

## CONCLUSION

The seminal event for the people of Eupen-Malmedy in the aftermath of the Great War was the region's transition from German to Belgian sovereignty. The annexation was in some respects a last-ditch attempt by Brussels to recover some international prestige after what had been a degrading and disconcerting experience at the hands of its erstwhile defenders in Paris. In place of the much sought-after Duchy of Luxembourg, or the territory of Flemish Zeeland, Belgium was reluctantly ceded this troublesome strip of territory inhabited by an enemy population. The advance towards annexation was equally precipitated by the actions of specific interest groups on the ground in both districts, as was the reaction against it.

The objective for Herman Baltia as royal high commissioner or governor of Eupen-Malmedy was to make '*bons Belges*' out of German citizens, be they ethnic German or Walloon. Although Baltia was sensitive to the cultural diversity of both communities, the architects of 'Belgicization' in Brussels seemed oblivious to the nuances attached to these local identities. As Stefan Berger has asserted, the imposition of a national identity on borderland communities cannot be achieved by force, but instead emerges as a negotiated arrangement between the respective government and the borderland communities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Berger, 'Border regions, hybridity and national identity: The cases of Alsace and Masuria' in Q. Edward Wang & Franz Leander Fillafer (eds.), *The Many Faces of Clio: Cross Cultural Approaches to Historiography* (Oxford, 2007), 366–381 (366–368).

This study has explored the extent to which the people of these borderland districts became Belgian, and to what degree Baltia succeeded in his objective of national assimilation. It has shown how Baltia's mission of nation-building in Eupen-Malmedy was a flawed enterprise from the very beginning. That said, the cracks had already begun to appear long before his appointment. His predecessor, Henri Delvaux de Fenffe, albeit a little eccentric in his designs for the post, was merely echoing the contemporary discourse in government circles, that viewed these newly ceded districts as minor colonial collateral, a poor substitute for the suffering endured by Belgium during the war. If Baltia had described the granting of Eupen-Malmedy to Belgium as akin to 'giving a gourmand a bone to chew', it was one which stuck in the throat of many Belgians still ingesting the effects of the war.

A successful political incorporation of both districts into the Belgian state depended on the outcome of the public expression of opinion, which was to be held during the first six months following the coming into force of the Versailles Treaty. Even today the popular consultation remains somewhat of a stain on the tapestry of Belgian democracy. The bad faith created by the controversial consultation was never quite dispelled, and haunted later attempts at so-called 'Belgicization', and efforts to stem the rising tide of German revanchism in the territory. This latter phenomenon continued to threaten the stability of the region up to the Nazi annexation in 1940.

But other factors played their part in conspiring against a seamless attachment, or 'reattachment' of Eupen-Malmedy to Belgium. The assimilatory process was taking place while the Belgian public was still grappling, both physically and psychologically, with the traumatic legacy of the war. In addition, Belgium's internal political and cultural turbulence meant that the incorporation of these former German districts was ill-timed to say the least. For the majority of the borderland population, the primary concern was the future well-being of their families, and in this way the hard economic realities of that period played a significant role in determining the approach that individuals and communities adopted during the impending consultation.

Baltia's period of transition saw many erstwhile loyal citizens of the Reich openly declare in favour of Belgium. In Malmedy in particular, this study has demonstrated how the push towards a union with Belgium gathered impetus among economic and cultural elites. In Eupen, a number of employers worried about the effect a change in the region's

sovereign status would have on their future trading position with Germany. By the same token, the draconian reparation conditions which Germany was expected to meet augured badly for those wishing to opt in favour of German sovereignty, primarily because the expected tax toll on their already meagre incomes would be prohibitive. As well as this, there were those who looked across the border to Berlin, which was still in the grip of revolutionary fervour, as Germany embarked upon a transition of its own, from empire to republic. The chaotic convergence of these factors meant that most people were confused as to which road to take.

Baltia's transitory regime laid the legislative, juridical and administrative foundations on which the future relationship between Brussels and Eupen-Malmedy would rest. He understood, however, that the national acculturation or assimilation of these former German subjects would need much more time and effort on the part of the Belgian state. This view was not shared by the vast majority of political voices in Brussels, who believed that Baltia's prolonged presence was beginning to have an adverse effect on the advances already made. For the majority of Germans living in Eupen-Malmedy, Belgian citizenship did not equate with becoming Belgian *per se*. This distinction was best demonstrated by the work of organizations such as the *Heimatbund*. To the adherents of such organizations, rather than being Belgian, they were instead *Auslandsdeutsche*.

When Herman Baltia stepped down as governor of Eupen-Malmedy on 29 May 1925, he believed that his regime and its achievements had been sacrificed for the sake of political expediency. The Belgian government, in his view, had finally succumbed to pressure from the Socialist benches and media criticism which scorned the state of exception over which he had ruled, oblivious, it seemed, to the fact that the ends may well have justified the means.<sup>2</sup> The events that unfolded in the immediate aftermath of the transitory regime threw into doubt Belgium's commitment to *la nouvelle Belgique*, proving Baltia's point (which had previously been made by Pierre Van Werveke) that Eupen-Malmedy's

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<sup>2</sup> LANRW, Sammlung Baltia, RW/10/5, Erinnerungen des belgischen Generals Baltia, 1918–1922, Gouverneur (Hochkommissar) für die abgetretenen Gebiete Eupen-Malmedy aus seiner Tätigkeit (Erinnerungen), 32–33.

future inside Belgium would be at the mercy of political opportunists in Brussels.<sup>3</sup> The failed attempt to sell most of the territory back to Germany between 1925 and 1926, followed by the lack of a coherent plan to rally its new citizens to the Belgian flag, left many in doubt as to Belgium's true aims. The conflicting signs emanating from the *rue de la Loi* were reflected in the palpable sense of confusion among Eupen-Malmedy's inhabitants. This vacuum of uncertainty was, however, a welcome development for the advocates of German irredentism.

Border areas are constantly changing entities, the contours of which are altered by a combination of social, political and economic forces, and by discursive interaction in a mutually reciprocal relationship. This process of cultural and political sedimentation is accumulative, and defines the character and attitudes within a borderland territory over time.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the relationship between the people of a territory, be it occupied or annexed by a foreign power, are affected by a number of issues, whether economic, social, political or psychological. Rather than seeing these people solely as unsuspecting victims of the whims of high politics, in the main they adopted a 'wait and see' approach to whether or not the benefits of staying in Belgium would eventually outweigh the disadvantages. The arbitrary treatment of these 'new Belgians', from the flawed public expression of opinion to the exploitation of the young and impressionable at the hands of both Belgian and German propagandists, contributed to the emergence of a confluence of conscience among the population at large. The inhabitants of Eupen and Malmedy found themselves trapped in a twilight existence, torn between the demands of the putative mother country (*mère patrie*) and the primordial and historical ties of the *Vaterland* to which they once belonged. By the mid-1930s, Belgium awoke to the need to reassert its authority over the new districts, but to many observers both inside and outside Belgian political circles, it seemed too little too late.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid; Pierre Van Werveke, *La Belgique et Eupen-Malmedy. Où en sommes-nous?* (Brussels: Les Éditions du Pays Belge, 1937), 12–13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Maxence, *Les atouts gaspillés, ou le drame des Cantons de l'Est* (St. Niklaas, 1951), 37–39.

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