

LEOPOLD OF BELGIUM

Since King Leopold's release from captivity in early May the question of his return has become the most disputed topic in Belgium. The extent and vehemence of the controversy have convinced an increasing number of Belgians that the unity of the country would be seriously impaired if Leopold were to reascend his throne. The King's announced decision not to return immediately has satisfied neither his supporters nor his opponents. Most Belgians apparently feel that he is using the explanation of ill health as a means of postponing a final settlement of the issue. The partisan spirit which the Leopold issue has evoked in the country is expected increasingly to hinder the efforts of the van Acker Government to cope with domestic problems of rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Opposition to Leopold's return, prior to his liberation, was largely confined to left-wing Walloon elements. Support for his return was centered among the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, career army officers, former adherents to the prewar fascist parties *Rex* and *VNV*, and other conservatives. In the first months following Belgian liberation such pressing issues as food and fuel supply overshadowed the question of his return. The press refrained from discussing the issue until Leopold's supporters launched a determined propaganda campaign. This provoked a series of severe attacks on Leopold by extremist Walloon papers, while other Belgian journals debated the advisability of any discussion of the issue until the King should be free and able to defend himself. The debate between the opponents and supporters of the King grew so vehement that neutral papers began openly to discuss the question. As a result, public opinion began to swing in favor of Leopold's abdication even before his release from German captivity. Socialist and Liberal elements tended increasingly to support the Communist oppositionists. Though the Catholic Party threatened to withdraw its support of the van Acker Cabinet unless the Socialists repudiated their General Council's resolution in favor of abdication, progressive Catholic elements came out in support of abdication.

A delegation including Prince Charles (Leopold's brother and the present Regent), Premier Achille van Acker, Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak, and other Cabinet Ministers representing all Belgian political parties went to see Leopold immediately following his release. They found the King suffering from a nervous condition and report that he was completely unaware of the growing opposition to his return. With accustomed stubbornness he apparently resented the advice given him by these Ministers and demanded that he be allowed to consult with his former advisors many of whom were extreme rightists. This request has been

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granted. Relations between Leopold and his brother Charles also are strained, though the latter will not oppose his brother's return. The van Acker Cabinet, despite its majority opposition to Leopold, has initiated steps to curb extremist press discussion of the issue pending final clarification of the King's decision, and Leopold has asked his brother to continue as Regent for the time being.

Present indications are that the King will decide either for or against abdication in the near future. If he insists on returning, the present van Acker Cabinet will resign. Leopold's stubbornness, however, may lead him to disregard the opposition and attempt to justify himself before Parliament or demand a popular vote on the question of his resumption of power. Whatever course he now follows, short of abdication, it appears probable that he will impair the traditional position of the Belgian Crown as a symbol of national unity.

If Leopold abdicates, it appears certain that the regency under Prince Charles will be continued until Leopold's eldest son reaches the age of 18. Despite the opposition to Leopold the great majority of the Belgians favor a monarchical form of government. Even the Communists and Socialists seem to regard the monarchy as a necessary evil. They join their fellow-countrymen in recognizing that a country so sharply divided along religious and national lines must retain an institution which, in theory at least, stands for the whole against the parts.

Prince Charles, a bachelor with the reputation of a *bon vivant*, showed little interest in politics prior to Belgian liberation and has wide popular support. When faced with deportation to Germany in 1944, he took to the *maquis*. He is thoroughly pro-Allied and apparently on excellent terms with his Premier and Cabinet.

Opposition to Leopold, however, is based on a number of considerations, some of which stem back as far as 1936. In that year Leopold personally directed his country's shift from a policy of military alliance with France to one of neutrality. Though this step met with public approval at the time, the fact that he then overstepped the limits of his position as constitutional monarch now is held against him.

Belgium's capitulation to Germany in 1940 encouraged further charges against him. Though Belgians generally concede that he could not have prevented the surrender of his armies, many of them still believe that he should have attempted to escape capture by the Germans, as he was then advised by his ministers. Instead of serving in exile as the symbol of Belgian independence, Leopold elected as commander in chief to remain in Brussels and surrender his military forces. Some Belgians also criticize him for not ordering his soldiers to destroy their equipment which under the circumstances was immediately available for use against the British and French.

Leopold's role during the occupation gave rise to further complaints. A few days after capitulation, he urged the Belgian people to go back to work. Whether it was his intention to encourage economic collaboration

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with the Germans, his instructions had that effect, and since liberation economic collaborationists have used Leopold's instructions to excuse having done business with the invader. Leopold is also charged with failure to give any encouragement to the resistance forces under the occupation and with failure to protest and intervene with sufficient vigor on behalf of deported Belgian workers.

Behind all these relatively personal accusations, there exists a firm foundation of political hostility to the King. There can be little doubt that he believed that Germany had won the war and that among his personal entourage there were a number who welcomed this prospect and looked forward to the establishment of an authoritarian regime in Belgium. As a result Leopold has become for many liberal Belgians a symbol of collaborationism, authoritarianism, and reaction.

His association with *Flamingantisme* (the defense of the Flemish cause), dating back to prewar days, has incurred the opposition of Walloons. His decision to marry while a prisoner of war and his selection of a commoner as wife earned him a fair measure of general criticism. The fact that he married at a time when Walloon soldiers were still prisoners although Flemish prisoners had already been released, further intensified Walloon hostility in particular.

On the other hand, Leopold's supporters among Catholic and conservative circles praise his decision to remain with his men as a brave act and argue that he took no positive step to assist the Germans. They maintain that by remaining in the country he insured the maximum possible freedom for his people and spared them Nazi administration under a *Gauleiter*.

Behind such defenses of Leopold's personal actions, however, lie strong political and national motives. The Catholic Church in Belgium has been the King's strongest supporter and closest ally since the revolution of 1830 created Belgium. That revolution in part was a Catholic revolt against the Protestant House of Orange. The conservatives of the Catholic Party likewise see in the King a protector of the traditional social order and a bulwark against Communism, separatism, and every other form of radicalism.

Until recently the supporters and critics of the King appeared about equally divided while a considerable body of the people held a neutral position. The intensity of the current opposition to Leopold, however, appears to be encouraging an increasing number of people of many shades of opinion to regard Leopold as a symbol of Belgian division instead of Belgian unity.

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