalize on local frustrations in the north-Belgian (or Flemish) countryside. In this area called the ‘Kempen’, rumours had it for months that entire villages would disappear and that the otherwise so quiet region would become a British-controlled military domain. There was some truth in the rumours, as Belgian-British negotiations were leading to the establishment of military bases.<sup>2</sup> The ‘occupation’ required spaces that, in the end, amounted, to about four thousand acres, and included some fifty homesteads.<sup>3</sup> These territories would allow the British to efficiently supply their army on the Rhine in case of a Soviet attack.

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<sup>1</sup> Anti-Britse stemming in de Kempen, “De Weg”, 31 augustus 1951, p. 6. [Full caps in the original]

<sup>2</sup> J.M. Sterkendries, *La Belgique et la sécurité de l'Europe occidentale, 1944-1955*, PhD-thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2003, pp. 311-312.

<sup>3</sup> P. De Rynck, *Erfgoedgids Koude Oorlog in de Kempen. Operatie Gondola en de Britse basis in de provincie Antwerpen*, Antwerp, Provincie Antwerpen, 2011, pp. 16-21.

A Soviet invasion and occupation of Western Europe was indeed one of the main Western doom images of the early Cold War.<sup>4</sup> In that scenario, western Germany formed the first line of defence. British soldiers occupied its northern half since 1945, while the Americans were in the south. In case of a massive Soviet attack, Western forces would have to fall back behind the Rhine. That line could hold only if extra troops were rapidly mobilized. While the Americans negotiated with the French to set up military communication camps in France, the British opted for Belgium, because of excellent transport links between the port of Antwerp and their military headquarters in Germany.<sup>5</sup> A British-Belgian agreement had to arrange the establishment of camps for the British soldiers, ideally not too far from Antwerp. It was agreed that the Kempen provided the ideal location.

This article analyses how the coming of the British to this rural region was received by journalists from national newspapers and local weeklies. Apart from contributors to the communist press, these writers were all rooted ideologically in the Western camp in these times of heightened Cold War anxiety. In the early 1950s, Belgian society was also dealing with the aftermath of the most polarizing event in its political history: the Royal Question, in essence the question whether Leopold III could remain King of the Belgians.<sup>6</sup> It originated in his decision, in 1940, not to follow the government in exile and to remain in soon to be occupied Belgium. The issue was formally solved only in July 1951, when Leopold abdicated. In the meantime, large sections of public opinion had taken offense at his New Order ideology and his remarriage in wartime. The matter of his return had deeply divided the country: the (Dutch-speaking) Flemish in the north were largely in favour, while the (French-speaking) Walloons in the south were generally opposed; as to the

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<sup>4</sup> O.A. Westad, *The Cold War. A World History*, London, Penguin Books, 2018, pp. 99-127.

<sup>5</sup> See O. Pottier, *Les bases américaines en France: 1950-1967*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003, pp. 27-58.

<sup>6</sup> Most of the literature on this issue is in Dutch or French. An excellent study in English is M. Conway, *The sorrows of Belgium. Liberation and political reconstruction, 1944-1947*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

political parties: the Catholic CVP-PSC was clearly in favour, the Socialist SP-PS and Communist KPB-PCB vehemently opposed, the Liberal LP-PL divided. News of the establishment of British military bases became widespread at a time when the abdication of Leopold III was drawing near. In this context, the alleged British responsibility for the removal of the king, a rather marginal idea within the wider polemic caused by the Royal Question, threatened to resurface more vigorously.

Scrutinizing the rhetoric and discourses of occupation by national and local journalists will allow to evaluate the extent to which representations of the British military's imminent arrival were conditioned either by memories of wartime occupation, or by the prospect of a Cold War that could suddenly turn hot. In this regard, it should be stressed that the hostile occupation of the country by Germany's *Wehrmacht* between 1940 and 1944 was followed by a 'friendly' occupation by primarily British, American and Canadian troops from late 1944 until early 1946.<sup>7</sup>

Historians have long been dealing with the establishment of military bases in Western Europe during the Cold War. An initial focus on security issues gradually gave way to social- and cultural-historical analyses highlighting the perspective of soldiers (and their families). Most of these studies privileged American military presence in the larger countries, followed at some distance by the British in continental Europe.<sup>8</sup> Such research often pays attention to dialogue with local actors, but rarely from the latter's point of view.<sup>9</sup> In the Belgian case, academic historiography has not yet engaged with this bottom-up approach. Indeed, historians have so far provided us with no more

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<sup>7</sup> On occupied Belgium during the Second World War, see M. Van den Wijngaert, *België tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, Antwerpen, Standaard Uitgeverij, 2015; On Liberation and Allied occupation, see P. Schrijvers, *Liberators. The Allies and Belgian Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> See S.W. Duke, W. Krieger (eds.), *US Military Forces. The Early Years, 1945-1970*, Westview Press, 1993; and L. Rodriguez, S. Glebov (eds.), *Military Bases: Historical Perspectives, Contemporary Challenges*, IOS Press, 2009. See also S. Carruthers, *The Good Occupation: American Soldiers and the Hazards of Peace*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2016; and G. Huxford, "'Deterrence can be boring': boredom, gender, and absence in Britain's Cold War military", *Critical Military Studies*, 2022, pp. 1-19.

<sup>9</sup> See nevertheless C. Erlichman, C. Knowles (eds.), *Transforming Occupation in the Western Zones of Germany: Politics, Everyday Life and Social Interactions, 1945-1955*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018.

than a few brief, rather factual overviews of mainly the US presence in the country, which, however, only took off after NATO headquarters moved to Brussels from Paris in the late 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

This article aims to redress this lack of attention for local actors. It does so in full awareness that studying the proliferation of military bases in Western Europe during the early Cold War as a form of ‘occupation’, might be somewhat of a conceptual stretch. Yet for people living close to such bases, feelings of being occupied or even colonized were not uncommon.<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of international law and the principle of territorial sovereignty, too, the long-term presence of foreign troops on the national soil was not unproblematic. Approval by the host country was a *sine qua non*, but even then issues of disciplinary jurisdiction had to be settled unambiguously.<sup>12</sup> Otherwise, those who opposed the construction of the bases would all too easily be able to capitalize on local frustrations, for instance by putting the arrival of foreign soldiers somewhere on the spectrum ranging from ‘friendly’, over ‘peaceful’, to ‘hostile occupation’.<sup>13</sup>

This discursive choice can be studied through a critical reading of local weeklies and national newspapers. The former have hardly been studied in Cold War research. In the framework of this article, it comprises eight weeklies published in the larger towns of the area where the camps were established. Even if most of them bore “Catholic weekly” as a subtitle, they did not slavishly follow directives from the Catholic Party, which had held an absolute majority in parliament since June 1950. Nevertheless, they were representative of a region where, in the 1950 elections, almost eighty per cent of the vote had gone to that political party. Socialists had obtained about seventeen per

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<sup>10</sup> Zie Luc De Vos, “US Forces in Belgium since 1944 », in Duke and Krieger, *US Military Forces*, pp. 181-205; and Simon W. Duke, *United States Military Forces and Installations in Europe*, Stockholm, 1989, pp. 16-22.

<sup>11</sup> See in this regard the chapter “Baselandia” in Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States*, London, Vintage, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> O. Pottier, *Les bases américaines*, pp. 141-172; J. Delbrück, *International Law and Military Forces Abroad: US Military Presence in Europe, 1945-1965*, in S.W. Duke, W. Krieger, *US Military Forces*, pp. 83-115.

<sup>13</sup> On the notion of ‘peaceful occupation’, see K. Gram-Skjoldager, “The Law of the Jungle? Denmark’s International Legal Status during the Second World War”, *The International History Review*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2011, pp. 235–56.

cent, the Liberal Party about three, the Communists only one.<sup>14</sup> No similar publications tied to their political families were spread in the Kempen. As for the newspaper press, these included “Het Handelsblad”, “De Standaard”, and “Gazet van Antwerpen” (all of a Catholic persuasion), the socialist “Volksgazet” and the liberal “Nieuwe Gazet”. These were sold almost nation-wide but found their main outlets in the city and province of Antwerp. Especially “Gazet van Antwerpen” was popular in the Kempen. In the early 1950s, it was reputed to quite closely following the Catholic Party line. The same went for the “Volksgazet” and its relation to the Socialist Party, but much less for “Het Handelsblad”, “De Standaard”, and “De Nieuwe Gazet”.<sup>15</sup> The editors of these dailies paid a fair amount of attention to what was happening in rural Belgium and often employed a journalist whose responsibilities included news from the Kempen. Unlike the contributors to the Kempen weeklies, however, these were all professional journalists who did not live in the region.<sup>16</sup>

This article relates how, during the Summer of 1951, news about the coming of the British to the Kempen was framed as a conflict between either Belgian or British military expropriators on the one hand, and dispossessed local farmers on the other. The second part shows how the writers who attributed the responsibility for the sorrows of these farmers to the British, specified what the British were exactly guilty of: wanting to militarily occupy sovereign Belgium. The resonance of this discourse in wider media and political circles, is evaluated in the final part.

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<sup>14</sup> These percentages are taken from the total vote of the district (‘arrondissement’) of Turnhout combined with the canton (‘canton’) of Zandhoven. See <https://verkiezingsresultaten.belgium.be/nl/search/kamer-van-volksvertegenwoordigers/1950/kanton>, last visited on 6 August 2024.

<sup>15</sup> E. De Bens, K. Raeymaeckers, *De pers in België : het verhaal van de Belgische dagbladpers, gisteren, vandaag en morgen*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2007; I. Ghijs, *100 jaar Gazet van Antwerpen*, Antwerpen, Gazet van Antwerpen, 1991.

<sup>16</sup> This biographical information is drawn from *Officieel Jaarboek van de Belgische Pers 1949-1950*, Brussel, 1950.

## Who is to blame for the expropriations of farmers' lands?

News about the establishment of British military bases in the Kempen was first picked up in June 1951 by the Antwerp Catholic daily “Het Handelsblad” and its Liberal counterpart “De Nieuwe Gazet”. Both journalists adopted a conflict frame, with a clear indication of the conflict’s victims (the local farmers in both cases) and the perpetrators. In the Liberal newspaper’s article, the Belgian military was proclaimed guilty – they had deprived these poor ‘peasants’ of their means to make a living. This made sense, for technically, expropriations were carried out under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence, and the Belgian army would become owner of the lands at the point in the future when the British military felt their presence was no longer needed.<sup>17</sup> The editors did not attach much importance to the events, for the article was tucked away in the middle of the newspaper. It was also significantly shorter than the one in “Het Handelsblad”, and was clearly based on the information in this Catholic daily.<sup>18</sup>

For “Het Handelsblad”, the perpetrators were clearly the British: a lengthy front-page article opposed the title “British army expropriates 800 ha” to the subtitle “Scores of farmers thrown out”. The journalist asserted that the Kempen people shared this view: “Like fire it ran from homestead to homestead. The English soldiers are coming to confiscate everything! Officers of the Royal Engineers [...] did indeed go from house to house and, usually without an interpreter, made the inhabitants aware that their homes were becoming military domain.” Remarkably enough, the Cold War, the cause of what was happening, was referred to rather vaguely, towards the end of the article, where the journalist stated to “nonetheless agree that expropriations are necessary given the current

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<sup>17</sup> P. Deloge, *Une coopération difficile. Belgique et Grande-Bretagne en quête de sécurité à l'aube de la guerre froide*, Bruxelles, Musée Royale de l'Armée, 2000, p. 377.

<sup>18</sup> Beroering rond militaire Onteigeningen, “De Nieuwe Gazet”, 7 juni 1951, p. 5.

international situation.”<sup>19</sup> There was apparently no need to explain to the readers how these measures were linked to this ‘situation’.

But why did the journalist decide to put all the blame on the British? Could this have had anything to do with the aftermath of the Royal Question? After all, his article was published one month before Leopold III’s formal abdication and “Het Handelsblad” was one of several Catholic newspapers which had fiercely pled for the return of the King. The literature on these newspapers, the most important of which was probably the Brussels “De Standaard”, argues that the “international Cold War” greatly increased polarization resulting from the Royal Question. Apparently, it also created a certain paranoia on the editorial boards of most of these right-wing newspapers. Many of their journalists believed in a communist plot driven from abroad to replace the monarchy with a republic that would inevitably be organized on the Eastern European model. To them, Leopold III was “the paladin of Christian civilization” and a “solid dam against the red tide.” Particularly interesting is that opinion pieces published at the height of the Royal Question in the Summer of 1950, occasionally suggested that not only the Communist International but also “English agents” were manoeuvring to eliminate Leopold III. This was certainly not a widespread conviction in Catholic circles but rather the result of blindly copying theories from French-language ultra-royalist pamphlets.<sup>20</sup> Yet the idea was out there, and it could have stimulated Catholic Flemish journalists to hold the British responsible for the sorrows of Kempen farmers.

However, for most of the Summer of 1951, this line of thought was nowhere to be found in the major Belgian dailies, and apart from a few pieces in “Het Handelsblad”, anti-British sentiments

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<sup>19</sup> J. Br[usselaers], Brits leger onteigent 800 Ha voor aanleg van munitie-opslagplaatsen, “Het Handelsblad”, 6 juni 1951, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> G. Durnez, *De Standaard. Het levensverhaal van een Vlaamse krant van 1948 tot de VUM*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1993, pp. 27-56, 147-150.

appeared only – and infrequently – in “De Standaard”. In an article somewhere in the middle of this Brussels newspaper’s edition of 12 August 1951, reference was made to the behaviour of the British military during the Liberation era, when they allegedly destroyed Kempen nature for the construction of a hospital for their wounded soldiers. The journalist could not condone this “lack of respect for the beauty of the environment.”<sup>21</sup> In late 1951, such hostility towards the British because of their early postwar military presence in Belgium seems to have been limited to “De Standaard”. By contrast, the ‘tourist gaze’ which approached the Kempen as a place of outdoor recreation for urban dwellers was put forward in nearly all Brussels- and Antwerp-based media.<sup>22</sup>

None such comments made it into the weeklies published in Kempen towns, whose inhabitants used nature for economic subsistence rather than for tourist consumption. Neither did local media attribute the recent misfortunes of their farmers to British manoeuvres. How to explain this?

On the one hand, a different memory about the English conditioned the way the Kempen authors regarded the imminent establishment of British military bases. As the editorialist of “Aankondigingsblad”, the main weekly of the largest Kempen town, put it: “We have nothing against the English, obviously. Quite the contrary, we will never forget the excellent services they have rendered during the last war.”<sup>23</sup> Assisted by Canadian and Polish troops, British soldiers had driven the *Wehrmacht* out of the region in September 1944, and seven years later they were still seen primarily as the liberators of the Kempen from the German occupier.<sup>24</sup> This was not as self-evident as it might seem, for the ‘friendly occupation’ which had followed the rush of regained

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<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, De Britse legerbasis in ons land. Antwerpse Kempen met ondergang bedreigd, “De Standaard”, 12 augustus 1951, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> See M. Auwers, De Koude Oorlog komt naar de Kempen. De lokale pers over de oprichting van Britse militaire basissen in de vroege jaren 1950, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, vol. 54, no. 3-4, pp. 122-123.

<sup>23</sup> Britse militaire basis in onze Kempen, “Aankondigingsblad”, 1 september 1951, pp. 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> F.H. Jansen, B. Clymans, G. Goris, *De Kempen bevrijd, 1944*, Leuven, Davidsfonds Uitgeverij, 2016.



freedom, gradually caused what Peter Schrijvers has labelled ‘irritations of occupation’, among which the frustration of local young men about what they deemed unfair marriage-market competition ranked prominently, as well as that of young women who unwillingly faced the advances of sometimes inebriated ‘Tommies’. More generally, British requisition of building materials and other supplies, and of public and private spaces for administration and billeting, did not always go down well with a population which had just suffered four years of German occupation.<sup>25</sup> Collective memory, however, might have silenced these negative recollections of the British passage.

On the other hand, local journalists appreciated the advantages in terms of employment the military bases could bring. Indeed, nowhere in Belgium unemployment rates were higher than in their region.<sup>26</sup> They also stressed the absolute necessity of contributing to the defence of Western Europe. These considerations are well worded by a journalist from “Het Getrouwe Lier”: “We have to do our part in the defence of the West [...]. Rather a British army base than a Russian occupation. Rather work and bread for our workers at home, than mass deportation of our people to the mines of Siberia.”<sup>27</sup>

The readers of these weeklies could have hardly disagreed with this way of presenting the issues at stake. The above quotation is part of one of few Belgian press articles published between June and late August 1951 that contain the word ‘occupation’. Tellingly it was put in clear opposition with the establishment of British military bases. The combination “British occupation” did occur once, in “Aankondigingsblad”. Not in accusing way, however, but rather to mitigate its

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<sup>25</sup> P. Schrijvers, *Liberators*, pp. 206-237.

<sup>26</sup> V. Van Rompuy, *Het arrondissement Turnhout. Een regionaal-economisch onderzoek*, Leuven, KUL Centrum voor Economische Studiën, 1957.

<sup>27</sup> De militaire basis in de omtrek, “Het Getrouwe Lier, 18 augustus 1951, p. 2.

consequences in an overall positive piece titled “Possibilities for the Kempen”.<sup>28</sup> Only the communist newspapers would consistently refer to the British as aggressors and to the coming of the British bases as the beginning of a military occupation of Belgium. Yet their efforts to incite Kempen farmers to resist the British ‘occupiers’, had virtually no effect in a region where less than 1% of the vote went to the KPB-PCB.<sup>29</sup> Also nationally, the 1950 elections had provided extra proof that this was the weakest of all West-European communist parties.<sup>30</sup> In what follows, their writings will therefore no longer be taken into account.

### **The British ‘occupation’ of the Kempen**

Still, as expropriations went on and their effects became more tangible, it could be expected that other political players who did not accept the West-European Cold War narrative, would also try to exploit local dissatisfaction. On the other side of the political spectrum, indeed, resided political groups who equally opposed the Atlanticist discourse hegemonic within the Catholic, Socialist and Liberal Parties. And this brings us back to the quotation at the start of this essay.

The weekly from which this quote is drawn, was one of the mouthpieces of the so-called ‘Belgian’ (as opposed to Flemish-nationalist) neo-Dinaso’s. These fervent supporters of King Leopold III still adhered, as the passage “We want to fight for Belgium! [...] BUT FOR NO STRANGERS!!!!” shows, to the former King’s foreign policy of independence. Striving for an authoritarian monarchy, they discerned in any political crisis, the rapid end of parliamentary democracy. In this view, the combination of Leopold’s abdication and the establishment of British bases in the Kempen was

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<sup>28</sup> Kempische mogelijkheden, “Aankondigingsblad”, 11 augustus 1951, pp. 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> Just two examples: La Campine livrée aux armées anglo-américaines, “Le Drapeau Rouge”, 19 juillet 1951, pp. 1, 3; and M. Thijs, Kempenaars, opgepast voor de propaganda der Dinaso’s. Ze zijn tegen een Britse bezetting maar voor een Duits-Amerikaans aanvalsact, “De Roode Vaan”, 12 oktober 1951, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> See L. Peiren, *De Communistische Partij van België gedurende de Koude Oorlog, 1944-1968*, in M. Van den Wijngaert, L. Beullens (red.), *Oost West West Best. België onder de Koude Oorlog*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1997, pp. 191-201.

regarded as the starting point of the right-wing revolution. Belgian neo-Dinaso's targeted Britain "to the point of paranoia [...] England was, as it were, the new occupier and the regime [...] the new collaborator."<sup>31</sup> These ideas were clearly present in the article, and the discourse of occupation would be repeated in every edition of their weeklies for the next year and a half. Headlines such as "Chase the British out of the Kempen", "Let us sabotage British occupation" and "To drive out tyranny...", as well as visualisations of "Little Britain", or even "Little Britain: coffin of the Kempen" on a map of northern Belgium, had to spur readers into action against the effects of this 'occupation'.<sup>32</sup> Contributors also capitalized on the rising international criticism of British imperialism to frame Belgium as a "Crown colony" and the establishment of the military bases as the start of "British colonisation". More subtly, they suggested that the terms of the "occupation treaty" that the British had allegedly imposed on Belgium were "the same as the ones that define the statute of the British Occupation in Egypt against which this country is rebelling today."<sup>33</sup>

[Insert Illustration 1: "Little Britain: coffin of the Kempen". Map published in the neo-Dinaso weekly *De Uitweg*. The region where the British bases were established is indicated by a coffin holding a corps]

To be fair, neo-Dinaso publications were not widely read, and their militants were few. Yet they did exert some influence on the Catholic Party's right-wing. Moreover, they did not only publish weeklies filled with articles that connected the coming of the British military with the removal of Leopold III. From late September 1951 onwards, they also campaigned intensively in the Kempen

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<sup>31</sup> B. De Wever, "De schaduw van de leider. Joris Van Severen en het na-oorlogs Vlaams-nationalisme (1945-1970)", *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, vol. 31, no. 1-2, 2001, pp. 187-196.

<sup>32</sup> A. Belmans, Jaagt de Britten de Kempen uit, "De Uitweg", 29 september 1951, pp. 1-2 with a map of "Little Britain" on p. 1; Idem, Saboteert de Britse bezetting, "De Uitweg", 6 oktober 1951, p. 1; L. Gueuning, De Tyrannie verdrijven..., "De Uitweg", 16 oktober 1951, p. 1; Map of Little Britain: Coffin of the Kempen, "De Uitweg", 30 augustus 1952, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Statuut der Britse bezetting. Het Londens verraad, "De Uitweg", 27 oktober 1951, p. 3; De Britten in de Kempen, 24 november 1951, "De Uitweg", p. 6; L. Van Hembyze, Belgium: a Crown colony?, "De Uitweg", 8 maart 1952, p. 1.

region, often using flyers with on the front the King's portrait between lines such as "Why did he have to go?" and "He did not tolerate the enslavement [by the British] of our people", and the message that the Kempen was suffering from British occupation, on the back.

This troubled Catholic political elites. They knew perfectly well that the region where the British camps were to be constructed, counted eighty-five per cent of the people in favour of the return of Leopold III. Nowhere in Belgium this percentage was higher.<sup>34</sup> The Ministry of Defence therefore wanted to dispel these "fantastic rumours" via a press note. It reiterated that the bases simply had to be there to adequately defend the West against the communist threat, that they would bring many economic benefits to the region hit by high unemployment, that those dispossessed would receive fair compensation, and that the arrival of the British military did certainly not affect Belgium's sovereignty over its own territory.<sup>35</sup>

This government-orchestrated media campaign was probably too modest to fully counter the negative effects of the expropriations and the expected changes of the public space in the Kempen. In any event, several of the local weeklies started to negatively portray the British, and some now tied the establishment of the military bases to British manoeuvres to eliminate King Leopold III (which would facilitate military occupation of the country). Editors of only three of the studied weeklies refrained from publishing contributions that contained negative comments on the coming of the British, one of them stressing that sacrifices made by their soldiers during the Second World War demanded continuing gratitude.<sup>36</sup> In the other five weeklies, by contrast, the neo-Dinaso's anti-British discourse of occupation did seem to trickle in. Partly, this was caused by the perceived

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<sup>34</sup> R. Keyes, *Leopold III. Complot tegen de koning. Deel 2 1940/1951*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1988, p. 430.

<sup>35</sup> This note was published on 31 October in the major Brussels newspapers.

<sup>36</sup> Tussen Reivinnen en Groene Heuvel. Beschouwingen bij een herdenking, "Het Nieuwsblad van Geel", 22 september 1951, p. 1.

paradox between the British government's refusal to full membership of the European Defence Community on the one hand, and its army's imminent presence in the Flemish countryside on the other. The Labour government had indeed opted for a policy of association-not-membership of this institution, which the Churchill administration had accepted upon its start in late October 1951.<sup>37</sup>

This paradox led one contributor of "De Netebode" to wonder: "Why do these lads come occupy and destroy our Kempen? Are the Kempen perhaps a final move on their chess board? And will the Kempen become a cause of contention within Europe? For Belgium would have to take their side because of the threatening presence of the British?"<sup>38</sup> In this article, as well as in several others published in local weekly newspapers, the British are essentially portrayed as perfidious: they are no longer former liberators but future occupiers who, moreover, in the event of a successful Soviet attack, would leave the Kempen undefended.

A similar idea also took root in "Aankondigingsblad". An initially combative stance ("If England wants an advanced defence post here, they can pay for it!"<sup>39</sup>) soon gave way to a fatalistic attitude ("Belgium is, after all, a Lilliput in the realm of the Giants, and in the end we will have to bow our heads anyway"<sup>40</sup>) which culminated, in January 1951, in a subtle link between the little Belgium-narrative and the discourse of military occupation:

One bad day, we were surprised by the news that nearly 1,800 hectares were to be expropriated to serve as sites for the armies of Western European defense. Okay. We understood, although we realized what a calamity this occupation would bring to our region [...] There would have to be a Western European army. Fine, we were willing [...] Comes England and cynically says: well, but not me... And now [...] nothing will come of

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<sup>37</sup> K. Ruane, *The Rise and Fall of the European Defence Community*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, pp. 31-50.

<sup>38</sup> Woorden II, "De Netebode", 30 december 1951, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Bedrogen?, "Aankondigingsblad", 6 oktober 1951, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> En nu waarheen?, "Aankondigingsblad", 20 oktober 1951, p. 1.

the European army, because of [...] the big lords, who want to put the little ones in front of the wagon, but don't want to do anything themselves.<sup>41</sup>

In February 1952, on the occasion of the British king's passing, "Aankondigingsblad" published a historical sketch of the decline of "Proud Albion". In the final paragraph, it explicated the tension between the British image of liberator and that of occupier of the Kempen:

The English people have always enjoyed great sympathy in Belgium. It has been one of our staunchest allies [...] Equally, it must be said that the history of the English base in the Kempen will not strengthen the existing friendship... Which does not prevent that in the event of any conflict, the ranks will be closed again against the common enemy.<sup>42</sup>

The last sentence of this passage nuances the anti-British sentiment to which some of the Kempen weekly writers appealed. They did not prefer the pre-war policy of independence to a Western alliance. They did, however, show frustration at the perceived powerlessness of the Kempen farmers within little Belgium, and within Europe where larger powers, even if they were in decline, still called the shots. Their frustration did not, however, lead them to present the 'occupation' itself as an encroachment on Belgian sovereignty. In a way, they still accepted the Defence ministry's reasoning, which drew on an international law perspective on occupation as "the temporary control of a territory by another state that claims no right to permanent control over that territory".<sup>43</sup>

This was very different in "De Nethegalm", the only local weekly which copied the rabidly anti-British and anti-government discourse of the neo-Dinaso's. From late November 1951 onwards, lead article writer Socia began to invariably refer to "the occupation treaty" as the framework

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<sup>41</sup> Met grote heren..., "Aankondigingsblad", 5 januari 1952, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Het trotse Albion, "Aankondigingsblad", 16 februari 1952, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> See David M. Edelstein, "Occupation Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail", *International Security*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2004, p. 52.

within which the British came to set up their camps. In a December opinion piece, he presented the essence of the neo-Dinaso campaign as a question: “Would it be true that first the King had to disappear in order [for the government] to sell our independence?”<sup>44</sup> The answer filled the columns of “De Nethegalm” almost every week, and two months later still ran:

In fact, we have an English occupation in this country. Foreign troops billet on our territory at our expense. Hundreds of our Flemish people are being put on the streets for those foreign troops. [...] Our boys have to walk in English uniform and receive English military instructions. - Practically the whole of our country will be transformed into an English arsenal. - It is about defending the West.

Like in the ultraroyalist media, the article links a mixture of half-truths and falsehoods about the arrival of the British, to the thorny issues of expropriation and the loss of national sovereignty. This included, elsewhere in the text, the statement that Belgium had become a “British colony”. Moreover, the most efficient strategy to meet the challenges of the Cold War was national revolution, the editorialist of “De Nethegalm” argued, with a reference to events in countries like Egypt: “Everywhere we see how national pride no longer tolerates English exploitation. [...] A solid national consciousness in each country of Europe and the actual action to obtain and strengthen it are a better dam against communism than large-scale armament.”<sup>45</sup>

Also in Catholic dailies close to the Flemish movement and further removed from the government could one read (or rather see) aspects of the neo-Dinaso discourse of British occupation. This could largely be attributed to Pil (pseudonym of Joseph *Joë* Meulepas), a former convicted collaborator with the German occupier who after his release from prison in 1947 became an editorial cartoonist

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<sup>44</sup> Socia, De CVP hield een congres, “De Nethegalm”, 15 december 1951, pp. 1, 8. See also Militaire onteigeningen in de Kempen bedragen 1508 ha, “De Nethegalm”, 10, 17 november 1951, pp. 1, 3; Socia, Militair weerbaar, De Nethegalm, 24 november 1951, 1-2; Men speelt met de brave man, “De Nethegalm”, 8 december 1951, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> S[ocia], Onze Koning is dood, 16 februari 1952, “De Nethegalm”, p. 7.

for principally “De Standaard”.<sup>46</sup> In the early 1950s, he often chose the foreign and imperial policy of his wartime enemies the British as the topic of his satirical sketches. In Autumn 1951, these criticisms were generally in line with the textual contents of “De Standaard”’s articles. They differed significantly, however, when it came to the establishment of British bases in the Kempen.

[Insert Illustration 2: Pil, To facilitate their supplies (in Egypt)... the British raze 75 houses. Cartoon published in “De Standaard” on 14 December 1951, p. 1]

While journalists in this period did not comment on these events, in mid-December Pil reacted to a small article on page three titled “The British raze 75 houses for a bridge over the Suez-canal” with a cartoon reading “To facilitate their supplies (in Egypt)... the British raze 75 houses”.<sup>47</sup> The visual represents, on the right-hand side, two Kempen farmers with their characteristic cap, dotted handkerchief tied around their neck, coat with elbow patches, and wooden clogs. On the left-hand side, a British soldier (wearing a ‘Tommy helmet’) on a bulldozer tears down a typical Kempen farmstead. The farmers are watching this scene from behind a fence labelled ‘Keep Out Kempen Camps’. To be sure, the article published a few days earlier contained no references to the Belgian case. Neither would “De Standaard”’s journalists report on the matter over the following two months. Daily front page news on “the English-Egyptian conflict”, as the struggle of Egyptian nationalists to shed of the last remnants of British colonial rule was termed, nevertheless inspired.

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<sup>46</sup> M. Ruys, “Meulepas, Joë”, *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, <  
<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/meulepas-joe> (last visited on 11 August 2024).

<sup>47</sup> Pil, Om hun bevoorrading te vergemakkelijken (in Egypt), “De Standaard”, 14 december 1951, p. 1. This is a reference to Britten leggen vijfenzeventig huizen plat. Voor een brug over het Suezkanaal, “De Standaard”, 9 december 1951, p. 3.



Pil to take his comparison between the British military bases in Belgium and the situation in Egypt, one step further.<sup>48</sup>

[Insert Illustration 3: Pil, The English army bases in the Kempen. Keep out! ... you... Egyptian. Cartoon published in “De Standaard” on 3 February 1952, p. 1]

A cartoon published in early February 1952 suggests an analogy between the Belgian Albert Canal, along which most of the camps and depots were to be erected, and the Suez Canal. In the back, a British soldier marches on the canal’s banks, perhaps a subtle analogy to the formal grounds of British military occupation of Egypt: to safeguard transit through the Suez Canal. The posture of the Lord Kitchener-like British officer impeding the Kempen farmer access to the field, suggests a more violent occupier versus occupied dynamic than in Pil’s earlier cartoons. The likeness is underscored by the officer’s confusion, who seems to think that he is addressing an Egyptian (“Keep out... you... Egyptian”).<sup>49</sup>

The analogy between the Egyptian and Belgian cases is obviously a false one. Power differentials between ‘occupier’ and ‘occupied’ were much greater in British-Egyptian encounters than they were in British-Belgian relations, most importantly on the intergovernmental level and on that of civil-military relations.<sup>50</sup> In the former case a situation of (semi-)colonialism (had) existed, whereas the project of British military presence in Belgium could not reasonably be labelled as such.

The false analogy did not prevent neo-Dinaso writers and those who sympathized with their ideas to frame the British construction and occupation of military bases in the Kempen, as a form of

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<sup>48</sup> See S. Botman, *The liberal age, 1923-1952*, in M.W. Daly (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Volume 2: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the end of the twentieth century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 306-307.

<sup>49</sup> Pil, De Engelse legerbases in de Kempen. Keep out! ... you... Egyptenaar, “De Standaard”, 3 februari 1952, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> See P. Deloge, *Une coopération difficile*, cit. pp. 377-380, for the Belgian government’s powerful negotiation position. See J. Beinon, *Egypt: society and economy, 1923-1952*, in M.W. Daly (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Volume 2*, pp. 330-331, for the powerlessness of the Egyptian peasantry.

colonialism. Arguing that the Belgian government had ceded sovereignty to the British, was a crucial part of this discursive strategy.<sup>51</sup>

Newspaper editors closer to the political elites were aware of this.<sup>52</sup> Their reactions to the ultraroyalists' campaign ranged from disdain to worry. Contributors to the Catholic "La Nation belge" ridiculed the neo-Dinaso "declaration of war" on the British but also pointed to striking parallels between their propaganda and that of the communist press.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, their colleague from the Socialist "Le Peuple", while qualifying their allegations as "ramblings of the brainless", was convinced that the neo-Dinastos much rather preferred to collaborate with neo-Nazi groups, for "isn't it nostalgia for Hitler and his methods that takes hold of these disreputable characters?" The Catholic "La Cité" compared them to "Indians" on the warpath who would come at night to pull out the beard hairs of the English. The authors of these articles mockingly contrasted the ideas of the neo-dinastos with the obviousness of Belgian participation in Western defence. While this might suggest that they saw no substantial threat from it, several editors of these newspapers did decide to send reporters to the Kempen in order to gauge the extent of local dissatisfaction.<sup>54</sup>

Other journalists were more worried. The Liberal "Het Laatste Nieuws" accused the ultraroyalists of "profound shortsightedness" and stressed that the loyalty of England towards Belgium was profound and ancient. The Catholic "Gazet van Antwerpen" went further to counter what one of its journalists labelled "the criminal pettiness and shortsightedness of some scribblers" who dared to

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<sup>51</sup> See David Baillargeon, Jeremy E. Taylor, *Introduction: Spatial Histories of Foreign Occupation and Colonialism*, in Idem (ed.), *Spatial Histories of Occupation: Colonialism, Conquest and Foreign Control in Asia*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, pp. 4-7.

<sup>52</sup> See for instance R.S., *De Britse 'kolonisatie' der Antwerpse Kempen*, "Het Nieuws van den Dag", 4 oktober 1951, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Une déclaration de guerre...*, "La Nation belge", 8 octobre 1951.

<sup>54</sup> See Robert Vivenoy, *Vacances anglaises en Campine*, "L'Unité belge", 13 octobre 1951; and Pierre de Vos, *Les bases en Campine sont-elles pour les espions ce que le miel est pour les mouches?*, "La Nation belge", 6, 7 novembre 1951, p. 1.

question Belgium's alliance with the British and the country's willingness to "defend ourselves against a real danger looming from the East". In a series of elaborate articles, this contributor to the most widely read Flemish newspaper urged them to stop, arguing that "such behaviour can be expected from the Communist Party, but not from national groups."<sup>55</sup> His lack of success, however, did worry both Catholic politicians and journalists, who were eagerly looking for a way to cast the blame for the farmers' misfortunes, elsewhere.

### **Secret Agreements?**

The occasion to do so, presented itself when a law professor at the Catholic University of Leuven published a paper in which he argued that there was no legal basis for the establishment of British military camps in Belgium. His observation was picked up by the Catholic press around Christmas 1951 and recycled in a narrative directed not so much against the CVP-PSC-government but against the Socialist Party. The coming of the British to the Belgian countryside, Catholic journalists now argued, was the consequence of a secret treaty negotiated at the end of the Second World War between Belgian Socialist leader Paul-Henri Spaak, then Foreign Minister, and his British counterpart Anthony Eden.<sup>56</sup> During the Royal Question, Catholic journalists had constantly repeated that the Socialists were indebted to London because of the Belgian government's stay in the British capital during the war. By suggesting that the "secret" agreements resulting from this stay were the cause of all the Kempen farmers' misery, they tried to pass the buck to their political

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<sup>55</sup> See [L.] Phil[ipsen], Britse basis in de Kempen, "Gazet van Antwerpen", 31 oktober, 1, 3 november 1951.

<sup>56</sup> Britse basis in de Kempen, "Het Handelsblad", 24 december 1951, p. 1; Gemengde Kroniek - Britse basis in de Kempen, "Gazet van Antwerpen", 25 december 1951, p. 2; L'opération Gondola. Une affaire mal engagée, "La Libre Belgique", 29 janvier 1952, pp. 1, 5.

rivals. However, it soon turned out that the negotiations about the bases, dated entirely from the Catholic reign. This, then, incited socialist MP's to question the Foreign Minister in parliament.<sup>57</sup>

Catholic newspaper journalists reacted ambivalently. On the one hand, they stopped attacking the Socialists and their former Foreign Minister, and even called on them to withdraw the interpellation. The editorialist of "De Standaard" now repeatedly warned readers for the neo-Dinaso's "exaggerations and misplaced, pseudo-nationalist propaganda." Invoking the Cold War, he also argued for military secrecy: "Should the Russians know, where all the Anglo-Saxon camps are located?"<sup>58</sup> At the same time, however, "De Standaard" continued its battle with the socialists, albeit more indirectly. The same editorialist indeed introduced the discourse of occupation in his column: "Some of the English behave", he pointed out, "as if they are in an occupied country." Moreover, not only journalists of "De Standaard" but also those of "Gazet van Antwerpen", while having previously condemned the campaign of the ultraroyalists, now offered their readers ample and positive coverage of one of the neo-Dinaso's anti-British and anti-socialist speeches. Thus the myth of secret agreements between Brits and Belgian Socialists once again filled the newspaper columns. The title of "Gazet van Antwerpen"'s page two article "British base in the Kempen, a beginning of English occupation. Because of secret agreement in London?" was followed by extensive quotations from speakers who asserted "that in 1944-45, we already had an English occupation, which was in no way different from the military occupation during the war."<sup>59</sup> In other words, readers of Catholic newspapers were once more presented with the chronological sequence

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<sup>57</sup> Pierre Hagelsteen, Un tribut à la sécurité collective. L'opération Gondola, "La Métropole", 19 février 1952, p. 1; Idem, En marge des expropriations militaires de Campine. Les accords de Londres, "La Métropole", 6 mars 1952, pp. 1-2 ; L'opération 'Gondola', "La Libre Belgique", 3 mars 1952.

<sup>58</sup> Wat gebeurt er in de Kempen?, "De Standaard", 17 maart 1952.

<sup>59</sup> Britse basis in de Kempen, een begin van Engelse bezetting, "Gazet van Antwerpen", 17 maart 1952, p. 2.

‘secret agreements in London – postwar British occupation of Belgium – removal of King Leopold III – Cold War British occupation of Belgium’.

This is when journalists of the Socialist newspapers, primarily those of the Antwerp “Volksgazet”, took action. Previously, they had hardly reported on the issue, even explicitly stating that people in the ‘hamlets’ of the Kempen consistently voted for the Catholic Party, implying that Socialists had little to gain there. But things had changed now that the Catholic press kept spreading fake news that accused the Socialist leadership of having subordinated Belgian sovereignty to British interests. In one of many front-page articles, their Catholic colleagues were charged with wanting to “restart the Royal Question” in a way that threatened to “cloud relations between Belgium and England and make Belgium pay the price.”<sup>60</sup> During the debate in parliament on 18 March 1952, Socialists heavily criticized the ambiguous position of Catholic politicians and journalists towards the ultraroyalists, even forcing Defence Minister De Greef to unequivocally deny that there was a British ‘occupation’ of the Kempen.

As importantly, Catholic newspapers seemingly accepted the Socialists’ reasoning about the dangers of propagating a cause effect relation between wartime secret agreements and a British ‘occupation’ of (part of) Belgium. An opinion piece in “Gazet van Antwerpen” by MP and former editor-in-chief Louis Kiebooms, captures this acceptance well. After acknowledging that “the legal justification invoked by the government [...] was very weak,” he plainly denounced the neo-Dinaso’s as “extremists” whose language was indistinguishable from that of wartime collaborating parties, and reiterated “that in the context of Western defence, foreign bases are inevitable.” He also expressed satisfaction that “the legend of the so-called secret agreements of London was

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<sup>60</sup> Lasteren maar... er blijft wel wat van over, “Volksgazet”, 18 maart 1952, p. 1. See also De regering gevangen, “Volksgazet”, 20 maart 1952, pp. 1-2.

dispelled” and suggested to move the focus to the positive effects of the British camps on employment in the Kempen.<sup>61</sup> That same day, the editorial of “De Standaard” contained an almost identical message”.<sup>62</sup> It nicely summarized the consensus that seems to have been accepted in most dailies from late March 1952 onwards, and partly as a result of which national attention to the dispossessed farmers gradually died away.

As to the Kempen weeklies, accusations of British ‘occupation’ of the region persisted in only one of them. “De Nethegalm”’s Socia now ever more explicitly copied the neo-Dinaso discourse, but by the Summer of 1952 his feeling that no one seemed to care anymore, frustrated him to the extent that he started minimising the threat of communism: “Too excessively, the great danger of the moment [...] is daily presented to us as Communism.” According to him, the real danger lay in the “goody-goody mentality” of the Kempen people regarding “the English occupation”. While that still seemed to pass, a tirade a few months later did not go down well with “De Nethegalm”’s readers: titled “The Resistance”, he clarified that it was not about World War Two resistance, “which found its genesis around the Liberation of 1944.” Instead, it was about the neo-Dinaso action committees against the “English Occupation”. Readers of “De Nethegalm”, however, took particular notice of Socia’s careless insult to wartime resistance fighters. He had to twist and turn to explain that he had not meant to offend these national heroes.<sup>63</sup> In this almost impossible task, he failed. With his replacement as lead article writer, the occupation discourse vanished from the Kempen press.

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<sup>61</sup> L. Kiebooms, De Britse bases in de Kempen, “Gazet van Antwerpen”, 20 maart 1952, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> De Britse basis in de Kempen. De regering zal trachten haar fouten te herstellen, “De Standaard”, 20 maart 1952, pp. 1-2.

<sup>63</sup> Socia, De grote bedreiging, “De Nethegalm”, 21 juni 1952, p. 1; Socia, Het Verzet, “De Nethegalm”, 13, 20 september 1952, p. 1.

## Conclusion

Socia's final articles highlight that for Catholic (as for Socialist and Liberal) journalists, the discussion presented in this article actually boiled down to the choice between a British military presence (including expropriations of farming land) in rural Belgium, and the prospect of a future Soviet-Russian occupation of the entire country. While only contributors to the communist press were suspected to regard the latter as a 'friendly occupation', other writers accepted the hegemonic Western Cold War narrative that this was to be avoided at all costs. Ultraroyalist writers and their aficionados sought to minimize the risk of a future Russian occupation and refuted that British military presence was an acceptable remedy. Their strategy to frame the British bases as a form of occupation or even colonialism was briefly and modestly successful among a few contributors to the Catholic press, both national (or rather regional) and local. This was at least partly due to the latter's experiences of occupation during the Second World War. Some of them might indeed not have regarded the German occupation of 1940-1944 as particularly 'hostile', but 'friendly' or at least 'peaceful', and the subsequent English occupation the other way round. It was also due to the decline of the British empire, a prominent theme in the press globally, which for Belgian journalists facilitated making analogies between the Kempen case and local resistance to British occupation or colonialism elsewhere in the world. Finally, it was due to the remnants of the contemporary, society-wide controversy over the return of Leopold III. Far-right groups had sought to make the image of the British as enemies, a rather marginal idea during the Royal Question, central to the discussion about the establishment of the British military bases. Leopold III personified pre-war neutrality, and the ultraroyalists argued that his removal was orchestrated by the British so that they could integrate Belgium into their empire.

On the whole, however, the discourse of a British ‘occupation’ did not really catch on. The ultraroyalist arguments were no match, indeed, for a reading of the Second World War that presented the British as liberators of the Kempen (and of Belgium more generally). More importantly, perhaps, the idea of British ‘occupation’ proved difficult to reconcile with the ideological frameworks created by the Cold War. This geopolitical conflict forced the narratives about the establishment of the camps into an anti-communist straitjacket that Belgian mainstream media could not get out of. After all, the British were now a necessary partner in curbing the Soviet threat. Moreover, the bilateral origins of the negotiations for the military bases could easily be subsumed into the fundamental multilateralism of the Cold War. Both NATO and Western European unification indeed offered Belgian Catholic journalists the enticing prospect of an anti-communist Christian Occident. All this points to the dynamic nature of occupation perspectives. Structural factors such as changing geopolitical constellations defined the limits of how occupations were perceived and could be framed.

To be sure, journalists were but one of many Belgian groups who expressed their opinions on the establishment of British military bases in their country. Local council members and, of course, the farmers themselves, were more directly involved. Future research, for instance in the municipal archives and in the Defence Ministry’s expropriation files, could further complicate the perception and representation of the early 1950s north-Belgian countryside as an occupied space.