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**NATION AND STATE IN THE BELGIAN REVOLUTION  
1787-1790**

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PhD Thesis  
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2015

# THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Today, Belgium is an oft-cited example of a “fabricated state” with no real binding national identity. The events of 1787-1790 illustrate a surprisingly strong rebuttal to this belief. Between 1787 and 1790, the inhabitants of the Southern Netherlands protested the majority of reforms implemented by their sovereign Joseph II of Austria. In ten independent provinces each with their own administration and assembly of Estates, a resistance movement grew and its leaders eventually raised a patriot army over the summer of 1789. This force chased the imperial troops and administration from all the provinces except Luxembourg, allowing the conservative Estates and their supporters to convene a Congress at Brussels, which hosted a central government to the new United States of Belgium. By November 1790, however, infighting between democrats and conservatives and international pressures allowed Leopold II, crowned Emperor after his brother’s death in February, to easily reconquer the provinces.

This thesis investigates the moment in which “Belgianness,” rather than provincial distinctions, became a prevailing identification for the Southern Netherlands. It tracks the transition of this national consciousness from a useful collaboration of the provinces for mutual legal support to a stronger, more emotional appeal to a Belgian identity that deserved a voice of its own. It adds a Belgian voice to the dialogue about nations before the nineteenth century, while equally complicating the entire notion of a nation. Overall, the thesis questions accepted paradigms of the nation and the state and casts Belgium and the Belgians as a strong example that defies the normal categories of nationhood. It examines how the revolutionaries—the Estates, guilds, their lawyers, the Congress, and bourgeois democratic revolutionaries—demonstrated a growing sense of “Belgianness,” in some ways overriding their traditional provincial attachments. I rely on pamphlet literature and private correspondence for the majority of my evidence, focusing on the elite’s cultivation and use of national sentiment throughout the revolution.

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## INTRODUCTION: BELGIUM AND NATIONALISM THEORY

Today, Belgium is an oft-cited example of a “fabricated state” with no real binding national identity.<sup>1</sup> The events of 1787-1790 are a surprisingly strong rebuttal to this belief. Over the course of those years, the inhabitants of the Southern Low Countries<sup>2</sup> systematically protested against the majority of reforms implemented by their sovereign Joseph II of Austria. In ten independent provinces,<sup>3</sup> each with its own administration and assembly of Estates, a resistance movement grew, and the leaders of these movements eventually raised a combined patriot army over the summer of 1789. This force chased the imperial troops and administration from all the provinces except Luxembourg, allowing the conservative Estates and their supporters to convene a Congress at Brussels, which hosted the central government of the new United States of Belgium. By November 1790, however, infighting between democrats and conservatives, along with international pressures, allowed Leopold II, recently crowned Emperor after his brother’s death in February of the same year, to reconquer the provinces easily.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Carl Strikwerda asserts that Belgium “owed its existence as a state only to several accidents of history,” and that “the new state survived . . . only when the great powers agreed to prevent its annexation by either France or the Netherlands.” Sébastien Dubois begins his book investigating the origins of Belgium as a nation-state with the premise that Belgium “only exists since [1830], that it is an ‘artificial’ creation due to the ingenuity of the great powers wanting to preserve European equilibrium.” R. Swennen, a Liégeois pundit, wrote in 1980, “Belgium was never really a nation and was born from a compromise among powers, without possessing that was its own.” Quoted in Jacques Logie, *1830: De la régionalisation à l’indépendance*. (Paris: Éditions Duculot, 1980), 216. Strikwerda *A House Divided: Catholics, Socialists, and Flemish Nationalists in Nineteenth-Century Belgium* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 28, and Dubois, *L’invention de la Belgique: Genèse d’un État-Nation, 1648-1830* (Brussels: Éditions Racine, 2005), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as the Belgian Provinces or Austrian Netherlands and differentiated from their northern counterparts which then made up the United Provinces.

<sup>3</sup> The two most important, economically and politically, were Brabant (home to Brussels, Antwerp, and the university at Leuven) and Flanders (home to Ghent). The other eight were Hainaut, Namur, Tournai and Tournesis, Malines (Mechelen), West Flanders, Gueldre, Limbourg, and Luxembourg.

The Belgian revolution of 1789-1790 is an understudied episode—certainly in the Anglophone world—of what is known as the “Age of Revolution.” What little has been written on the Belgian resistance to Joseph II’s reforms exists mainly as entries in larger volumes.<sup>4</sup> While a fair amount of attention was paid to the men involved and the key events of the revolution during the first few decades of the twentieth century—most significantly by Suzanne Tassier—less attention has been devoted to the Belgians and their revolution since then, aside from a few very good articles, a series of colloquia held in Belgium in the 1980s, and an important study of Brussels between 1787 and 1793 by Janet Polasky.<sup>5</sup> Piecing these accounts together gives a fairly complete timeline of the revolution; however, as the French eventually overran and annexed the provinces in 1795, little effort has been made to investigate the deeper implications of the Belgians’ struggle. Outside Belgium itself, the story of the revolution has yet to be seen as much more than a footnote to the French Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For example, chapters in Henri Pirenne’s seminal *Histoire de la Belgique*, 7 volumes published in Brussels between 1899 and 1932 (now in various editions), and in two volumes edited by Harvé Hasquin, *La Belgique Autrichienne, 1713-1794* (Brussels: Crédit Communal, 1987) and *La Belgique Française, 1794 - 1815* (Brussels: Crédit Communal, 1993). For a non-Belgian perspective, studies of Joseph himself prove most useful, notably the short volume by T. C. W. Blanning, *Joseph II Profiles in Power* (London: Longman, 1994), and a much deeper study in 2 volumes by Derek Beales, *Joseph II* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987 & 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For Tassier, see specifically *Les Démocrates belges de 1789* (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1930), *Figures Revolutionnaires* (Brussels: la Renaissance du livre, 1944), and *Les Belges et la Révolution française, 1789-1793* (Brussels: Impr. médicale et scientifique, 1934). See also Jan Craeybeckx, “The Brabant Revolution: a Conservative Revolt in a Backward Country?,” *Acta Historiae Neerlandica*, no. 9 (1970): 49-83 — an influential article, refuting many of Tassier’s economic suppositions. Janet Polasky, *Revolution in Brussels, 1787-1793* (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1985). For a more detailed discussion of the revolution in historiography see Janet Polasky, “The Brabant Revolution, ‘a Revolution in Historiographical Perception,’” *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis/ Revue belge d’histoire contemporaine*. Special Issue: Belgian History from Abroad, 35, no. 4 (December 2005): 435-455.

<sup>6</sup> One notable exception to this is Michael Rapport’s article “Belgium Under French Occupation: Between Collaboration and Resistance, July 1794 to October 1795,” *French History* 16, no.1 (2002): 53-82.

Such consignment has obscured one intriguing element of the revolution: its role as the first concrete political expression of a province-wide feeling of “Belgianness.” Henri Pirenne, in his pioneering seven-volume history of Belgium, referred briefly to the unifying moment, positing that in the 1780s, “Old provincial exclusivism itself disappeared.”<sup>7</sup> In his seminal biography of Joseph II, Derek Beales characterizes the inhabitants of the provinces in 1787 as “what was beginning to be possible to regard as ‘the Belgian people’ or ‘the Belgian nation’.”<sup>8</sup> The late Belgian historian Jean Stengers focused most closely on this idea of the revolution as the moment of a “Belgian” national awareness, the first inception of a national feeling. In one of his last works, a two volume investigation into the origins of the Belgian nation, Stengers declares 1789 the beginning of a solid Belgian national identity, an idea first developed in two of his earlier articles.<sup>9</sup> In a 2006 contribution to an edited collection investigating national identities, liberalism, and the post-imperial era, Janet Polasky builds on Stengers’ work, succinctly stating, “Revolutionaries from the nine [Belgian] provinces first identified themselves as Belgians in 1789, laying claim to a heroic national heritage of civic freedom.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, she explains to her readers, “The Belgians had fought as a united nation to expel the Austrian tyrant.”<sup>11</sup> Though this list indicates a general acknowledgement among historians of the revolution that

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<sup>7</sup> Henri Pirenne (1926), 423.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Beales, *Joseph II*, vol. II “Against the World 1780-1790” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 151.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Stengers, *Les racines de la Belgique, Jusqu’à la Révolution de 1830*, vol. 1 in *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918* (Brussels: Éditions Racine, 2000). He first developed the idea in two earlier articles: “La déconstruction de l’État-nation: Le cas Belge,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire* 50 (April-June 1996): 36-54 and “Le mythe des dominations étrangères dans l’historiographie belge,” *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 59 (1981): 382-401.

<sup>10</sup> She speaks of nine provinces, instead of ten, because Luxembourg remained under Austrian control. Janet Polasky, “Liberal Nationalism and Modern Regional Identity: Revolutionary Belgium, 1786-1830,” in Iván Zoltán Dénes, ed. *Liberty and the Search for Identity: Liberal Nationalisms and the Legacy of Empires* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006): 75.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.



1789 was a defining moment for a developing “Belgian people,” there is as yet no in-depth study of the growth of national feeling over the course of the revolution.

Succinctly put, this thesis argues that national identity was relevant with regard to revolution and state creation in Belgium in the late 1780s and 1790.

Canonical works of nationalism studies, including the works of modernists Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson, emphasize the prevalence of factors these scholars associate with “modernity”—economic, social, cultural, and political developments in the nineteenth century—in creating nations and nation-states. As such, more recent works are more useful in contextualizing this thesis. In 1787, members of the Estate, guilds, councils, and other bodies that sent official complaints to Brussels and Vienna were not aiming for independence based on nationalistic feelings demanding a state for a Belgian people. Primarily, they protested that the autonomy to which they had become accustomed be upheld, that Joseph recognize their long-standing status within the Empire that gave the provinces a degree of self-governance. Thus, they paralleled some of the early projects of the Dutch Patriots who engaged in a democratic revolution during the 1780s, who were interested in “restoring and upholding the rights of [cities] and citizens, their privileges and customs.”<sup>12</sup> These patriots were defending their rights as a “nation” in a distinct way, tied to the evolving nature of international relations in the eighteenth century. Ian McBride, in an investigation of international society at the end of the eighteenth century, finds that in the settlement of Utrecht in 1713 (which, among the eleven bilateral treaties concluded, transferred the Southern Netherlands from the Spanish to the Austrian Habsburgs) the various participants were called “‘states’,

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<sup>12</sup> Annie Jourdan describes their aims and methods well in her book *La Révolution batave: entre la France et l’Amérique (1795-1806)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008).

‘nations’ and ‘peoples’” interchangeably. As such, he concludes, “The international agents . . . were neither the dynastic conglomerations of the early modern period nor the national units of the late nineteenth century, but something in between.”<sup>13</sup> In such a fluid environment, where definitions were hard to pin down, room was created for peoples and nations to situate themselves within the changing political atmosphere. This is an important undercurrent in the Belgian revolution. At the start of resistance to Joseph II and his reforms, members of the provincial Estates and councils in the Southern Low Countries reminded their sovereign of their position within his Empire, contrasting their traditions and customs with those of his other holdings, asking Joseph to remember the contracts he had sworn to uphold. In a masterful new look at the origins of nationalism, Caspar Hirschi posits that a nation “interrelates with communities, which are attributed to the same category as one’s own, but perceived as significantly different not only from one’s own, but also from each other’s.”<sup>14</sup> The initial resistance to reform stemmed from wanting to maintain the status quo in the Belgian provinces, and one way the protesters did this was to point out that they were not like some of the Emperor’s other holdings. They were describing themselves as a distinct nation within Joseph’s Empire.

Thus the Belgian revolution, as an episode, resembles what Miroslav Hroch terms the emergence of “national consciousness.” In his 1993 study, Hroch clarifies that nationalist movements are entirely different from the organic growth of a nation: “namely, [nationalism is] that outlook which gives an *absolute priority to the values*

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<sup>13</sup> Ian McBride, “The nation in the age of revolution,” in Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer, eds., *Power and the Nation in European History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 258.

<sup>14</sup> Caspar Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism: An Alternative History from Ancient Rome to Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 13.

*of the nation over all other values and interests.*”<sup>15</sup> The Belgians who helped foment and took part in resistance and revolution were not prioritizing independence and the values of a nation with its own state over everything else. This is not to say that other concerns completely eclipsed notions of national identity or independence; as John Breuille points out, it is not necessarily obvious that “nationalism was rather less important than other concerns, such as material deprivation or dynastic concerns.”<sup>16</sup> Though the revolution precipitated the creation of an independent state (which ultimately failed), an established state for a Belgian nation was initially not what the revolutionaries hoped to achieve. More accurately, their struggle should be seen as an example of the shift between medieval or pre-modern communities and the political nations of the modern era, which involved the downfall of “relics of earlier political autonomy.”<sup>17</sup> Hroch contends that such shifts often “generated tensions between the estates and absolutism that sometimes provided triggers for later national movements.”<sup>18</sup> This is certainly an apt description of the Belgian situation, as the national consciousness awakened in this first revolution proved valuable to the 1830 revolutionaries who successfully created modern-day Belgium.

The Belgian example illustrates an important distinction between purporting to speak for the people and claiming to actually represent the people at large. The former uses “the people” as a rhetorical construct while claims to truly represent the people assume some degree of interaction between representatives and their

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<sup>15</sup> Miroslav Hroch, “From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation: The Nation-building Process in Europe,” *New Left Review* I/198 (March-April 1993): 6. Original emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> John Breuille, “The Response to Napoleon and German Nationalism,” in Alan Forrest and Peter H. Wilson, eds., *The Bee and the Eagle: Napoleonic France and the End of the Holy Roman Empire*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 256.

<sup>17</sup> Hroch, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

constituents. The eighteenth-century Belgian revolutionaries without doubt purported to speak for the entire Belgian people and to have their best interests at heart, but they made no claims to have actually consulted the people, or even to be interested in their specific demands. The revolutionaries did not consult any popular opinion before protesting against Joseph's reforms or regarding independence after legal resistance proved futile, yet they continuously professed to act and speak for the nation. Annie Jourdan contends that, for eighteenth-century revolutionaries in the United Provinces, France, and North America, such emphasis on a national people actively helped create national consciousnesses that eventually emerged from their rebellions.<sup>19</sup> Certainly this was the case for the United Provinces, "which," as she put it, "during the revolutionary years had discovered that they formed a nation."<sup>20</sup>

Though not initially, the Belgian revolutionaries nevertheless did eventually seek an independent state for a Belgian people, a people whose identity was gradually coalescing alongside the traditional provincial identities of the Flemish, Namurois, Hainuyers, Brabantines, and others. The formal creation of the United States of Belgium was a clear expression of that national identity. Abigail Green makes the important point that there was a German nationalism "precisely because nationalists clearly sought a political expression for their national identity in the shape of some kind of nation-state."<sup>21</sup> Breuille's definition of nationalism is also rather useful here, as he describes a "three-fold claim that: (a) a nation exists; (b) this nation is a source of special value and loyalty; and (c) this nation should be as

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<sup>19</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Annie Jourdan, "The Netherlands in the constellation of the eighteenth-century Western revolutions," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 18, no.2 (2011): 213.

<sup>21</sup> Abigail Green, "Political Institutions and Nationhood in Germany, 1750-1914," in Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer, eds., *Power and the Nation in European History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 326.

autonomous as possible.”<sup>22</sup> While construction of a modern nation-state was not a concern of the Belgian revolutionaries, the overall point is salient. Though the revolutionaries in the provinces were not attempting to create the kind of nation-state which would emerge and dominate in the next century, by the summer of 1789, when they were recruiting a grass-roots army, the Belgian patriots were seeking “a political expression of their national identity in the shape of some kind of” independent state compatible with the Europe they knew; they were engaging in the idea of a new, Belgian nation.

The act of creating the United States of Belgium in January 1790 was a decidedly nationalistic undertaking. First and foremost, the creation of a state spoke to a belief in the existence of a “Belgium” in a political sense—Breuille’s first prerequisite that “a nation exists.” Despite the loose, confederated nature of the central state the framers of the United States of Belgium created in 1790—an indication of the continued importance of regionalism—they did create a government that wielded certain powers above those of the individual provinces. Local interests and identities did not need to be eradicated in order for a national feeling to exist, and even grow, as Green and Breuille convincingly argue in the German case. Indeed, the regional authorities could strengthen their own case for sovereignty and authority by tapping into and supporting a national identity. The way this process worked in the Belgian provinces demonstrates the reality of Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer’s assertion that “nationalism got under way well before the creation of a central nation-state.”<sup>23</sup> The activity of the three years prior to the formation of the

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<sup>22</sup> Breuille, “The Response to Napoleon and German Nationalism,” 257.

<sup>23</sup> Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer, “Introduction” in Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer, eds., *Power and the Nation in European History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 22.

national Congress, notably the armed rebellion of 1789, had helped create the national sentiments that enabled the revolutionaries to contemplate and then create an independent central government. The national consciousness that emerged and was fed during the resistance and revolution against Joseph II was exactly the transforming force that Scales and Zimmer describe as a major factor in the eventual invention of modern nationalism.

The national feeling embodied in the United States of Belgium and Congress set up in Brussels built on traditional patriotism, which, “whether defined as ‘love of country’ or ‘loyalty to one’s fatherland and institutions,’” played an important role in the revolution against Joseph II.<sup>24</sup> As Jourdan explains, over the course of the eighteenth century, patriotism remained tied to love of and desire to protect one’s homeland while “the nation [was] practically perceived as a person,” a “subject” to which the homeland became an “object.”<sup>25</sup> Traditional notions of patriotism have their roots in Ancient Rome, according to Hirschi, and largely revolve around civic duties to the fatherland. In the medieval and early modern periods, this Roman civic patriotism was clumsily translated to entire polities.<sup>26</sup> National movements therefore had a broad patriotic base from which to build, since patriotism as an “object” could be used to feed the growing “person” of the nation. Importantly, the differences between nationalism and patriotism do not form a strict dichotomy. Rather, there are porous borders between nationalism and patriotism; states use the former as a socio-political tool that differentiates from foreign entities while the latter encompasses a more nebulous feeling of love for and loyalty to one’s immediate homeland. While it

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>25</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Hirschi, 11.

is important not to equate loose adherence to being “Belgian” with a mass nationalism, the differences between patriotism and nationalism need not create an atmosphere of mutual exclusion, particularly since this thesis argues for a different kind of nationalism.<sup>27</sup>

The national feeling that formed and grew during the Belgian revolution was a strengthened form of patriotism, a growing loyalty to a broader identity elites invoked in order to create political unity among the provinces. The identity that emerged was a Belgian sentiment that crossed provincial lines. The Belgian revolutionaries were attaching political significance to a national body, which superseded and worked with the several provinces and was to be independent of any other political power or empire. This correlates to Green and Breuille’s discussion of the dual power between central and territorial state powers, which ultimately did not come into conflict, since both sought to engender and then use a feeling of German nationalism and cultural identity. The territorial states, rather than opposing a comprehensive German identity, sought to somewhat undermine the central state’s authority by “offer[ing] an alternative political channel through which this national feeling could express itself.”<sup>28</sup> Those in power in the separate Belgian provinces similarly sought to maintain their own authority and identity, but did not oppose the creation of a central state as such. Indeed, their support of the new United States of Belgium fostered the budding Belgian identity.

This support for new national identity through the central Belgian state queries the importance of Belgianness vis-à-vis provincial identity. As Scales and

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<sup>27</sup> Sébastien Dubois includes an interesting linguistic discussion on the differences between the words *peuple*, *nation*, *patrie*, and *nationalisme* and *patriotisme* in his book’s first chapter, “État, Nation, Patrie,” in *L’invention de la Belgique*, especially pages 39-46.

<sup>28</sup> Green, 326.

Zimmer declare, the “relative *importance* of the pre-modern nation is, to say the least, never other than a hard and speculative task.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it is ultimately impossible to quantify just how much provincial loyalty either trumped or ceded to the new national identity. What is possible is to determine whether a national identity emerged and garnered strength. In late eighteenth-century Europe, nationalism and patriotism, while different, were closely intertwined; Scales and Zimmer argue that patriotism before 1800 was usually “focused on a particular town or region rather than on an entire nation.”<sup>30</sup> While they dutifully provide the caveat that such local focus was not *always* the case, the Belgian example is an exception to their main point. The patriotism fostered by the revolutionaries in the revolution of 1787-1790 did extend to the entire nation, transforming itself and being transformed into a national sentiment. Pamphleteers, both anonymous and official writers for government bodies, flexibly invoked love for their individual provinces as well as for the Belgian nation as a whole, particularly after the creation of the United States of Belgium in 1790. The focus of resistance to Joseph’s reforms moved from the collectivity of independent provinces to a surprovincial Belgian identity, most clearly politically manifested in the central government set up in 1790. This is not to say, however, that by the end of the revolution Belgians no longer felt any provincial attachments or that there was a clear conception of what it meant to be a member of the new Belgian nation with a state.

After the conservative members of the Estates General officially inaugurated the United States of Belgium, with themselves as members of the new Congress, debate raged in the provincial pamphlet literature as to the nature of government for

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<sup>29</sup> Scales and Zimmer, “Introduction,” 12-13.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 19.



the new country. In their writings, each new pamphleteer declared his patriotism and commitment to the revolution's cause. Many invoked historical myths and narratives, tools Oliver Zimmer highlights in his examinations of Swiss national identity. While he admits, "we can hardly speak of a popular Swiss nationalism before the nineteenth century," Zimmer underlines the prevalence of "historical myths and narratives" that began to bind the populace together in the eighteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, as Marc Lerner shows, the experiences of the eighteenth century contributed to the strong federal state the Swiss created in 1848. The constitution of that year "reflected the rights-based political culture that emerged in Europe during the Age of Revolution" as well as "an accommodation with older customary notions and rhetoric of self-rule."<sup>32</sup> As such, "The new constitution did not create a unitary radical state, but claimed to respect—to a degree—the traditions of those who sought continuity with the Old Confederation."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in the Dutch case, out of the revolutionary movement of the 1780s, "a new democratic and republican culture was born, even though the old order was not entirely overthrown."<sup>34</sup> Old traditions and respect for the past were of prime importance to eighteenth-century revolutionaries.

Similar processes were at work in Belgium, where the eighteenth-century pamphlet writers regularly referenced medieval monarchs—especially the Bourgogne family—and even Roman characterizations of the Belgians to tell the story of the history of a Belgian nation. Zimmer notes that myths do not need to be

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<sup>31</sup> Oliver Zimmer, "Competing Memories of the Nation: Liberal Historians and the Reconstruction of the Swiss Past 1870-1900," *Past & Present* 168 (August 2000): 206.

<sup>32</sup> Marc H. Lerner, *A Laboratory of Liberty: The Transformation of Political Culture in Republican Switzerland, 1750-1848*, Studies in Central European Histories, eds. Thomas A. Brady, Jr. and Roger Chickering (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Jourdan, "The Netherlands in the constellation of the eighteenth-century Western revolutions," 203.

true to be effective, and he quotes Johann Jakob Bodmer, writing in 1775: “[Myths] can nonetheless have the desired impact on peoples’ minds, by instilling repugnance to tyrants, and in teaching an esteem for the value of liberty and the rights of the people.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, it was not important that a Belgian pamphleteer be entirely accurate, only that he effectively create a sense of common past that could reinforce the developing national sentiment.

Importantly, the flexibility of origin myths remains true in the face of revolutionary factions. Lerner describes the Swiss situation in which different factions had varying “interpretations of liberty and self-rule,” and these differences precipitated a situation where political actors “engaged in public debate and the crafting of political culture.”<sup>36</sup> In turn, these diverse Swiss nationalists, Zimmer points out, “rallied behind opposing conceptions of community and interpreted the core myths differently, [but] both referred to the same constitutive myths and legends in seeking to advance their claims.”<sup>37</sup> In the Belgian case, both democrats and traditionalists in the provinces quoted Caesar, pointed to medieval examples of governance and sovereignty, and invoked the same constitutions to make opposing points. They argued violently—both on paper and in the street, as many democrats fled into exile in the face of threats of physical violence—about this new Belgian identity, but they clung to the same stories to construct it, something which I examine in more detail in the fifth chapter of this thesis. That the revolutionaries never came to a definitive answer about what it means to be Belgian is more due to the sudden tragic denouement to the Belgian independence experiment than to

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<sup>35</sup> Zimmer, “Competing Memories of the Nation,” 206.

<sup>36</sup> Lerner, *A Laboratory of Liberty*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Zimmer, “Competing Memories of the Nation,” 209.

inherent flaws in the formation of Belgianness itself. Jourdan casts the Dutch case in a similar fashion, asserting, “The final failure of the Batavian Revotluion certainly does not mean that there were no actual revolutions in the Netherlands or that their outcomes were fruitless.”<sup>38</sup>

The way Belgian pamphleteers used origin myths appealed to a broad audience and included the mass population in forming conceptions of a Belgian identity; yet their discourse remained part of what Breuilly designates the sphere of elite concerns, primarily centered on political construction and administration.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Hirschi contends that nationalists used language that invoked the people at large regardless of whether mass popular support was being courted. The Belgian example bears his point out, as the conservative revolutionaries who sought to preserve the *ancien régime* had little interest in what the masses actually wanted, yet participated in the production of a national discourse that sought to bind inhabitants from all the Belgian provinces together. Breuilly’s elite national discourse was alive and well during the Belgian revolution. To use Hirschi’s expression, they “were looking for . . . access to power, not necessarily popular support.”<sup>40</sup> The conservative revolutionaries in Brussels, Ghent, Namur, Mons, and the other provincial capitals did little to try to inspire the rural population to believe in a Belgianness, yet their pamphlets did speak of a Belgian identity that would hold the provinces together.

The traditionalist revolutionaries largely relied on parish priests to incite the population of the countryside into action, whether against imperial troops or democratic campaigners, when they needed violent shows of patriotism to drive

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<sup>38</sup> Jourdan, “The Netherlands in the constellation of the eighteenth-century Western revolutions,” 213.

<sup>39</sup> Breuilly, “The Response to Napoleon and German Nationalism,” 267-268.

<sup>40</sup> Hirschi, 16.

enemies out. Yet, these revolutionaries had little interest in actually empowering peasants or the illiterate masses. What they wanted was to harness the power of a Belgian nation to negotiate for independence within Europe. Despite manipulating the populace in a utilitarian manner and refusing to consider any changes to representation or the franchise, conservative writers showed a clear conviction that the Estates and eventual Congress spoke for the entire Belgian nation. Even the democrats, who wrote more often of the universal ideals exhibited by the Americans and Parisians, offered only limited, conservative versions of new representation or expanded franchise; yet their belief in the Belgian nation and its cultural, political identity was real, and it continued to grow as more voices entered the debate about what it meant to be Belgian. These eighteenth-century revolutionaries wrote that they spoke for the nation, and in so doing they helped to create it.<sup>41</sup>

To be sure, the conservative Belgian revolutionaries' understanding of nationhood required no popular consultation. Their idea of representation and the nation allowed them to speak for the country—for the people—on the basis that they were members of the elite ruling class; they naturally would have the people's interests at heart and they would know best. They were empowered by the sovereignty of the nation, but that power and sovereignty remained in the abstract and did not need to be physically demonstrated by the masses. In this sense, these Belgian conservatives were comparable to Abigail Green's early nineteenth-century Prussian authorities, who "wished to mobilise popular enthusiasm for specific purposes, but not to politicise the people."<sup>42</sup> The Belgian revolutionaries wished to foster an armed rebellion against the Habsburg Emperor who had violated his

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<sup>41</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 12.

<sup>42</sup> Green, 321.

contracts, but they did not want to invest the population at large with political power or democratic political ideals along the lines of the American or French Revolutions.

The Belgianness emerging in 1789 and 1790 remained un-defined and the state the revolutionaries created—which had not been their initial goal—ultimately failed. Prasenjit Duara proposes to “view national identity as founded upon fluid relationships; it thus both resembles and is interchangeable with other political identities.”<sup>43</sup> He rightly posits that nationalism is not a definite phenomenon that whips a community into a fever-pitched bid for independence, but rather that it consists of a dialogue in which different ideas of what and who forms the nation are engaged in conversation with each other. The Belgian revolutionaries engaged in such conversations, the different factions vying for position as most patriotic and most representative of the nation.<sup>44</sup> Duara criticizes Gellner and Anderson specifically for their perception of “national identity as a distinctive mode of consciousness: the nation as a whole imagining itself to be the unified subject of history.”<sup>45</sup> This denies a sense of unity to communities before the modern era and insists on a “cohesive subjectivity” that forces nations to be either modern or

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<sup>43</sup> Prasenjit Duara, “Historicizing National Identity, or Who Imagines What and When,” unpublished essay outlining some ideas on the relationship between nationalism and history that are more fully developed in *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 151.

<sup>44</sup> There is a lot of literature on this subject with regard to the French, and to a lesser extent, the American revolutions. For an example of each, see Michael Rapport *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France: The Treatment of Foreigners 1789-1799* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), and an article about American rebel prisoners of war in Britain during the War for Independence by Francis D. Cogliano “‘We All Hoisted the American Flag:’ National identity among American Prisoners in Britain during the American Revolution” (*Journal of American Studies* 32 no.1 (April 1998): 19-37. Marc Lerner also addresses it with regard to the Swiss during between 1750 and 1848 in *A Laboratory of Liberty*. For Ian McBride, in his contribution to Scales and Zimmer’s volume, Hobsbawm’s conception that “state = nation = people” (which is echoed in much of the modernist literature) comes directly from the French Revolution. As the Irish historian puts it, “The French Revolution has been accorded a pivotal role in the emergence of nationalism by almost every standard work on the subject.” (248)

<sup>45</sup> Duara, 153.

classified as something else entirely. As such, “the manner in which we have conceptualized political identities is fundamentally problematic.”<sup>46</sup> Though there have been studies that seek to separate nations and nationalism, more needs to be done in supporting Duara’s suppositions to highlight the ability of a political, national consciousness to exist without needing an independent state as its ultimate goal.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, while the 1789 Belgian revolution and the national consciousness it engendered align fairly well with newer theories like those espoused by Hroch, Duara, and Hirschi, the fit is not perfect. Hroch’s definition of a nation posits “a large social group integrated not by one but by a combination of several kinds of objective relationships (economic, political, linguistic, cultural, religious, geographical, historical), and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness.”<sup>48</sup> In his delineation of the factors that bind a nation together, Hroch includes “a density of linguistic or cultural ties.”<sup>49</sup> In Hirshi’s conception, language is the third of three main, general pillars of the construction and representation of realities in the history of nations.<sup>50</sup> While religion was fairly homogenous within the Southern Netherlands and could tie the inhabitants of the ten provinces to each other, language could not. Adrian Hastings asserts that, with regard to the emergence of nationhood, “territory itself may provide the basic criterion in one case, language in another . . . religion may be effectively decisive in a third.”<sup>51</sup> In his study of the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Most prominent would be Julia Kristeva’s *Nations without Nationalism*, Leon S. Roudiez, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>48</sup> Hroch, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> The first and second are the identity of the citizen and national stereotypes.

<sup>51</sup> Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 25.

origins of nations, Hastings contends that, especially in the Netherlands, “nationalism largely took over from religion.”<sup>52</sup> Especially given the important Protestant/Catholic distinctions between the Belgian Southern Netherlands and Dutch United Provinces, religion was an important factor in binding the Belgians together, something which the revolutionaries realized and used to their advantage. Still, by the eighteenth century, the inhabitants of the Southern Netherlands did not practice a religion different from that of the French nation to their south, or the independent Episcopate of Liège in their midst. And yet, a national consciousness that bound the provinces together and distinguished them from those around them did grow throughout the provinces over the course of their revolution.

Ultimately, the Belgian national consciousness that grew out of the resistance to Joseph II’s reforms does not fit any complete paradigm of the nation, nationalism, or a definitive national identity. The protagonists of this eighteenth-century revolution were caught between phases of a national consciousness and modern nationalism. In revisiting the question of nations and nationalism in Europe, this thesis helps complicate the linear, traditional image of the “progression” of a nation and questions accepted paradigms of the nation and the state, while it adds a Belgian voice to the dialogue about nations before the nineteenth century.

In many ways, the value of the Belgian revolution lies not in the novelty of examining an obscure historic episode, nor in its hand in complicating the radical-conservative revolutionary binary that has persisted since the days of R.R. Palmer and his *Age of the Democratic Revolution*. What the revolution of the Belgian provinces in the eighteenth century does is highlight the very real gray area of

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 28.

nationalism studies, bridging the gap between modernists and those who want to find nations in the pre-modern era. To call Belgium and the Belgians an example of a “proto-nation,” as Hobsbawm would, goes too far. To use such a term denies legitimacy to the national feeling that came out of the 1789 revolution. This thesis investigates the development of that identity over the course of the first Belgian revolution on its own terms.

To begin, an understanding of the situation of the provinces as Joseph II came to the throne will be useful. Chapter one offers a detailed look at how the provinces fit into the Austrian Empire and why Joseph sought to reform them after 1780. The second chapter investigates the intellectual resistance from the various provincial bodies from 1787, when the Emperor announced his substantial administrative reforms, until 1789, when he annulled the provincial charters and constitutions. It focuses on how the resistance over those two years fostered unity among the provinces. Chapter three looks at the events of the armed revolution—its preparation in the spring and summer of 1789, and the military campaign against imperial troops in the fall of that year and how a sense of Belgain-ness grew as the patriot army gathered strength. Chapters four and five consider the independence of the provinces, the creation of a central government in the United States of Belgium, the quarrel over how that state should be conceived and governed, and the broader disagreements about how to define Belgain-ness. The final chapter looks at the reasons for the revolution’s disintegration, focusing on the international situation and the Belgians’ failure to maintain their independence. The resistance begun in 1787 fostered cooperation among the provinces that eventually grew into a pan-provincial, Belgian feeling. As the pamphlet writers and provincial bodies began to call themselves



Belgian more often, the creation of the United States of Belgium helped solidify the national consciousness aroused by the recruitment of the patriot army. Throughout these six chapters, the growth of that national consciousness over the course of the resistance and revolution is consistently charted.

The Belgian revolution of the eighteenth century ultimately failed. Though the patriot army successfully chased imperial troops and administration from the provinces and the Estates set up a central government for the United States of Belgium, no lasting independent state ensued. However, there is still a success story to tell: the revolution created a spirit of unity and a national consciousness that remained and would continue to develop in the nineteenth century.

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Throughout the thesis, all translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated. I have kept punctuation and spellings intact where the eighteenth-century transcription does not distract from the text's meaning. Where there are conventional Anglicized versions of place names, I have used these (Ghent is a prime example), but otherwise I have tried to use the name most commonly used by a place's inhabitants. Thus, Leuven, which is today the capital of Flemish Brabant, retains its Flemish name rather than the French Louvain.

## CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE STAGE: THE CONTEXT OF THE BELGIAN PROVINCES AND JOSEPH II'S REFORMS

“Governed according to their own laws, assured of the control of their property and their personal liberty, paying only moderate taxes that they impose on themselves, the Belgians enjoy the precious gifts of a free constitution.” – *Prince Kaunitz, State Chancellor to Maria Theresa and Joseph II*<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

The resistance that emerged in the Belgian provinces in 1787 and grew into an armed bid for independence stemmed from a fundamental difference of opinion regarding provincial political autonomy between ruler and ruled. Many of Joseph II's reforms were, in fact, progressive, meant to streamline administration and bring the territories into organized harmony with the rest of the Habsburg Empire; indeed, the bulk of the Emperor's reforms had significant support.<sup>2</sup> Yet in 1787, the administrative bodies of the ten Belgian provinces mounted a sharp resistance. Provincial Estates, Bishops, and Councils wrote formal grievances protesting against the new measures. In December 1786, students at the University of Leuven had rioted, damaging buildings and disquieting the neighborhood.<sup>3</sup> Just over two years later, revolutionaries raised a native army and drove Austrian soldiers and officials from the Belgian territories. How did the situation develop so rapidly? Why were the new Emperor's reforms so distasteful?

The answer lies in the history of the provinces and the context of the reforms, and is linked to how the people living in the Southern Netherlands identified themselves within the wider Empire. During the resistance, and throughout what

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Janet Polasky, “Liberal Nationalism and Modern Regional Identity,” 76.

<sup>2</sup> Polasky offers a concise discussion of European and Belgian support of Joseph's “courage and vision” in implementing state reforms. As she puts it, “The Emperor had become the hero of Voltaire and d'Alembert's disciples; Joseph seemed an ideal philosopher-king.” [*Revolution*, 42-43.]

<sup>3</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 505.

became the revolution, authors published an astounding volume of pamphlets, broadsides, and letters, condemning the actions of a wayward sovereign who clearly did not understand his Belgian subjects. A lack of understanding is, in fact, the crux of the early resistance in 1787. The fact that the Belgians felt their sovereign comprehensively misunderstood them raises several important questions about how they saw themselves, and offers an appropriate starting point from which to investigate Belgian identity at the end of the eighteenth century. The details of that question are the subject of the next chapter, but the reverse question, explored in this chapter, is equally important. How did Joseph and his advisors see their Belgian possessions? What motivated the Emperor to implement reforms in the Southern Netherlands after 1780?

In the eighteenth century, the political map of Europe was rapidly changing. Britain was growing in strength and Prussia had proven herself capable of defeating the powerful Habsburg Empire. The old Empire needed to renew itself. Shifting allegiances, the rise of Prussia, and war with the Turks all required an Austrian Empire that could not only survive but also compete with the other European powers. Maria Theresa of Austria had begun the process of reform during her reign (October 1740 – November 1780). Immediate concerns of the war waged upon her accession drove the changes her government implemented, and in general they only addressed the most central regions of her Empire. Joseph II's mother understood the varied personalities of the people and states she ruled, and utilized diplomacy and moderation in her remodeling efforts. These included her efforts vis-à-vis the Church, where she exhibited a "genuine awareness of the variations in the state of

monasticism within her dominions.”<sup>4</sup> Maria Theresa earned her status as a beloved ruler through respect for local differences in custom, as can be seen in her statements to her son concerning the Belgian provinces:

In the essentials of the constitution and form of government of this province, I do not believe that anything needs changing. It is the only happy province, and it has provided us with so many resources. You know how these peoples value their ancient, even absurd, prejudices. If they are obedient and loyal and contribute more than our impoverished and discontented German lands, what more can one ask of them?<sup>5</sup>

She may have disapproved of many of their “absurd” practices, but Maria Theresa was wise enough to leave them primarily to their own devices.

Her son was not so prudent. Joseph’s reforms, faster paced and in many ways further-reaching than his mother’s programs, were motivated by more than the pragmatic needs Maria Theresa had first identified upon gaining the throne. His convictions were in large part a product of his character, including his intense belief in the sanctity and importance of the state. It is important to remember that the Emperor was not singling out the territories; he was in fact bringing them into line with his other holdings, attempting to create a unified state that would be easier to defend—and easier to control. The provinces’ unique histories, however, did not allow for such abrupt changes, especially after it became apparent that Joseph had little patience for the assorted local bodies, customs, and laws, all requiring consultation about any new measure to be executed. The resulting discord brought about resistance and then armed revolt in a group of territories long accustomed to

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<sup>4</sup> Derek Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 184.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Blanning, 137. See also Beales, *Joseph*, 137. Again, we see the overarching collectivity of the provinces, imagined as a unit by their sovereign in Vienna, yet still divided as she refers to their “peoples” in the plural.

being ruled by a distant—and slightly disinterested—sovereign. The origins of the revolution lie in the confrontation of the power structures of the provinces (fashioned with care over the centuries and having acquired privileges and rights as feudal territories faded into centralized states) with a head-strong monarch whose primary goal was the consolidation of his holdings for the sake of the imperial good. This chapter explores the origins of the Belgian Revolution in the history of the provinces—their social, economic, and political structures upon Joseph’s rise to power, as well as the Emperor’s own motivations and the Viennese reforms that caused such unrest.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROVINCES

Well before the eighteenth century, multi-layered systems of local and regional offices, each with their own particular interests, were firmly entrenched in the area today known as Belgium. The political divisions had roots stretching back to the age of Julius Caesar, who called the tribes who inhabited the area Belgae. Indeed, in his own account of the Gallic War, Caesar proclaimed, “Of all these [Gallic] peoples the Belgae are the most courageous,” a statement Belgians happily repeated with pride well into the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> By that time, “Belgium” had long been unfortunately situated in a “battlefield for European armies ... [the territories] saw their borders redrawn, from war to war, depending on the balance of power.”<sup>7</sup>

Combined with a dense population, the pressures of constant warfare increased “the

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<sup>6</sup> Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. H. J. Edwards (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 3. What the Belgians did not care to repeat was the rest of the Roman general’s clause: “because they are farthest removed from the culture and civilization of the [Roman] province [Gallia Narbonensis]”.

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Thérèse Bitsch, *Histoire de la Belgique*, Nations d’Europe (Hatier, 1992), 10.

dependence of still-fragile polities on the small group of elites in possession of the administrative, judicial, military, and financial know-how and resources vital to state expansion.”<sup>8</sup> These elites were competitors with the Church, which had an equally deep-rooted influence in society and political life. As church and state evolved over the centuries, and their relationship to each other changed, increasing lay control over ecclesiastic matters (including land and appointment of offices) led to “innovative ideas” of organization. The most well known of these is perhaps the “tripartite theory of society” that produced the three Estates system, in which the Church, nobility, and some aspect of bourgeois life (often privileged towns or corporations) each had their own voice. This would eventually lead to jealous guarding of privileges in the centuries to come, as “elites were in turn able to exploit their strong position, a position only strengthened by periods of extended warfare, to lay the groundwork for the future appropriation of vital state functions.”<sup>9</sup> Eventually, these systems created a mammoth bureaucracy that sustained “permanent officials at both the national and local levels engaged in purely clerical and administrative tasks.”<sup>10</sup> Such a culture of privilege pervaded the Southern Netherlands by the end of the eighteenth century, proving Michael Rapport’s assertion (referring to France, but equally applicable in the provinces) that, “Privilege defined relationships between the component parts of Ancien Régime society.”<sup>11</sup>

In the fourteenth century, in the midst of constant wars and power changes, the Belgian provinces began to codify their relationships to their given rulers. During

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 36-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-7, 53-4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France*, 33.

the Hundred Years' War, merchants in the Duchy of Flanders secured privileges against their sovereign, who had sided with the French, in favor of trade with England. Though the particular set of protections and stipulations they negotiated did not last more than a decade, the principles therein paved the way for further contracts between powerful provincials and sovereigns who were less and less present in the actual territories.<sup>12</sup> The exception to such piecemeal acquisition of provincial privilege was the Province of Brabant, home to Brussels, whose council of nobles, clergy, and important city representatives (what would become the Estates) secured a wide-reaching *Joyeuse Entrée* from their Duchess Jeanne and her husband Wenceslas of Luxembourg in 1356. It afforded a variety of guarantees to residents, including equality before the law, liberty of language, “the indivisibility of the territory, the exclusive appointment of Brabantines to public service, the prohibition of putting a Brabantine before a foreign tribunal, [and] liberty of commerce and navigation,” among others.<sup>13</sup>

The inhabitants of the various provinces that became the Southern Netherlands were aware of the potential power wielded by local and central governments. That these medieval treaties and reciprocal contracts with sovereigns began to incorporate provisions that certain posts could only be held by natives (or those who had established some kind of permanent residence in the provinces) spoke to a conception of foreigners as distinct. Though the monarchs who ruled the provinces employed foreigners as plenipotentiary ministers or Governors-General, for example—and, indeed, after Charles V the sovereign him-/herself was foreign to

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<sup>12</sup> Bitsch, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Georges-Henri Dumont, *Histoire de Bruxelles* (Brussels: Le Cri, 2005), 35.

the provinces—the medieval contracts explicitly kept all administrative positions within the provinces strictly for natives.<sup>14</sup> While the main reason for such exclusions in the medieval Southern Netherlands was probably economic, clear divisions between Brabantines and foreigners, and the roles they could play in civil society, indicated a complexity of identity, already hinting at some kind of broader political community.

The *Joyeuse Entrée*, tailored to fit each successive sovereign's coronation, would become the cornerstone of Brabantine government. It was, in effect, a “constitution” that gave the residents of the province guarantees against abuses of power by their sovereign in return for their loyalty, usually expressed in monetary or manpower support for military campaigns, and often both.<sup>15</sup> If either side failed in its duties as stipulated, it could terminate the relationship. This contractual element came to be valued above all else by the Brabantines, and the other provinces applied similar logic to their own, somewhat less codified, constitutions, so that by the eighteenth century, the tradition of contractual government lay behind every argument the Belgians made against Joseph II's reforms.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In *ancien régime* France, for example, the crown regularly used foreigners who could be useful at various levels of government. During the French Revolution, “the revolutionary notion of the sovereignty of the nation implied that [foreigners] be excluded from” important posts, certainly in government positions. Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> The term “constitution” is used by the Belgians themselves in the 1780s, and Maria Theresa, in a letter to Joseph II in 1780 referred to the “constitution” of their Belgian holdings, though there is some discussion as to its appropriateness before then. In her concise *Histoire de la Belgique*, Marie-Thérèse Bitsch declares Brabant's *Joyeuse Entrée* a “véritable constitution.” (p.28).

<sup>16</sup> The Belgian historian of the beginning of the twentieth century, Henri Pirenne, insists that, when resistance to Joseph's reforms broke out and the provinces justified their actions, only Brabant's *Joyeuse Entrée* was a legitimate “constitution” that actually defined the rights and obligations of the sovereign. The other provinces, he feels, possessed little more than treaties accumulated over the years that defined the relationship between sovereign and governed. Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique: Des origines à nos jours*, vol. 4 (Brussels: La renaissance du livre, 1952), 424.



It is important to keep in mind that provincial “constitutions” of the fourteenth century were only part of the formula that led to such strong convictions on the part of the Belgians. As they were shifted from sovereign to sovereign over the centuries, the provinces continued to negotiate their status vis-à-vis each new regime. They became part of the Habsburg holdings in 1482 when Marie de Bourgogne, a member of the family that had long owned the provinces, married Maximilien de Habsbourg. This positioned them as part of the vast Spanish realm and in 1548, just before the war in which the northern provinces of the Low Countries gained their independence as the Dutch Republic, the provinces gained autonomous status within the Habsburg Empire.<sup>17</sup> This autonomous position was an important element in the political development of the provinces, as it undoubtedly helped cultivate a sense of collectivity among the provinces, singled out as virtually self-governing.

It was not until the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714) that Madrid transferred the provinces to Vienna’s control, placing them under the rule of the Habsburg cadet branch. Still, the Austrians could not consider the territory “as a conquered country. It had been declared one and indivisible, inalterable and inalienable and the sovereign was obliged to accept the national constitutions.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the treaties that ceded the Spanish Low Countries to the Austrians stipulated that they would be kept intact—they could not separate them were there to

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<sup>17</sup> Bitsch indicates a complete freedom from any legal relationship – “Charles Quint libère l’ensemble des Pays-Bas de tout lien juridique avec l’Empire.” (p.42). Beales describes a situation in which the provinces are “detached from the central core of the Monarchy” and “administered by the Staatskanzlei,” or State Chancellery (rather than the domestically-oriented Staatsrat) under the Austrian Habsburgs (Joseph, p.133).

<sup>18</sup> Piet Lenders, “Vienne et Bruxelles : une tutelle qui n’exclut pas une large autonomie,” in *La Belgique autrichienne 1713-1794 : Les pays-bas méridionaux sous les Habsbourg d’Autriche*, ed. Harvé Hasquin (Brussels: Crédit Communal, 1987), 38.

be exchanges or further treaties—and that the new sovereigns would continue to be bound by the old contracts with each province. Without doubt, the provinces maintained strong political identities independent of each other, as the plural “constitutions” attests. However, as Piet Lenders’ appellation of the contracts as “national” reveals, regionalism and provincialism were beginning to break down at the end of the eighteenth century, and the revolution accelerated their depreciation in favor of a stronger pan-provincial Belgian identity.

The explicit preservation of the Low Countries as an entity in the Treaty of Utrecht would later prove an important point, when the revolutionaries would be able to point not only to their medieval charters and autonomous status but also to the more recent treaties accepted by Joseph’s family upon gaining the territory. Ultimately, historical precedent as well as legal documentation supported the position of the Belgian provinces in the 1780s—a fact that would not be overlooked by the authors of pamphlets and official letters of grievance when Joseph announced his reforms.

#### SITUATION IN THE PROVINCES AT JOSEPH’S ASCENSION

By the time Joseph II assumed complete authority, after the death of his mother in 1780, the situation in the Belgian provinces was relatively stable.<sup>19</sup> Since their transfer to the Austrian Empire, with international agreement on the neutrality

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<sup>19</sup> Though Joseph’s father had died in 1756, he was co-regent of the Monarchy with his mother until her death in 1780. Throughout that time he was Holy Roman Emperor in his own right—as a woman, Maria Theresa was ineligible for the title—but, as T.C.W. Blanning explains, the Monarchy was “where real power was to be found.” Indeed, even “‘co-regent’ proved to be a misnomer, for Maria Theresa always had the last word, usually supported by the third member of the ruling triumvirate, Kaunitz,” who was State Chancellor. The general consensus among historians is that Joseph was quite resentful of his mother’s influence and power, and that he felt frustrated by his inability to enact his own policies for so long. T.C.W. Blanning, *Joseph II*, 50. See also Derek Beales, *Joseph II*, vol. II “Against the World 1780-1790.”

of the territory as of 1733, the Belgians had enjoyed relative peace and prosperity. Aside from “a brief French presence between spring 1745 and January 1749 . . . the Low Countries escaped all conflict and did not have to undergo another foreign invasion before Autumn 1792.”<sup>20</sup> There was no military conscription in the Belgian provinces as part of the Austrian Empire, and they were “one of the most urbanised parts of the world and [were] showing signs of precocious industrial development.”<sup>21</sup> Trade flourished as well, thanks in part to Joseph’s designation of Ostend as a free port after 1781 and the subsequent accumulation of wealth, especially with regard to Belgian participation in the slave trade.<sup>22</sup> The Monarchy estimated the population of the provinces in 1780 at two million, and in 1784 they were home to approximately 2,273,000 inhabitants, with a population density of roughly 82 people per square kilometer, “the highest in Europe.”<sup>23</sup> New industries were developing, especially coal and metallurgy in the south, the rural population was implementing agricultural improvements, and epidemics were generally on the decline, helped by the disappearance of the plague.<sup>24</sup> Out of all the Austrian Habsburgs’ holdings, only Lower Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary surpassed the revenue of the provinces, 6.7 million florins at the time of Joseph’s ascension in 1780.<sup>25</sup> If not for the upheavals of the eighteenth-century revolutions, the Belgian provinces could quite possibly have preempted Great Britain as the site of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Harvé Hasquin, introduction to *La Belgique autrichienne 1713-1794*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 62, 244. See also Bitsch, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 142.

<sup>23</sup> Bitsch, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 247.

<sup>26</sup> Polasky, in *Revolution in Brussels*, and Beales, in *Joseph II*, and Bitsch mention this possibility, basing the assumption on newer economic research done on the provinces in the 1970s and 1980s.

Government structure and administration was slightly different in each province, to allow for local customs and traditions, but overall the ten provinces had the same basic administration. First and foremost, each was independent of the others and maintained separate relationships with Vienna. Joseph II would be crowned Duke of Brabant and Count of Flanders; he was Count of Namur and Duke of Limbourg, and so on.<sup>27</sup> Still, there was a single Governor-General for all the provinces; during Joseph's reign, it was a couple: his sister Maria Christina and her husband Albert de Saxe-Teschen. It was customary that the Governor be a member of the royal family who then "officially exercised sovereign authority in the name of the emperor. He or she promulgated decrees, oversaw the administration of justice, police, and finances, filled offices, and convoked the Estates."<sup>28</sup> Importantly, the Governor-General lived in Brussels, at the heart of the provinces and easily accessible. There was also a common plenipotentiary minister, who served "at the emperor's discretion," and was essentially Vienna's absolute substitute in Brussels, taking orders directly from the Crown rather than possessing more executive powers traditionally granted the Governor.<sup>29</sup> These overarching administrative mechanisms, while not erasing the independent provincial politics and identities, fostered collective identity—as with the 1713 stipulation that the Austrians treat the provinces as an indivisible entity. What emerges is an image of communality among ten independent provinces.

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Most notable is Jan Craeybeckx's article, "The Brabant Revolution: A Conservative Revolt in a Backward Country?"

<sup>27</sup> This added to the provincialism and regionalism prevalent in the provinces, creating a real hurdle for the growth of a "national" Belgian feeling.

<sup>28</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

There were, however, key differences between the provinces' governments. In Brabant, the most powerful of the provinces, there were three councils for administration: the *Conseil d'état*, the *Conseil des finances*, and the *Conseil privé*.<sup>30</sup> Flanders, in contrast, added a smaller denomination of local power in several châtelannies, centered around aristocratic families. The judicial system for each province also differed moderately from one to the other, with varying layers of tribunals and councils, though each did have a central *Conseil de Justice*, often also referred to as the Conseil de Province (i.e. the Conseil de Brabant). Finally, each Province had an assembly of the Estates. In Brabant and Flanders, these could convoke themselves, while the assembly in Namur had to have permission from the Governor. These Provincial Estates spoke for the "three orders," traditionally understood as the nobility, clergy, and commoners. Each province defined membership in the Estates distinctly. In Brabant, for example, the Third Estate—that which represented "the commoners"—was comprised of "the guild leaders and urban magistrates of Antwerp, Louvain, and Brussels."<sup>31</sup> Thus, by the 1780s, an elaborate, multilayered, and multifaceted organization of government and accompanying bureaucracy existed in the Belgian provinces, which Joseph proved eager to streamline.

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<sup>30</sup> Polasky explains that the Conseil d'état was "established originally to handle matters of war and peace, [but] by the 1780s [was] largely honorific"; the Conseil des finances "participated directly in the control of provincial finances," "supervising the collection of taxes from the provincial Estates, it set customs duties, regulated industry and commerce, and supervised the construction of government facilities"; and the Conseil privé "kept the emperor informed of events in the provinces." [*Revolution*, p.17]

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 18.

Socially, the territory was recovering from the massive emigration of artists and intellectuals to the newly independent Dutch Republic in the sixteenth century.<sup>32</sup>

Though the Golden Age of the Brueghels and Rubens had passed, the Belgian bourgeoisie remained in touch with enlightened thinking and advances. Marie-Thérèse Bitsch sums it up nicely:

Even if literary production was limited, intellectual life was active in the capital, where the Royal Library, already forty thousand volumes strong in 1785, was founded and the Academy of Sciences and Belles Lettres was built on the French model. Officials and liberal professionals formed a cultivated, francophone elite, often seduced by Free Masonry and open to the philosophy of the Lumières.<sup>33</sup>

In 1772, Brussels became home to a royal academy, grown out of a literary society created in 1769 under Maria Theresa.<sup>34</sup> There were numerous publishers and printers in the urban centers as well, many of which would disseminate much of the abundant pamphlet literature during the years of the revolution. Though the Belgians were no longer producing their own enlightenment, they undoubtedly kept up to date on the wider world's developing thought. Economics also supported such cosmopolitan tastes and outlooks. While the guild system maintained a certain degree of inwardly focused economic energy, those entrepreneurs not part of the official system, or those looking to expand their own interests, had a tendency to look outside Brussels and even Belgium for their influences.<sup>35</sup>

When discussing society in the provinces in the eighteenth century, it is impossible to ignore religion. The Catholic Church was integral to social and

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<sup>32</sup> According to Bitsch, primarily Protestant emigration took the population in the Southern provinces from 90,000 in 1560 to 42,000 in 1589. (p.53)

<sup>33</sup> Bitsch, 61.

<sup>34</sup> Hervé Hasquin, *Joseph II, catholique anticlérical et réformateur impatient, 1741-1790*, 26-27.

<sup>35</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 30. Bitsch attributes this to a tradition established during the Middle Ages whereby Belgian merchants would travel themselves (rather than using intermediaries) to foreign countries to sell their own products and buy both raw materials and luxury goods. Bitsch, 23.

political life. The Church documented and regulated many of life's landmarks, including births and deaths, and common people experienced as much contact with Catholic structure as they did with the local political apparatus. In fact, it was this overlap that motivated much of the Austrian reforms: both Joseph and his mother Maria Theresa wanted to see the Church subordinated to the State. After the schism between the southern and northern Lowlands along mostly religious lines, with the northern Dutch Republic committed to Protestantism, the Belgians "had developed in self-conscious contrast with the Protestant north and had become notorious for clericalism and obscurantism."<sup>36</sup> In part, this was a product of the Counter-Reformation, with the Church and the Spanish government enacted with zeal in the provinces after the schism. Every diocese set up seminaries; authorities created a specifically Belgian catechism as of 1609 and censured theatrical shows while fostering, but regulating, religious festivals.<sup>37</sup> These efforts, dubbed by Bitsch a "silent revolution," constituted a success: "the Catholic religion, solidly anchored, was practiced with fervor; the population was taken in hand by the Church who imposed new values, obedience and morality."<sup>38</sup> As shall be seen, an important element of "Belgian" identity was this fierce Catholicism and a strongly held belief in one's duty to protect the Church.

The strength of the Church made secular reforms more difficult to implement, but also meant that the composition of Belgian society differed from the Monarchy's

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<sup>36</sup> Derek Beales, *Prosperity*, 212. Suzanne Tassier combines this idea with a general "ignorance" of most of the Belgian clergy, characterized by "a lack of general culture, [an] imperfect knowledge of the ideas and events of their time, [which] could lead certain ecclesiastics, at important moments, to a simplistic politics and short-sightedness." Tassier, *Les Démocrates Belges de 1789*, Jeroom Vercruyse, ed. (Brussels: Hayez Editeur, 1989), 40.

<sup>37</sup> Bitsch, 51.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

other provinces with regard to ecclesiastic persons. Beales asserts that the Belgian provinces had one of the highest proportions of regular clergy to the population as a whole: “about 1 to 220 in the Belgian lands,” compared to “around 1 to 400 in the Austrian provinces,” 1 to 800 in Bohemian lands and 1 to 1,600 in Hungarian holdings.<sup>39</sup> This abundance of monasteries and houses of the old Orders contributed to the well-being of the population, doing much to help the poor and maintaining general good-will with the widely devout population.<sup>40</sup>

As a bastion of Catholicism, the Belgian provinces tended to foster traditional theologies, notably ultramontanism, which held Rome above regional, episcopal, and secular powers.<sup>41</sup> The Counter-Reformation had been deployed within Belgium with particular vigor after the loss of the Dutch Republic and it was no surprise that the population was one of the most devout in Western Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. Theologically, the arrival of Jansenism in the 1640s marked an important moment, and not simply because Cornelius Jansen had been Bishop of Ypres and a professor at the University of Leuven, near Brussels, the center of higher education in the Belgian provinces. The Jesuits vehemently condemned his work, and Jansen condemned them in turn. Put simply, the new movement emphasized episcopate and local power over the authority of the Pope and Rome, in opposition to

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<sup>39</sup> Beales, *Prosperity*, 180. “Regular clergy” denotes those who follow a regula—who are in a religious order—and “secular clergy” denotes those who belong to the diocese and live in the world. According to Beales, the Belgian provinces contained roughly 10,000 nuns, “per capita eight times as many as Hungary and nearly twice as many as the Austrian lands” in the 1780s. (p.212)

<sup>40</sup> Beales contends that, while complaints and criticisms could certainly be found, “It was often asserted too that the monasteries were generous in charity to the poor, though it was notorious that they spent much of their income on building. Many were noted for the excellent beer they brewed. But while it was generally acknowledged that the monks and nuns behaved respectably, they were not thought to display the fervour of previous generations.” (p.213)

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of Belgium as “the last stronghold of the Catholic Church in Europe,” see the section “The Church Takes up the Battle,” in Chapter II: The resistance 1780-1788 of Polasky, *Revolution*, especially pages 65-66.



the paramount position these were given by ultramontanists. In practice, it prescribed far less pomp and circumstance, something Maria Theresa and her husband favored as well, one sign that they “certainly had some sympathy with Jansenism.”<sup>42</sup> Though the Pope eventually suppressed the Jesuit Order itself in the eighteenth century, Jansenism continued to exist on the margins of orthodox Catholicism. By the 1780s, though it “was still thought to linger” in the Belgian provinces, Jansenism was popularly out of favor, and the Belgian clergy in general widely supported ultramontanism.<sup>43</sup>

The secular and ecclesiastic blended often in the provinces, and Belgian bishops and abbots were immensely powerful in the political sphere. From an administrative ecclesiastical perspective, it is important to note two things about the Belgian provinces: first, that the First Estates in the provinces were usually represented exclusively by the Abbots of the wealthier monasteries, and second, that many of the houses owned land outside the provinces, which often also corresponded to a disconnect between “ecclesiastical and political geography,” such as bishops being based outwith their dioceses.<sup>44</sup> For a sovereign like Joseph, such outside power and influence was suspect, especially in light of new notions of efficient and consolidated states. The fact that Bishops and Abbots were equally members of the local administration added an extra layer of power with which the Emperor had to contend when considering his reforms.

Without question, economics were an equally important piece of the Belgian political puzzle. In the Province of Brabant, for example, the guilds (brewers being

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<sup>42</sup> Beales, *Prosperity*, 181.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 75.

the wealthiest and most important) formed the so-called “Nations.” As expected of such associations, they had the power to “restrict guild membership either to relatives or to those men who could pay a substantial entrance fee” and they “determined the length of apprenticeship [and] set their own prices in the Brussels marketplace over which they had a monopoly.”<sup>45</sup> But the guilds were more than simple economic powerhouses; they had accrued a large amount of political power over the centuries.

The Brabantine Nations used their power for more than mere monopolistic control of the markets. They additionally “organized their own military units” (which would become quite useful for the revolutionaries) and “traditionally spoke for the common people of the Brussels region in the provincial government.”<sup>46</sup> This final role for the economic guilds was an extremely important one. In Brabant’s Estates, the third group was representative of the bourgeoisie, as its members came from the three privileged towns (Brussels, Antwerp, and Leuven) and conferred largely with the Nations rather than any truly representative body, in the modern sense. This system had grown out of medieval practices centered on feudal notions of government and representation and spoke to the “virtual representation” of political systems such as that in Great Britain at the time.<sup>47</sup>

The Belgian Provincial Estates were not the toothless bodies that shared their name in France. In the first instance, they voted several times a year to send taxes to Vienna, lining the coffers of the Empire. (The one important exception to this was Flanders, which had negotiated automatic payments to Vienna under Maria

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<sup>45</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Discussed in more detail at the end of this section.

Theresa's rule in the 1750s.) While the tax votes rarely encountered dissent, they were a powerful symbolic tool for the provinces regarding their relationship to their sovereign. Secondly, the provincial Estates functioned in a manner that gave a substantial voice to those perhaps often thought of as ignored. In Brabant, for example, the Third Estate had veto power. When the Estates convened biannually in March and October, the first two Estates "always deliberated first, attaching a provision to their vote: '*à condition que le tiers état suive & autrement pas*'. The Third Estate then took the question back to its constituencies for separate consultation."<sup>48</sup> In other words, if the Third Estate did not agree with the other two groups, a given measure could not pass, including those relating to the sovereign's taxes. The existence of the Conseil de Province further strengthened this position since it "claimed the right to reject legislation proposed by the government."<sup>49</sup> The fact that these bodies had to approve any and all official orders and decrees before they were publicly distributed added yet another layer of local power. If the Conseil or Estates chose not to publish a specific edict, it would be technically legal but would never actually go into effect.

These features contributed to a general air of satisfaction and contentment concerning the Provincial governments. The actual representative qualities of the Estates may be questioned in hindsight, but what is most important in the context of an intellectual understanding of the revolution is the contemporary perception of representation and sovereignty. Indeed, the eighteenth century saw a general

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<sup>48</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 18. "provided that the third estate follows & otherwise not."

<sup>49</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 133. The other provinces were each organized in similar fashion, with only minor differences among them. In Namur, for example, an official meeting of the Estates Assembly could not take place without royal permission, though the province's deputies could still meet and discuss amongst themselves when needed and could send letters of request to the government, as shall be seen below.

redefinition of, or at least the emergence of new ways of thinking about, sovereignty and representation in government. As Edmund S. Morgan posits, “Government requires make-believe. . . Make believe that the people have a voice or make believe that the representatives of the people are the people. Make believe that governors are the servants of the people.”<sup>50</sup> This make-believe element of government corresponds to the imagined communities that helped create and nurture nations and nationalism as they are traditionally conceived.<sup>51</sup> The imagination required to accept any notion of representation—whether referring to representatives of the people in an administrative body or the notion that a monarch represents a country or an empire as a whole—is equally required to build ties across geographic space in forging an idea of a nation. In England before the American Revolution, “the sovereignty of the people was not said to reside in the particular constituencies that chose the representatives, it resided in the people at large and reached the representatives without the people at large doing anything to confer it.”<sup>52</sup> Some of the eighteenth-century revolutionaries in the Southern Netherlands—especially those of a more conservative bent, and the Estates they were members of—used this logic to justify their claims to speak for the “nation” in deciding which direction to take the revolution. They enacted a virtual nationalism that relied on rhetoric of popular sovereignty but made no claims to assess directly broad popular opinion. In this sense, sovereignty *and* representation were passive: the “people” need not actually participate for their “representatives” to justify their own existence and role in

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<sup>50</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: the Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (London: W.W. Norton & Co, 1988), 13.

<sup>51</sup> This is again Benedict Anderson’s famous contribution to nation and nationalism studies, best explained in *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>52</sup> Morgan, 49.

government. The question of the Estates' representation of the people would come to the fore as those bodies confronted Joseph's reforms.

#### JOSEPH'S MOTIVES

In seeking to understand what sparked revolution in the Southern Netherlands, it is useful to probe Joseph II's thinking, for it was truly he, rather than any administrative machine outside of his control, that instigated the reforms that would so displease the Belgian provinces. At heart, these reforms stemmed from Joseph's strongly held belief in the new, enlightened concept of the State. To read the biographies by Derek Beales and T.C.W. Blanning is to see the portrait of a ruler in love with the idea of an efficient government mechanism, culminating in authoritarian power at the top. All citizens should be useful, contributing to the overall wealth and welfare of the state, which would in turn provide them with opportunity to make their living. This was akin to the political philosophy and rise of a "well-ordered police state" in Prussia, which historians like Marc Raeff see as rooted in Cartesian rationalism. There, "Faith that the world was rationally organized was translated into the conviction that the state, through rational and purposive activity could foster in its subjects a more efficient and productive style of economic and cultural behavior."<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, for Joseph, enlightenment belief in rationality was not a call for representative, liberal governments so much as a justification to do away with the frivolous or inefficient aspects left over from less enlightened ages, such as the

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<sup>53</sup> Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change Through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800* (Yale University Press: London, 1983). James Van Horn Melton, "Absolutism and 'Modernity' in Early Modern Central Europe," *German Studies Review* 8, no. 2 (Oct. 1985): 384. Van Horn Melton's article makes great use of Raeff's work throughout.

complicated hierarchy of the Church or convoluted systems of smaller government bodies autonomous from the central government. This was all meant to strengthen the state and render it better equipped to deal with a changing political stage in Europe, a housecleaning begun by Joseph's (more subtle) mother. Joseph "believed that good government, especially in the Monarchy, depended on the unchallenged, absolute, even despotic authority of a sovereign," a stance that would put him in direct conflict with the Estates and Conseils in the Belgian provinces who expected to be consulted about matters pertaining to their territories and, more problematically, to be able to object to any measures they found distasteful.<sup>54</sup>

Joseph routinely disregarded the advice of his counselors, just as he contradicted the advice his mother had given him regarding the Belgians. Contrary to Joseph's designs, State Chancellor Kaunitz assured Maria Christina, the Emperor's sister who was to be the Governor-General to the provinces along with her husband, "that, even if their fears [that Joseph would take total control and allow no other executive powers] were realized in other parts of the Monarchy, Belgium would be the last province to be tackled and *its constitutions would make it impossible for major changes to the administration to be carried through.*"<sup>55</sup> Kaunitz thus accurately predicted that major changes would be fiercely resisted, though he failed to see that Joseph would nevertheless insist on enacting them. Regarding her own position and that of her husband, the Emperor's sister was right to worry—when the time came for them to take the reins of power as Governors-General, Joseph "refused to discuss Belgian affairs with Marie Christine and Albert, intending that they should

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<sup>54</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 6.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 36. Emphasis mine.

have absolutely no executive power in Belgium.”<sup>56</sup> He meant for his siblings to be strictly figureheads, with day-to-day governing in the hands of his plenipotentiary minister, despite the fact that this was “contrary to the treaty under which Austria had obtained the [Austrian] Netherlands.” This family rivalry and jealous guarding of power by the Emperor can be interpreted as an indication of Joseph’s views on sovereignty: it proved that Joseph “held that sovereignty must be undivided and therefore that no other member of his family could share it.”<sup>57</sup> Such a view is crucial to Joseph’s understanding of how his empire, and each piece within it, ought to operate. If sovereignty could not be divided among Habsburg family members, even within a hierarchy with the Emperor at the top, he would hardly be receptive to arguments by the Belgians that their Estates and Conseils should exercise some authority or sovereignty over the administration of their governments.

In fact, Joseph’s perception of contractual government is perhaps the most salient aspect of the Emperor’s own philosophy in understanding how and why his Belgian subjects revolted. The Belgian provinces contracted with their rulers, and saw the relationship as mutually binding, so that either party could terminate the relationship if the other did not adhere to the stipulated conditions. Joseph, on the other hand, did not even acknowledge the concept of contract between ruler and ruled. “He was utterly convinced that he owed his position to God – or Providence. There was no mention [in his personal writings] of a contract between ruler and ruled, a concept acknowledged even by Frederick the Great.”<sup>58</sup> This rejection of any contractual relationship between sovereign and subjects, combined with an

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. for both quotations.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 40.

indivisible vision of sovereignty, would be the source of most of the discord between Joseph and his Belgian subjects. While some of his reforms were positive (notably his attempts to reopen the Scheldt River to commerce), his unwillingness to work with the provincial Estates and Conseils would, in the end, cause some of his greatest personal grief.<sup>59</sup>

#### EDICTS, REFORMS, AND RESISTANCE

Given his strong views on a uniform, unified state, and his unheeded attempts at participation as co-regent, it is no surprise that Joseph began instituting his own ideas almost as soon as he assumed power, accelerating those reforms begun by his mother and instituting many of his own. Joseph, as co-regent, had expressed his opinion on the various reforms instituted by his mother and Chancellor Kaunitz during her reign. In a memorandum written the year his father died, Joseph put forth his own vision for the Church within the Empire, including the fact that he “had no thought of abolishing all or even many monasteries.” Yet, while Maria Theresa reigned, Kaunitz largely overrode her son’s ideas and Joseph had no real control over which policies were implemented; but it is important to note that he was involved to some degree in the reforms his mother instituted, including ecclesiastic measures.<sup>60</sup> It is interesting, however, that he paid Belgium little attention in his first few years, despite the fact that he had visited it for the first time the very year he took control.

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<sup>59</sup> The Scheldt River, Antwerp’s path to the Atlantic, had been closed to commerce in favor of Amsterdam after the Dutch Republic won its independence. Several attempts had been made to reopen it, by both the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs, but staunch British and Dutch opposition foiled all efforts. Both Beales and Blanning discuss Joseph’s extreme personal anguish, even on his deathbed, at having lost the Belgian provinces, which gained their independence mere months before he passed away.

<sup>60</sup> Beales, *Prosperity*, 185.



In fact, Joseph's 1781 visit, carried out before he was officially crowned sovereign of any of the provinces, was the first by a monarch to the provinces in several centuries.<sup>61</sup> The visit took place before Maria Christina and Albert assumed their posts as Governors-General; Joseph "was determined, as always, not to travel in state but with a small suite, avoiding all traditional formalities and ceremonies, wearing simple uniform and staying in hotels rather than in the palaces and abbeys that had the right and duty to house the emperor."<sup>62</sup> This led, unfortunately but inevitably, to many of the local officials and Church representatives feeling snubbed. After so long without a state visit, the provinces went out of their way to prepare enthusiastic welcomes; Joseph's general apathy and active refusal to take part in many of the smaller ceremonies created a low rumbling of grave disappointment.<sup>63</sup>

According to the Emperor, he had not "come to 'eat, drink or dance, but to execute serious affairs.'"<sup>64</sup> However, more recent scholarship indicates that Joseph only offended that part of the population he saw as obsolete: the numerous officials clamoring for ceremonial praise. Rather, Joseph held extensive audiences during a fortnight in Brussels, accepting thousands of petitions from ordinary citizens. The two most prominent petition categories were "those that objected to tolls and other obstructions to trade between and within the individual provinces" and those "that complained of the slowness, complexity and cost of legal processes."<sup>65</sup> Some raised

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<sup>61</sup> Given the nature of his titles, the sovereign of the Belgian provinces was sworn in as Duke or Count individually by each province in a separate ceremony. In Joseph's case, his sister's husband, Albert de Saxe-Teschen, who was Governor-General alongside his wife, had stood in for him, swearing and accepting the provincial oaths while engaging in all the pomp and circumstance.

<sup>62</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 138.

<sup>63</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 36. Her source for this is mostly Henri Pirenne, the nationalist Belgian historian whose distaste for Joseph is obvious.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Pirenne, 14.

<sup>65</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 144.

more general issues and one of these “consisted of a denunciation of the excessive number and the mutually conflicting privileges of the clergy of Louvain.”<sup>66</sup> Joseph took these complaints quite seriously, but whether he granted the given request was another issue; though he had each complaint meticulously documented, relevant officials never acted on most. Regarding the economic concerns of ordinary citizens, “the petitions did not alter [Joseph’s] basic attitude on these matters, but they supplied him with overwhelming evidence in support of his preconceptions,” though an exception was to be found in the petitions from Estates and other organizations. These, as requests from those with “a recognised status like guilds and churches,” were “often ignored or rejected.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, while Joseph may have rejected the official ceremonies and fêtes organized in his honor, he appeared genuinely interested in the points of view of common folk, those who would be best placed to work within his ideal efficient state system.

Despite Joseph’s visit and the audiences he held, upon his return to Vienna very little was done regarding Belgium for several years. Though he “secretly intended to make the government of Belgium uniform with that of all other provinces and objected to the exclusion of its affaires from the competence of the Staatsrat,” by 1782, Joseph’s only “visible achievement” in the Belgian provinces was the evacuation of the barrier fortresses, left over from the Dutch Independence War and the War of Spanish Succession as guarantees against French expansion.<sup>68</sup> Though he had revisited the question of the Scheldt River, a major obstacle to the Belgian economy, twice between September 1782 and December 1783, nothing came of it.

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<sup>66</sup> Beales, *Prosperity*, 213.

<sup>67</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 146, 147.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 139, 373. Negotiated in 1782, the last Dutch soldiers left in April 1787.

While Lord Stormont, the British Secretary of State, had indicated, as early as August 1780, a willingness to allow Antwerp access to the sea—after all, Britain and the Dutch Republic were at war—opposition from France, now also at war with Britain, and Kaunitz in Vienna eventually foiled the plan.<sup>69</sup>

One explanation for the serious delay in implementing Joseph’s unifying reforms was pragmatic: the Emperor put off reforming Belgium because he was hoping to exchange the provinces for Bavaria.<sup>70</sup> In fact, when the Bavarian project came to light—it had been conducted in utmost secrecy until the most diplomatic moment could be identified—there was general outcry, notably in the press, in both countries. This indicates a strong attachment to the monarchy itself on the part of its subjects. As Beales has it, “It was one of the novelties of the situation in the 1780s that the inhabitants of both Belgium and Bavaria showed displeasure at the readiness of their rulers to abandon them without the slightest consultation or compunction, a reaction that princes and treaty-makers had rarely had to contend with.”<sup>71</sup>

The wider negative reaction to Joseph’s exchange scheme is a clear indicator that a sense of loyalty to the Empire existed in the provinces. Such loyalty did not necessarily fit the established pattern of more local allegiance. In the past, certainly during the piecemeal sovereignties of the Middle Ages, the populations of the provinces were “aware of belonging to a specific entity and manifested a kind of patriotism across the principality.”<sup>72</sup> Such provincialism still existed in the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 111. For further discussion of the Schedlt affair, see Beales, *Joseph*, 390-402.

<sup>70</sup> See Beales, *Joseph*, 372 and Ch. 14: “‘Just one body, uniformly governed’: Hungary, the Tyrol, Italy and Belgium,” 1784-1787, 477-525. For details on the diplomatic attempts at the exchange, and their eventual failing, see Beales Ch. 11: “Foreign Policy, 1782 to 1786: the Schedlt, the ‘Greek project’ and the Crimea, the Dutch ‘war’ and the Bavarian exchange,” 388-390, 393-398.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 418.

<sup>72</sup> Bitsch, 28.

eighteenth century, playing an important role in the Belgian Revolution after the Empire (or the Emperor) proved itself unworthy of such loyalty, as evidenced in the distinctions made between Brabantines, Flemings, Namurois and the rest. However, demonstrated attachment by the residents of Joseph's territories would also manifest itself, especially in early complaints about Joseph's administrative reforms.

When the dream of exchanging the provinces died in January 1785, Joseph was faced with the reality that he needed to fully incorporate Belgium into his uniform-state vision. This meant he would need to enact reforms, many of which had already been implemented in the Monarchy's other lands but would now need to be accelerated in the provinces. The fact that he attempted no substantial administrative reforms in the provinces until 1786 does not mean that Joseph had not begun to stamp his mark on Belgium in other ways. He had attempted to open the Scheldt, as noted above; he had wrested total control of the frontier with France from the Dutch; he tried to bring university education more in line with that of the rest of the Empire; and in 1784 he ordered a detailed list prepared of all the corporations active in the provinces and their privileges. Though never again brought up, the list struck fear into the hearts and minds of the economic powerhouses, who dreaded government intrusion into their administration and practices.

But Joseph's most active hand in the provinces before 1786 was with regard to the Church. There, in line with his empire-wide actions, he had started implementing his progressive vision as early as 1783, when he began abolishing so-called "useless" or "unnecessary" (that is to say, contemplative) religious orders. Joseph actually decreed this policy in 1781, which was part of a larger course of action that would also strip monasteries "of their extra-territorial character," namely

the “connexions [sic] that existed between houses in his [Joseph’s] lands and superiors or monasteries in other states.”<sup>73</sup> In dissolving contemplative houses, however, Joseph had to devise a solution for all the inmates they once housed. The government encouraged many to become parish clergy or take a pension and this would require funds. In 1782 the government in Vienna set up a Religious Fund (not to be confused with a body of the same name established by Maria Theresa for the conversion of Protestants to Catholicism) that would receive the property or profits from the sale of suppressed houses. It would then use this wealth to pay pensions and create and support new parishes. The fund was also used to support the creation of new general seminaries throughout the empire. “In Joseph’s mind no element of his church reform mattered more than the establishment of ‘general seminaries’, only twelve in the whole Monarchy where all future clergy were to be trained.”<sup>74</sup> In the Belgian provinces, the seminary was to be housed at Leuven and it caused “the greatest indignation” of all his ecclesiastic measures.<sup>75</sup> It was certainly the single measure most stridently opposed by both high and low clergy in the provinces, notably the Bishop of Mechelen (or Malines in French)—in whose diocese Leuven existed—for reasons to be seen in the subsequent chapter.

As with Joseph’s secular reforms, most ecclesiastic measures, such as the suppression of orders which were not implemented until two years after the initial announcement, were delayed in Belgium for several reasons. The first was the continued importance of the Estates in the Belgian provinces, as opposed to their relative weakness in the Emperor’s central lands. For years, Joseph “refrained from

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<sup>73</sup> Beales, *Prosperity*, 192.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

dissolving any Belgian houses that were represented by their abbots in the provincial Estates.”<sup>76</sup> This, Beales tell us, was out of some respect for the constitutional standing of these men. More convincing perhaps, given the hindsight of Joseph’s treatment of the Belgian constitutions, is the argument that the Bavarian exchange negotiations and his attempts to force the Dutch to open the Scheldt delayed reform plans in the Emperor’s newest holdings.

Not until 1786 did Joseph take further measures against the Church, when a “hail of edicts ... rained on the Belgian Church ... most of which had been imposed earlier in the central lands and Hungary and were directly copied from those just introduced in Lombardy.”<sup>77</sup> As just two examples from many, Vienna limited *kermesses*, or religious carnivals, as well as the processions and costumes that they used, and bishops were to be directly answerable to the Emperor, not the Pope. Initial reactions were generally passive; most priests, rather than protesting, “just disregarded the new regulations.”<sup>78</sup> Abbots sought to frustrate the government wherever possible, relying on the fact that most suppressions and measures, designed to improve social and financial conditions, were not usually directed at entire Orders. This made it easier to plead one’s case for disobedience. Furthermore, in all parts of the Monarchy, many of “the new laws were not particularly effective, partly because rulers went on granting exemptions as favours or in return for services,” something Joseph himself did quite often in the Southern Netherlands in the 1780s.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, this flexibility backfired in the realm of popular opinion, especially in a country whose population adored its clergy. Since “every single monastery was to be

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 41.

<sup>79</sup> Beales, *Prosperity*, 186.

considered on its merits,” the government had created “a recipe, of course, for delay, uncertainty, ill feeling and inconsistency.”<sup>80</sup>

As no formal, organized protest materialized in the upper echelons, the lower clergy complained of the “weakness” of their superiors and preached “sermons exciting the faithful to resistance.”<sup>81</sup> This preaching does not seem to have caused any real disturbance, though priests’ roles would prove important in swaying popular, and certainly rural, opinion against the Emperor and in favor of the revolutionaries after 1789. Resistance did move beyond the purely rhetorical, though, as the first armed manifestation of unrest came from the students of Leuven. The announcement of the general seminary to be housed there was officially made in 1786, and in December of that year, “the seminarists rioted against their teaching and conditions, most particularly the weakness of their beer, the first sign of violent opposition to the government’s policies.”<sup>82</sup> Such aggression would not be repeated until after the administrative reforms of 1787, which convinced the nobility and Estates to engage in their own resistance movement that eventually became violent. Furthermore, in the Austrian Netherlands, “the new [Josephist] criteria for monastic suppressions had come as a shock” because “the application of monastic revenues and personnel to parochial works ... was [mainly] deemed unnecessary and unconstitutional but sometimes on the ground that it ignored the fundamental distinction between the secular and regular clergy.”<sup>83</sup> Joseph’s ecclesiastic measures were coming dangerously close to infringing on provincial rights, not to mention custom.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>81</sup> Pirenne, (1952), 23.

<sup>82</sup> Beales, *Prosperity*, 218.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 219.

The earlier initiatives against the Belgian Church had created an atmosphere of subtle unrest, one in which the rural and poorer urban populations were acutely aware of the complaints made by their clergy, while the corporate elite feared an infringement on its privileges. Simultaneously, a few bad harvests, war among their biggest trading partners, and some economic stagnation in 1785 and 1786 all meant that civil unrest was not far from the surface. As Henri Pirenne explains, “From the end of 1786, the country was waiting for a chance to rise up. And with a stunning clumsiness, the Emperor gave it one.”<sup>84</sup>

On 1 January 1787, Joseph II announced his plans to reform the administrative and judicial systems of the Southern Netherlandish provinces. The decrees (or edicts, depending on the province and the version consulted) stipulated first and foremost that the ten provinces would be reorganized into nine imperial “circles,” each administered by an intendant, or steward, whose orders would come directly from Vienna. The Estates, while continuing to exist, would be rendered fairly irrelevant, as new commissioners would vote the government’s taxes. The court system was to be completely overhauled, with many tribunals suppressed in favor of smaller, more central bodies. “All existing local officers were to lose their functions, and the new intendant of Antwerp declared that the Conseil de Brabant now had no role.”<sup>85</sup> The immediate response was one of disbelief. “In reality,” and in the perception in the provinces at the time, “this was not a reform, but a coup d’État. . . . By a stroke of the pen and without having consulted anyone, the Emperor had annulled the secular autonomy of Belgium. He had absorbed it into the Austrian

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<sup>84</sup> Pirenne, (1952), 27.

<sup>85</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 507.



State.”<sup>86</sup> That the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne speaks of a “coup d’État” committed by a sovereign against what is essentially his own government, and that the provinces were dumbstruck at being “absorbed . . . into the Austrian State” speaks to the autonomous nature of the provinces. Almost instantly, a flurry of official complaints, usually called *représentations* or *remonstrances* in French, flew from the administrative bodies of the provinces. Belgian administrators were suddenly moved to passionate protest, though they had generally ignored or paid only minor attention to the earlier, purely ecclesiastical reforms. Popular pamphlets also flooded Belgian printing presses. The Estates in the provinces convened, or sent urgent requests to be allowed to convene, as quickly as possible to formulate their responses. The first Province to officially raise its voice was Hainaut, while further north in Brabant, the relevant bodies refused to codify the new laws and the Estates met on 29 January to discuss the edicts. This was the moment when the Belgian provinces began to mount an organized resistance to the actions of their sovereign in Vienna; this is the official start of the story of the Belgian Revolution.

## CONCLUSION

The resistance of the Belgian provinces that began in 1787 was motivated by a desire to protect privileges and customs acquired over the centuries. In many ways, it began as a conservative movement of Estates and Bishops hoping to stem the tide of reform emanating from Vienna. These reforms, though occasionally extensions of measures originated by the idolized Maria Theresa, came from the Emperor Joseph

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<sup>86</sup> Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. 5, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Brussels: Maurice Lamertin, 1926), 420. [This is an earlier edition of the Pirenne cited heretofore. The date of the referenced volume is included in citations.] Suzanne Tassier uses the same language, calling the reforms “un véritable coup d’Etat.” Tassier, *Les Démocrates Belges de 1789*, Vercruysee, ed., 76.

II, often from his very pen. In pursuing his reforms, Joseph was not simply enacting absolutist whims. He was engaging in a systematic restructuring of his empire, impelled by a desire to create an efficient and modern state that would be able to maintain its position in a changing political landscape.

The ten provinces of the Southern Netherlands, however, did not want to be absorbed into a streamlined Austrian Empire. While willing to be part of the larger picture, and dutifully send taxes to their sovereign in Vienna, the provincial administrations guarded the powers and privileges they had acquired over the centuries. These privileges, enshrined in contracts the ruler agreed to upon their installation as sovereign, had come to define the political identity of the provinces. Moreover, in the shifts between and among sovereigns shaped a collectivity that, while not negating provincial identity, fostered a sense of special status within the Burgundian and then Habsburg holdings, outrightly manifested in the political autonomy Charles V granted the provinces. The Treaty of Utrecht's stipulation that the provinces remain grouped together augmented the perception that the Southern Low Countries maintained a unique and privileged place within the empire. That Maria Theresa and Kauntiz largely left the provinces to their own devices further encouraged a feeling of being separate and distinct. Even before protests began to come across the desks of the Governors-General and Chancellor Kaunitz after Joseph announced his reforms, there had been a sense of collectivity in the provinces. That foreigners were banned from certain posts and that Brabantines were guaranteed trial within that province were small but significant factors in cultivating a perception of exclusivity for the inhabitants. That the Estates voted Vienna its taxes concretely confirmed for the administrations in the Southern Netherlands their power within the

Empire. Joseph's administrative reforms, then, sought to fundamentally change the power dynamic, and that was not something the provincial administrations were willing to accept. In resisting the Emperor, they would strengthen the communality and collectivity that had been present for centuries. Ultimately, Joseph's reforms brought the provinces closer together.

Regardless of Joseph's motives, or even the merit of his reforms, his methods elicited outrage in the provinces in large part because the administration Joseph wanted to reform included the very men best placed to oppose him—the myriad lawyers and officials whose jobs depended on the continued existence of the status quo. These men did not set out to launch an armed revolution, and independence was not even discussed in January 1787. As shall be seen, the first wave of resistance came from the most privileged members of Belgian society, and their arguments focused on the contractual nature of their governments, characterized by ancient agreements with their sovereigns. When the resistance began, it was a movement to correct an overzealous Emperor unaware of the importance of tradition and a bid to return to customs and conventions centuries old.

## CHAPTER 2: FIRST STIRRINGS OF REVOLUTION: RESISTANCE TO JOSEPH II'S REFORMS, 1787-1789

### INTRODUCTION

Those who began petitioning against the Emperor's reforms in 1787 accused Joseph of ignoring provincial traditions and customs. The announcement of the decrees to change the provincial administration on 1 January 1787 was a decisive moment that spurred the provincial administrations into action, precipitating official grievances and complaints as well as a flurry of pamphlets condemning the measures. The first sweep of resistance, begun in January and intensified in March 1787, revolved around the idea that Joseph had fundamentally misunderstood the provinces. From the perspective of local officials, if the Emperor could see reason, and if he could be made to understand how the provinces worked, all would be remedied.

This line of thinking assumed that the provinces were something separate, that their inhabitants saw themselves as somehow distinct from the rest of the Empire, deserving of different treatment because they were not the same as the Austrian, Hungarian, Silesian, or other parts of Joseph's dominions. Linked to the notions of collectivity discussed in the last chapter, this Southern Netherlandish uniqueness engendered an idea of community felt among what were still independent provinces. The protests of 1787, which continued intermittently until mid-1789, began to exhibit a broader pan-provincialism. The individual Estates naturally maintained their local emphases, but several writers invoked arguments of strength in unity and protested that all the provinces jointly deserved better treatment from their sovereign. Slowly, a conception of a more inclusive Belgian identity—mostly political but also cultural in nature—began to emerge.

It is important to remember that, at this point, the resistance was not intended to gain independence or more autonomy within the Empire. Rather, its goal was recognition on Joseph's part of the autonomy that already characterized the provinces. The argument, in the main, was one warning Vienna away from despotism, a broad yet effective term of abuse that was "a rhetorical umbrella for critics from diverse ideological backgrounds."<sup>1</sup> James Van Horn Melton writes compellingly and convincingly of the use of despotism in the late eighteenth century. As he has it, "despotism" was "central . . . to political rhetoric throughout Europe." He attributes its malleability and popularity to Montesquieu, who ensured that "despotism acquired full status as a political category" in his *Spirit of the Laws*. Importantly for the Belgians, this cry of despotism was not radical, in fact the opposite was true: "Himself a conservative spokesman for the maintenance of corporate privilege, Montesquieu used the term as a polemical caveat against any monarchical violation of this privilege."<sup>2</sup> In 1787, when political resistance to Joseph's reforms focused on making the Emperor acknowledge Belgian autonomy rather than on any radical calls for independence, such a conception of despotism was useful to the provincial governments as they framed their protests.

Some of those in the provinces, particularly those bourgeois intellectuals who read the *philosophes* and other enlightenment thinkers, saw parallels between their movement and other political unrest at the time. On 23 May 1787, a lawyer to the Conseil Souverain de Brabant, one of the highest administrative bodies in the

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<sup>1</sup> James Van Horn Melton, "From Enlightenment to Revolution: Hertzberg, Schlözer, and the Problem of Despotism in the Late *Aufklärung*," *Central European History* 12, no.2 (June 1979): 104.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

province, delivered an address to the General Assembly of the Estates. He began by asking a few simple questions:

Will sad experience force us to repeat every day that the 18<sup>th</sup> century is the century of revolutions? Never have enlightened people better felt the dignity of man & the price of civil liberty ; never have Princes better known that despotism offends the peoples, that their happiness depends absolutely on that of their subjects ; & yet we see almost everywhere a continuous struggle between the throne built by force, & liberty sustained by the voice of nature & the authority of the laws?<sup>3</sup>

The men before him were the representatives of the province's nobility, clergy, and bourgeoisie. As they saw it, Joseph's attempts to reform the administrative and judicial systems of the province were steps toward tyranny, steps that would ensure their own decline under a sovereign who had not consulted with them or sought their input in any way when enacting his wishes. They were preserving their liberties, their rights as defined by natural laws and custom, and Joseph was infringing upon these in an appalling show of despotism.

In his address, later published as the pamphlet *Considérations sur la Constitution des Duchés de Brabant et de Limbourg, et des Autres Provinces des Pays-Bas Autrichiens*, the lawyer Charles Lambert d'Outrepoint defended the provinces' resistance to Joseph's actions, even while mildly conceding reform's legitimacy. At the time, this was a carefully expressed minority view, couched as a very real criticism of the Emperor's actions since his ascension in 1780. The prevailing mood in 1787 was one of conservatism; the Estates, Conseil, and Nations of Brabant, as well as Flanders, Namur, and Hainaut (soon to be joined by the rest of

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Lambert d'Outrepoint, "Considérations sur la Constitution des Duchés de Brabant et de Limbourg, et des Autres Provinces des Pays-Bas Autrichiens, lues dans l'Assemblée Général des États de Brabant, le 23 Mai 1787," KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium Politiek – België 23/3/1787-13/12/1787, (Leuven, Belgium), 3.

the Belgian Provincial bodies) were concerned for their own privileges, carefully acquired over the centuries and still steeped in medieval tradition. Joseph had perpetrated a direct insult to the medieval charters that the Belgians interpreted as clear contracts, in redesigning their administration himself. Crucially, the contractual nature of the charters gave both governor and governed permission to terminate their agreement if one side failed to uphold its end of the bargain. This was the intellectual and political foundation of provincial resistance to Joseph, though at the outset a large portion of the disputes, specifically those from the Brabantine Estates and Nations, stemmed from self-interest and a desire to guard their privileges.

From January 1787, when the Emperor informed his western-most territories that their system of government would be completely overhauled, until June of 1789 when Joseph annulled all constitutions and privileges of the provinces, there was an intellectual and political resistance to the Emperor's initiatives. This stemmed from a fierce belief, nurtured throughout history by events and treaty negotiations, that their charters gave the Belgians the right to administer their own governments within the Empire—they had achieved autonomous status<sup>4</sup>—and that they deserved to have their opinions heeded. Indeed, one major lesson to be taken from examination of this resistance period is the fundamental importance of contractual government. In the 1787-88 pamphlets and petitions, no issue came up more or was defended with more vigor than the notion of a reciprocal compact between ruler and ruled, regardless of the status of that ruler as monarch or assembly. Eventually, the commonality of the complaints led the Estates of the various provinces to collaborate across their borders, hoping to collectively achieve their goals.

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<sup>4</sup> See previous chapter.

## THE GENERAL SEMINARY

The general seminary scheme was an empire-wide effort by Joseph to bring both education and ecclesiastical matters more tightly under State control. There were to be twelve seminaries in total and Leuven (in French, Louvain) was the logical choice for the one in the Belgian provinces. The ancient university—founded in 1425 by Martin V—was already the center of education in the provinces and, significantly, operated quite independently from even the provincial administration. Indeed, it functioned as “virtually a small republic from its foundation, that is, its internal affairs were governed from within the University.”<sup>5</sup> This independence served to foster a perception that the university was a decidedly Brabantine institution, not an outside invention but a proud monument to the intellectual prowess of the territories.<sup>6</sup> Though the political resistance to reform did not mount until after Joseph announced his administrative reforms, the seminary eventually became a rallying point, adopted by the Estates in their official complaints retrospectively. It was a concrete, clear illustration of the heavy-handedness of Joseph’s reforms. Equally, Joseph proved his despotism in his willingness to meddle in an important local institution, as the university of Leuven was a symbol of the provinces’ intellectual achievements and their autonomy.

The seminary program, as noted in the last chapter, was particularly important to Joseph, and in his mind it came before all other ecclesiastical reforms. It was also the ecclesiastical measure that “caused the greatest indignation” in the

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<sup>5</sup> S. J. Miller, “A Belated Conversion from Jurisdictionalism to Jansenism, Josse Le Plat, 1732-1810,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 131, no.4 (December 1987): 400.

<sup>6</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 71.



provinces. By creating a general seminary, Joseph was directly interfering in the powers of the bishops, who would no longer be able to run their own diocesan education programs but would instead be forced to send all their prospective priests and seminarians to Leuven.<sup>7</sup> Given the strength of Catholicism in the provinces and the degree to which the inhabitants admired both the secular and regular the clergy in their midst, attacking the powers of the bishops in this way threatened an essential element of their perception of their provincial autonomy. Further, the general seminary ironically fostered a sense of collectivity. In asserting their right to separate diocesan arrangements in the face of Joseph's transgressions, the bishops contributed to a sense of common injury. Infringing on the seminary system and the right of each bishop to direct the tutelage of his own priests violated a key trait that set the provinces apart, and both the ecclesiastical and secular complaints about the general seminary conveyed this disruption. The general seminary would become an important complaint for all the provinces and dioceses.

Of course, the general seminary was not the first ecclesiastical reform Joseph tried to implement in the provinces. Three years earlier, in 1783, he had begun the suppression of contemplative orders, originally decreed throughout the Empire in 1781. These suppressions were meant to make the Church in the Habsburg lands more efficient, ensuring that parishes and priests were easily accessible and served an appropriate number of people. It was also a manifestation of Joseph's enlightened state vision where everyone and everything served a purpose.

It is very difficult to ascertain just how many monasteries were successfully suppressed and how many new parishes were created from the number of inmates

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<sup>7</sup> Beales, *Prosperity*, 218. For information on the paramount position of the seminaries in Joseph's church reform agenda, see *Prosperity* p.194.

relocated, as “the government found itself frustrated at every turn” by bishops and abbots.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that there was direct confrontation of Joseph’s policies the way there would be regarding the general seminary. Resistance came in the form of foot dragging, pleas for special circumstances, and simple evasion. A monk in Ghent wrote of his Abbot’s efforts, including “feign[ing] illness in order to avoid meeting official guests; he would blandly inform a visiting general that the abbey had no stables.”<sup>9</sup> Much of the secular clergy “just disregarded the new regulations.”<sup>10</sup> The Bishop of Malines, who would become a symbol of the resistance and who wrote prolifically during the revolutionary period defending the provinces’ rights, wrote to the nuns of his diocese whose orders were suppressed. He offered them his heartfelt condolences and sympathy, assuring them that he, too, experienced immense sadness. As one would expect in a missive from one religious to another, he counselled them to give their hearts to Jesus, that God knew their troubles and would see them through.<sup>11</sup>

Administratively, however, little appears to have been done. The aforementioned Flemish monk could “only lament the passivity with which the Council and Estates of Flanders [had] received Joseph’s decrees. They [had] even suggested how he might best spend the money accruing from the suppressions.”<sup>12</sup> It was not until the January 1787 edicts that threatened their own positions that the Estates and Conseils retrospectively took up the ecclesiastical cause. Then, their

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 218. Beales quotes the monk Emilien Malingié, whose diary *Le livre des jours* is held at the University of Ghent library.

<sup>10</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 41.

<sup>11</sup> *Lettre De son Eminence, Monseigneur le Cardinal Jean-Henri de Franckenberg, Comte du S.E.R. Archevêque de Malines, &c. &c. aux Religieuses des Couvents supprimées de son Diocèse*, Brussels: Le Francq, 1787. Originally published 1783.

<sup>12</sup> Beales, *Prosperity*, 217.

pamphlets and official *remonstrances* rang with descriptions of poor nuns and monks turned out of their homes, and horror at the abuses against the Church committed by the government in Vienna. These were politically useful, as such abuses horrified the local population and offered ready ammunition as broader illustrations of Joseph's misguided actions. They spoke to the fierce Catholicism of the general population, which had come to occupy a part of provincial identity. As resistance dragged on, more and more of the pamphlets used the Catholicism in the provinces as proof of their separateness from Joseph's other holdings, employing the Belgian church with its distinct catechism, local priests, and independent dioceses as a building block for a Belgian identity. They were constructing the nascent idea of what it meant to be "Belgian" from what it meant to be Brabantine, Hainuyer, Flemish, or Namurois, integrating the Catholicism of those provincial identities into a broader national character.

When the general seminary was announced in 1786, three years after the major suppressions and amid a flurry of other smaller measures<sup>13</sup>, it commanded immediate attention from the higher Belgian clergy. As it was to be established in Leuven, Jean-Henri de (or Johann Heinrich von) Franckenberg, Bishop of Malines (or Mechelen)—the diocese into which Leuven fell— was naturally one of the loudest voices against the move. For the next three years he would fight Joseph and his officials almost constantly about various aspects of the seminary. He, and many others in the provinces, would contest the seminary's necessity, its practical and logistical shortcomings, and the questions of curricula and doctrine it raised. After 1787 when the administrative reforms to the provinces were announced, the Brabant

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<sup>13</sup> See the previous chapter.

Estates and other Brabantine bodies which submitted formal grievances used the seminary and the uneasy situation in Leuven to their advantage. By 1788, the Nations (corporate guilds) of Brussels “argued that according to the constitution Louvain University as a ‘Brabant institution’ was subject only to rules set by the Brabant Estates.”<sup>14</sup> While this skirted the ecclesiastical aspect of the problem, it made the interesting claim that some institutions were specific to the Belgian provinces, identifiable as such, and therefore untouchable by Vienna. Without overstating the case, because this was not a novel assertion in the 1780s, such a claim illustrates that a fundamental aspect of the revolution was a feeling that Joseph was infringing on what made the provinces unique.

Each time the seminary was meant to open, violence by the students, refusals from the Bishops to send their seminarians, or other roadblocks prevented its success. Almost immediately after the imperial administration announced the seminary’s creation, in fact, the first violence against Joseph’s reforms in the Belgian provinces broke out as the students rioted in December 1786. The seminary was not their only complaint. “The riots at the University originated in universal hostility to the despotic enlightenment coming from Vienna, but the immediate cause was” theological in nature.<sup>15</sup> Without wading through the complexities of various Catholic doctrines, the conflict centered around doctrinal points, with the majority of the Leuven students condemning new, Jansenist-leaning publications. Moreover, students were unhappy with their general accommodations, including newly cramped conditions to accommodate the numerous new seminarians expected. Over the next few months, order was almost impossible to restore without conceding to the

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<sup>14</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Miller, “Belated Conversion,” 412.

students' and conservative professors' demands and by June 1787 "the old order of things at the University was solemnly restored."<sup>16</sup> Broadly speaking, Joseph was confronting a system as closed and traditional as the medieval administration manifested in the Estates. Ultimately, the general seminary was problematic on two fronts: it infringed upon the bishops' privileges regarding education in their own dioceses and it ruffled feathers within the administration of the University itself.<sup>17</sup>

As far as bishops' privileges were concerned, Franckenberg became a kind of spokesperson for those who objected to Joseph's measures and he articulated their concerns often. After December 1787, Franckenberg engaged in a public back-and-forth with "Le Ministre," presumably the plenipotentiary minister in Brussels.<sup>18</sup> The Brabantine Estates and Conseils supported him in their own writings, which never failed to mention the ecclesiastic measures in general or the specific matter of the general seminary in their own *remonstrances* and complaints to the sovereign and his representatives. In a letter dated 29 December 1787, just after the general seminary was again attempted in Leuven, Franckenberg broached the subject carefully. He lamented the "*malheureuse affaire du Séminaire général*," assured his reader of his intense respect and admiration for Joseph, and laid out his basic protests. A single

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<sup>16</sup> Jan Roegiers, *Un janséniste devant la Révolution: les avatars de Josse Leplat de 1787 à 1803* (Leuven, 1990), 78.

<sup>17</sup> A document online from University of Ghent from the deputies of the University and the Faculty of Arts to the Estates of all the provinces protesting against the abolition of their right to "Nominations." They argue that it has been their right to nominate (though what or whom is not entirely clear—presumably professors of theology) since the founding and that, since the General Seminary has been shown "impossible," nominations will be necessary for a Theology School at the University. I have not come across anything else about these nominations but this document does seem to support this notion of the secular administration of the university being frustrated both by Joseph and by the local governments once resistance commenced. Dated 12 October 1787.

<http://search.ugent.be/meercat/x/bkt01?q=900000056043>

<sup>18</sup> There is a possibility that he's writing to the Ministre des Évêques, but I have found no clear indications. I do have published letters to and from Franckenberg and Trauttmansdorff in which the Bishop addresses him as "Le Ministre." The fact that the plenipotentiary minister changed several times between 1787 and 1789 may account for the lack of precision.

theological school, he said, was dangerous and deprived the Bishops of one of their most important duties—the direction of their priests’ education. He understood the need for obedience, of course, as he had not stood in the way of the actual abolition of convents despite his protests against the measure, but he could no longer go against his conscience. Franckenberg assured the Emperor that he would not “cease to present His Majesty with the strongest representations of subjects of this importance and that touched upon the duty most essential of the Bishops.”<sup>19</sup>

True to his word, the Bishop’s complaints remained consistent. On the first of January 1788 he declared that the establishment of the general seminary, combined with the correlating suppression of Episcopal seminaries, could not be achieved “without exposing Religion, hurting [Franckenberg’s] conscience & rendering [him] guilty before God & before the entire Church.”<sup>20</sup> No doubt influenced by the opposition of their local Bishop, the students continued to flout the reforms; on 15 January 1788, when Joseph ordered the curricula again reinstated to his 1786 stipulations, “the benches [of the lecture halls] remained empty.”<sup>21</sup> February brought extreme measures, as all opposing faculty were stripped of their positions and sent into exile. In July 1788, Joseph resolved to try again, moving the entire University to Brussels and declaring a new start date for the general seminary in October. Still, calm did not return to the university town, “despite numerous interventions by the police and even by the army.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Johann Heinrich von Franckenberg, kardinaal, “Copie [d’une] lettre écrite par le Cardinal-Archevêque de Malines, à S.E. le Ministre, le 29 Décembre 1787,” 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 6. Though the document indicates only a letter from 29 Dec 1787, the file includes a letter entitled “Copie. Lettre du Cardinal Archevêque, de Malines écrite à S.E. le Ministre, le 1 Janvier 1788” and its page numbers are a continuation from the previous letter.

<sup>21</sup> Roegiers, *Un Janséniste*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 81.

By the summer, in a *representation* written to the Governors-General in response to a *dépêche* they had sent him, Franckenberg was able to go into much further detail in explaining his opposition. Maria Christina and Albert had accused him of using “Doctrine” as an opaque, obscure reason to denounce the seminary. He countered with five specific reasons: 1) the Church had been handed down by Jesus to Peter, the Apostles, and their successors and “*not to the Princes of the earth;*” 2) Joseph and his government had no authority to abolish Episcopal seminaries (which had also been re-guaranteed by the Council of Trent); 3) the proposed general seminary would reverse the “*sacerdoce*” and the “*Episcopat,*” nullifying the *Ministre des Evêques*; 4) the general seminary impinged on bishops rights since they were powerless to set curricula outside their own dioceses; and 5) the Bishops had sworn oaths to conserve and preserve the diocesan seminaries (which were locally supported) and had to maintain the right to control education in their jurisdictions.<sup>23</sup> Franckenberg used similar arguments in other letters published that year. He expressed distress, but no responsibility, for the disturbances in Leuven and blamed the Josephist professors for the students’ desertions.<sup>24</sup> The Bishop proposed his own suggestions for restoring order, including giving the Belgian bishops inspection powers as well as surveillance of the courses offered, rescinding all toleration of Protestants, and removing the new Austrian abbot professors (who were accused of heterodoxy). From a pragmatic perspective, he advised the use of Leuven’s

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<sup>23</sup> Johann Heinrich von Franckenberg, kardinaal, “Réprésentation de son eminence le cardinal archévêque de Malines à LL. AA. RR. les gouverneurs des Pays-Bas, sur la *dépêche* du 17 juillet 1788,” 13. The letter itself is not dated, though it is presumably written not long after the 17 July 1788 *dépêche* was written. Emphasis original.

<sup>24</sup> Johann Heinrich von Franckenberg, kardinaal, “Aux Etats des provinces,” 1788, 2. A series of letters by the Bishop published together, with an introduction addressed to the Estates, unsigned and undated. One of the professors he names is Josse Leplat (aka le Plat, LePlat, and Le Plat), subject of the articles by Roegiers and Miller cited above.

numerous Colleges rather than the University buildings to house all the new seminarians, thereby relieving some of the overcrowding and also giving some power back to the Bishops if the seminarians were housed by diocese.<sup>25</sup> His suggestions fell on deaf ears, as Joseph insisted his on orders.

In March 1789, Joseph ordered Franckenberg to Leuven, subtly punishing him for his opposition by asking him to oversee the curricula he so objected to and requesting a report on the seminary's (and the university's) doctrinal orthodoxy, which was constantly under suspicion in published letters and pamphlets.<sup>26</sup> That very month, two responses by Franckenberg to government *dépêches* were published. In both, he increased the virulence of his opposition, though his rhetoric remained smooth and submissive on the surface. The Bishop declared that his responsibilities throughout his diocese kept him too busy to implement Leuven's new curricula, though he did volunteer to nominate a number of new theologians who were most assuredly orthodox in their opinions.<sup>27</sup> He proposed a meeting of the Synod or general assembly of Bishops, begging Joseph to allow him to convoke either one. He continuously defended his motives, never swaying from his earlier opinions or reasons for opposition. Several times he fingered specific figures at the University, blatantly accusing them of heterodoxy and Jansenism.<sup>28</sup> Joseph and his ministers again took little notice, and repeatedly insisted the reforms go ahead. Responding to a letter written to him by Trauttmansdorff that same year, in which the Bishop was

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 3-6.

<sup>26</sup> There are many examples of this in the Leuven archives.

<sup>27</sup> Johann Heinrich von Franckenberg, kardinaal, "Reponse de son Eminence le Cardinal Archeveque de Malines, Aux deux Depêches à elle adressées en date du 24 Fevrier par le Gouvernement," 4 March 1789.

<sup>28</sup> Johann Heinrich von Franckenberg, kardinaal, "Reponse de Son Eminence le Cardinal Archevêque de Malines à la Depêche précédente," 26 March 1789 as part of the file "Lettre, et une réponse par le Cardinal-Archevêque de Malines," 1789.



threatened with “terrible orders” that would be carried out against him if he did not comply, Franckenberg declared that he could not complete his mission to determine the orthodoxy of the University if the pressure on him were not lifted.<sup>29</sup> He beseeched his sovereign to trust his intentions and actions, but may have been stalling for time. Regardless of his servant’s intentions, Joseph would be disappointed, as Franckenberg officially declared the General Seminary at Leuven non-orthodox on 16 June 1789.

Though Franckenberg does not seem to have offered opinions on the secular reforms being implemented during the late 1780s, the general seminary was not being established in a vacuum. The secular complaints to Joseph all took up the ecclesiastical cause after the January 1787 edicts, though ecclesiastical defense of the secular administration was not often present in the clergy’s writings.<sup>30</sup> Despite this lag, it is important to note that Franckenberg was using many of the same principles in his arguments that the secular officials used in their letters of grievance. He declared that Joseph had no authority to reform the university or create a general seminary. He asked to be involved in the decision-making process, citing a General Assembly of Bishops as the appropriate venue to debate such sweeping changes. Eventually, he even offered ways to make the general seminary work, for example by using the Colleges of Leuven. It was Joseph’s heavy-handed methods more than his actual reforms that caused the most consternation in the provinces.

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<sup>29</sup> Ferdinand Graf von Trauttmansdorff-Weinsberg, “Lettre. La représentation de son eminence le cardinal, archevêque de Malines, à la *dépêche* de l’Empereur [Joseph II] étant parvenu au Gouvernement-général, S. Exc. le ministre-plénipotentiaire [F.V. Trauttmansdorff-Weinsberg] lui écrivit la lettre suivante, & le Cardinal se rendit à Louvain au jour fixé d’après les Ordres de Sa Majesté,” 1789.

<sup>30</sup> The Bishops, however, would be instrumental in securing funding for the eventual armed uprising.

Brabant's Estates met in March after their initial letters of protest, written in January upon hearing of the administrative restructuring, went unanswered. Indeed, the administrative bodies throughout the provinces continued to meet and send letters, requests, and complaints to the Governors-General, the Plenipotentiary minister (at the time, the Italian Count Belgioioso), Prince Kaunitz, and the Emperor himself. Because of the legal status of the *Joyeuse Entrée* enjoyed by Brabant, Brussels became a center of activity, though each province acted in its own interests and of its own accord. The situation was exacerbated by Joseph's travels to Russia just after he issued the edicts, giving the Belgians time to organize while his ministers could not quickly or easily consult him (and he had demanded to be consulted before decisions were made).<sup>31</sup> As such, it was a busy month for the Belgian resistance to Joseph's reforms. Alongside the impost votes that traditionally took place in the spring, April was also the month in which many of the reforms stipulated in the January edicts were to come into effect, and so it was a logical time for the provincial officials to push their case harder than ever.

The provincial Estates, the Nations of Brabant, the Nobles of Flanders, and notable Brussels lawyers, to name a few, protested against Joseph's bouleversement of the provinces' "constitutions."<sup>32</sup> In Brabant, the corporate guilds, the Nations, took their own initiative alongside the Estates which had also called upon one of their prominent, privileged consulting lawyers from Brussels, Henri Van der Noot, to draw up a legal *mémoire*, or thesis, against the edicts. An important document for

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<sup>31</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 517.

<sup>32</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Belgians themselves used this nomenclature.

codifying and solidifying the resistance in 1787, many historians see the *mémoire* as the catalyst that sparked what became a revolution for independence from Austria. Independence was not at all Van der Noot's intent when he penned the legalistic defense of the *Joyeuse Entrée*, and he was not looking to lead a revolution, but the *mémoire* became a guidon for the resistance. Delivered to the Estates on 26 April, and eventually added to the remonstrations and ten points of contention written by the Estates and sent to Vienna, its sixty printed pages came to exemplify the arguments put forth by the Estates and institutions hoping to maintain the status quo and keep their historic privileges.

While Van der Noot's *mémoire* is perhaps the best known, and was the most detailed grievance at the time, it was but one of many such documents. The nobles of one of Flanders' *châtellenie* wrote to Vienna themselves, adding their voice to that of the province's Estates.<sup>33</sup> All these bodies beseeched the Emperor to rethink his policies, to reverse his orders, and, eventually, to rescind even the ecclesiastic reforms he had been enacting over the last five years. They discussed arguments of economic and pragmatic natures, their place within the Empire, ideas of contract and representation, and the merits of Joseph's reforms and methods. A close examination

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<sup>33</sup> For Pirenne, Polasky, Dumont, Hasquin, and Bitsch, the episode does not officially become a "revolution," or even a "resistance," until this document was presented to the Estates of Brabant, attached to their own *remonstrances*, and sent to Vienna at the end of the month. Why this line is drawn is somewhat unclear, though I suspect the later historiography takes it cues from Pirenne writing in the 1920s. Van der Noot's treatise was by no means the only instrument in the cacophony of outrage emanating from the provinces in April 1787, though it does exemplify the most conservative, traditionalist views prevalent at the time. (This is no surprise, given the fact that Van der Noot would come to lead the conservative faction of the Revolutionaries in two years' time, in large part because of his authorship of this *mémoire*.) The documents produced by the Brabantine Nations, one of which was an explanation and refutation of their Estates' actions, as well as the complaints from the Flemish notables, do much to round-out understanding of this first wave of organized indignation.

of a representative portion of these documents—including two of the most important Brabantine papers—demonstrates their overall arguments.<sup>34</sup>

On the eleventh of April, the Brabantine Nations sent a *Réprésentation* to the office of the Brussels magistrate, in their capacity as constituents of the Third Estate. In it, as the Flemish nobles had done, the Nation's members emphasized Joseph's oaths to uphold the traditions and constitutions of the province, asking how he could then violate these so easily. The edicts, they protested, went against the "fundamental laws" and the "constitution" of Brabant. They lamented the jobs that would be lost to the reorganization of the government, and complained of the economic woes this would cause, though without placing great emphasis on their own role in the province's prosperity, which the Flemish nobles had highlighted in their documents. They cited both the history of their charters throughout the Middle Ages and the 1714 Peace Treaty of Rastad which had given the Austrian Habsburgs the provinces. Thus, the Nations used not only contractual political theory to remind their assembly that Joseph could not do as he pleased without their input, but also reached back into the past to legitimize their claims and complaints.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> I chose the documents I analyze in detail here based on their accessibility in the archives (not every official document survives from the period), their importance (based on how historians have used them and spoken about their distribution at the time), and the fact that they represent the major points of view expressed at the time. With few exceptions (which are noted), they also represent the overall tone of resistance raised against Joseph's reforms. I had to make choices due to the immensity of the material in the archives, and its general chaotic state. In this chapter, I utilize and analyze of roughly 25 documents in detail, though I surveyed closer to 100. Many of these were taken from three volumes of "*représentations, protestations, et réclamations*" edited by François Xavier de Feller, an ex-jesuit conservative writer and publisher in the provinces, each of which contains roughly 75 pieces. These are part of a larger, 17-volume collection of material related to the revolution that was edited and printed through the *Imprimerie des Nation* between 1787 and 1790, a complete set of which is housed at the KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium. As they are organized chronologically, the later volumes are more useful for the subsequent chapters in this thesis. Each pamphlet is given its full reference as it is cited, but the full collection is also available online through the University of Ghent library: <http://lib.ugent.be/catalog/bkt01:000281723>.

<sup>35</sup> "Réprésentation faite à Messieurs du Magistrat de Cette Ville de Bruxelles Par les Nations de la même ville, Réprésentant le troisieme [sic] membre du tiers état, 11 Avril 1787," in *Reclamations des*

In his own *mémoire*, Van der Noot recited the history of Brabant, explaining that one could only understand the constitution, the *Joyeuse Entrée*, by understanding the overall history of the province. Not one to shy from extremity in rhetoric, Van der Noot reached back to ancient Rome. He claimed that, to the Romans, the Gaulois had “un Gouvernement Aristocratique” and he invoked Caesar’s quote that the “Belgae are the most courageous” of the Gauls, carefully editing out the Roman’s remarks on their barbarism.<sup>36</sup> Van der Noot invoked the many wars the Belgians had been subject to over the centuries, and their faithful payments throughout. Thus, Van der Noot was subtly referring to the payments now asked for by Vienna, reminding Joseph of the provinces’ real, and historic, financial power even as the Emperor sought to undermine their authority. This transitioned to an explanation of sovereignty in the past, which the people granted to the Prince, who was then bound by their wishes, which in turn were vetted by the Estates who would give their opinion and consent, without which the Prince could “*neither impose any subsidy, nor change the form of Government, what ever it could be, nor simply augment or decrease the value of moneys.*”<sup>37</sup> In a single paragraph, Van der Noot had invoked the people as fount of the Prince’s sovereignty, described the Estates’ role as the true expression of that people’s power, and made clear that what Joseph was trying to do—to change the form of government in the provinces—went against even Roman-era concepts of the relationship between ruler and ruled. The

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*trois États du Duché de Brabant sur les Atteintes Portées à leurs droits et Loix Constitutionnelles au nom de S.M. Joseph II, 1787, KU Leuven Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium) Double B 1679,150-158.*

<sup>36</sup> H. C. N. Vander Noot, *Mémoire sur les Droits du Peuple Brabançon et les Atteintes y Portées, au nom de S. M. L'Empereur et Roi, Depuis Quelques Années, Présenté à l'Assemblée Générale des États de ladite province, par Mr. H. C. N. Vander Noot, Avocat au Conseil Souverain de Brabant, Le 23 Avril 1787, KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), B 4952 II, (Brussels, 1787), 5.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. Emphasis original.

Estates' lawyer was making it clear that they were secure, thanks to history, in their position as voices of the people, despite their un-elected status.

On 17 April, the “Nobles, Notables, &c.” of the Châtellenie of Audenarde in Flanders sent a document of *remontrances* to the Emperor. Their premier concern was the edicts of 1 January 1787, which withdrew legally granted or purchased positions. Such positions, they noted, acquired by Flemish bourgeois and nobles over the years, had always been considered to be property, and protected by the sacred right to the same. Far from having “precarious origins,” these rights made up an “essential part” of the “national constitutions of the Province.”<sup>38</sup> The term “national constitutions” here is most likely used to refer to the whole of the Flemish province (not a Belgian nation incorporating the many provinces) but their vocabulary is thought-provoking. Although it reinforced the provincialism and regionalism of the provinces in the eighteenth century, it also firmly established certain rights as inseparable from a Flemish identity. Further, their use of “national constitutions” in the context of discussing these rights signifies that these treaties, customs, and traditions themselves reinforced a Flemish character. In violating rights to property, Joseph was not merely committing a minor illegal act, but also insulting the Flemish identity, which existed concretely in these legal terms instead of a purely cultural realm.

In sum, the Flemish nobles' *remontrances* were two-fold: 1) the attack on the right of property and 2) “the tacit annulment of the Estates & by a natural

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<sup>38</sup> “Remontrances des Nobles, Notables, &c. de la Châtellenie d’Audenarde, A Sa Majesté l’Empereur & Roi, en son conseil du Gouvernement pour les Pays-Bas,” in *Révolution Brabançonne, Gand: 1787 II*, held at University Library Ghent (Ghent, Belgium), Ref G17135 tot 17154, 2. In French: “*constitutions nationales de la Province.*”

progression, of the constitution.”<sup>39</sup> Joseph envisioned the provincial administration as nine imperial circles and accompanying intendants, a refashioning which the Flemish *Remonstrance* labelled entirely damaging. The Flemish nobles addressed the alarm coursing through the province: if the privileges of these justices could be arbitrarily removed, what would protect others? In other words, while the removal of these judges and justices would not directly affect everyone, the nobles did recognize the principles at work and feared for their own situations.<sup>40</sup>

One aspect that stands out about these *remonstrances* from Flanders, as opposed to the other April documents, is how they used economic arguments. While the Brabantine papers hinted at the economic woes the province would face—the Estates and Nations concerned themselves with the situations for those who would lose their positions as a direct consequence of the edicts—the nobles of Audenarde tied their province’s economic success to the liberties it enjoyed, guaranteed by the existence of the Estates. That representative body had governed the province for so long that it must have been the author of Flemish prosperity. Thus, the assembly should be allowed to continue to direct Flanders, which would then continue to line the coffers of the Empire.<sup>41</sup> This, they proposed, was the strongest argument in their favor; it was in Joseph’s own interest, if he wanted to continue to rule prosperous and happy territories, to halt his reforms.

As proof of this happiness and prosperity, and the benefits it produced in Vienna, the Flemish nobles’ *Remonstrances* described the history of their province, which had always been faithful and loyal. The Flemish population, these nobles

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 6.

assured Joseph, felt that even to doubt his love for them was a crime.<sup>42</sup> Being part of the empire was important and it seems that an integral part of being Flemish (and, more broadly, Belgian) was contributing faithfully to this collective entity. In return, the provinces had earned autonomy and a level of self-government they saw as intrinsic to their success. Rhetorically, repeated emphases on loyalty were expected expressions of obedience in the eighteenth century. It was important that those petitioning Vienna not incriminate themselves as libelous or insubordinate, lest they be fined, censured, or arrested. Predictably, each document in turn pledged the solid love, faith, and obedience of the inhabitants to their sovereigns throughout the ages, including Joseph himself. Such rhetoric demonstrated the ultimate injustice of his actions as the authors saw it: a people who were so loyal did not deserve to have their liberties violated.

Similarly, Van der Noot's *mémoire* began with an assertion that his document was in no way an indictment of the monarchy. In presenting a legal *mémoire* to the aggrieved Brabantine Estates, he intended to "propose grievances without incurring any indignation or disgrace from His Majesty or any other." His document, he assured his audience in Brussels and those who would read it in Vienna, would demonstrate "my loyalty to my Prince and Sovereign of my dedication to service, and my love for the Fatherland."<sup>43</sup> He successfully suggested unwillingness to take the path he and the province were approaching. It must be remembered that these devices were often employed in the eighteenth century, especially when a ruler was being criticized, to protect the author from sanction, imprisonment, or worse. Still,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Van der Noot, *Mémoire sur les Droits*, 4.



given the nods to this sentiment in the other documents, typified by entreaties to Joseph to ignore faulty advice from advisors and be the sovereign the provinces deserved, it cannot be dismissed. A degree of loyalty to Joseph and the Empire, or at the very least proving such loyalty, was genuine in the Belgian provinces. The fact that this loyalty would erode over the next few years speaks to the fluctuating nature of Belgian identity at the time. As the Flemish documents demonstrate, belonging to the Empire as loyal subjects was an important element of how the officials and pamphlet authors viewed themselves and their countrymen throughout the Southern Netherlands in 1787.

When he began to discuss the *Joyeuse Entrée*, Van der Noot's rhetoric mounted in a show of provincialism. Over the centuries, the province's successive sovereigns had agreed to the constitution, he assured the Estates (and Joseph, who would read the *mémoire* in Vienna) out of "valor, attachment, & liberty," which the Brabantines had also always felt toward their Princes, "more than all other Belges."<sup>44</sup> The phrase simultaneously evoked the uniqueness and importance of Brabant and exhibited a belief in a broader, *Belge* identity. Though Van der Noot sought to confirm the importance of Brabant, he equally displayed an acceptance of a Belgianness that included all the provinces of the Southern Netherlands as one. That the Brabantines could be best at loyally serving an empire solidified their identity two-fold, weaving the national consciousness into and on top of their regional attachment, and vice versa.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>45</sup> This recalls Abigail Green's points about German nationalism, in which smaller state constitutions and state apparatuses, as well as patriotisms, "offered an alternative political channel through which this national feeling could express itself." Green, "Political Institutions," 326.

Van der Noot felt additionally compelled to reiterate for his audience that he was not meant to speak for or to the other provinces.<sup>46</sup> His assignment had come from the Estates of Brabant and his concern in writing the *mémoire* was limited to that province alone. This little aggrandizement of the Brabantines vis-à-vis the other provinces was typical of Van der Noot's interpretation of his charge. Throughout the resistance and revolution, despite his leadership in a movement that would become pan-provincial, he maintained a Brabant-centered focus, always emphasizing his own province's status and power.

In a choice that would prove decisive, the Flemish nobles anchored their grievances in the relationship between sovereign and subjects. They tied every right and privilege under attack to the oaths Joseph had sworn upon assuming power. "Can there be a bond more sacred, than that by which Kings are tied to their people?" they asked.<sup>47</sup> Again and again over the next two years, this question would dominate the arguments made by the Belgians. Regardless of the merit of his reforms, to have gone against the promises made upon his coronation was the ultimate crime, and Joseph, consciously or not, had committed it.

On 19 April, the Brabantine Estates sent a letter to the Governors General in response to a request they had received for a continuation of the government's taxes. These they had refused to vote earlier in that day's session, instead sending an explanation and list of nine points against which they demanded resolutions.<sup>48</sup> In explaining their position, the Estates referenced the violations of the "essence of our

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<sup>46</sup> Van der Noot, *Mémoire sur les Droits*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> "Remontrances des Nobles, Notables, &c. de la Châtellenie d'Audenarde," 3.

<sup>48</sup> Pirenne (1926), 425. "Lettre des Seigneurs États de Brabant, En date du 19 Avril 1787 À leurs Altesses Royales, Par laquelle ils font connoître leur mécontentement des infractions portées à la Joyeuse Entrée," KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), 1787, 14-15.

fundamental constitution,” and declared that their consciences could not let them vote the payments, especially in light of the complete lack of response their earlier complaints had received. Thus, they were already comfortably using the language of liberal ideas of government, leaning on old concepts of contractual authority, and expressing an exceptionalism of their own.

The next day, the Estates published an explanation of the letter sent to Maria Christina and Albert, along with the list of nine specific points they wanted resolved. It clarified that some deputies had had an audience with the plenipotentiary minister; but they were not, readers were assured, trying to take sovereign power by arguing with the Governors. Rather they were pointing out that the new governmental positions outlined in the decrees from Vienna were contrary to the *Joyeuse Entrée*, as they could only be legally created with agreement and consent between the sovereign and the Estates. This was similar to the Flemish nobles’ request to be involved in Joseph’s deliberations. Though the Brabantine Estates were not making as explicit a request, they were implying that being consulted would greatly appease their grievances. Indeed, the Brabantine Estates’ description was intriguing, as it indicated sovereign power rested squarely with Joseph and his government in Vienna, and by extension its representatives in the provinces, such as the Governors, which a published explanation of the letter purposefully emphasized, saying they had no intention of “meddling at all with the exercise of sovereignty.”<sup>49</sup> Yet the Estates equally claimed authority, in this case the power to create jobs in the province. Authority to do so, as the Estates saw it, was not simply idealistic, but real, as illustrated by their power of the purse: “Our conscience will not allow us to give our

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<sup>49</sup> “Interprétation de la susdite lettre, faite à leurs Altesses Royales, par les Etats de Brabant, le 20 avril 1787,” KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), 1787, 16.

consent to the Imposts, as long as the infractions against the *Joyeuse Entrée* are not addressed.”<sup>50</sup> Consent from the Estates was a prerequisite, and the members invoked it strongly as part of contractual government understood in the provinces, yet this interpretation would also appear to give the provinces some measure of their own sovereignty. This apparent contradiction, and the fact that both sides seem to have been accepted simultaneously, indicates some intellectual acceptance of divided sovereignty.

Divided sovereignty was a new issue in the eighteenth century. It had been at the heart of the intellectual elements of the American Revolution. “Popular sovereignty,” the idea that it was the people who invested their rulers with authority to govern, stemmed from seventeenth-century English notions of representation in Parliament.<sup>51</sup> Colonists in North America, in adapting political theories for life on the far side of the Atlantic Ocean had come to favor actual representation over virtual representation, solidifying a perception that it was constituents and their consent that allowed a given body or person to reign. Michael Kammen writes, “For the colonial assemblies [in the North American colonies] somehow to divide and share sovereignty with the King and Parliament was inconceivable to the British; but to the colonists it seemed, increasingly, both natural and inevitable.”<sup>52</sup> After the American Revolution, these ideas gained more traction in Britain and Europe, especially when combined with Montesquieu’s balance of power, as the new US government attempted to do. One key element was a clear difference between divided

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<sup>50</sup> “Lettre des Seigneurs États,” 15.

<sup>51</sup> Edmund Morgan traces its lineage in his excellent work *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America*.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Kammen, *Sovereignty and Liberty: Constitutional Discourse in American Culture* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 17.

sovereignty and shared sovereignty. In the case of the Belgians, it is clear that the Estates and the authors of the many pamphlets refuting Joseph's reforms felt the provincial governments shared in the sovereignty allocated by their inhabitants. Van der Noot, after all, continuously reminded his audience in the Estates that they were the "representatives of the people." In part, this stemmed from pragmatism, just as it had for the Americans. Kammen reminds his readers that, "A pluralistic people scattered across a vast landscape found itself quite comfortable with the notion of divided sovereignty."<sup>53</sup> While the Belgians did not engage in constitutional theory debates as the Americans did and did not mean to diminish the sovereign's rightful rule, they had come to see their provincial governments, autonomous from the imperial government since Charles V had reigned, as imbued with a certain amount of authority in the governing process since not every matter could wait for word from the metropole. Consequently, the consent of the Estates, the voice of the people, was important. The Brabantine Estates' list directly addressed concerns that Joseph was ignoring his constituents.

The nine points the Estates wanted resolved included that the infractions against abbeys and other houses of God be righted; seigniorial justices remain intact; judges and officers to swear to the *Joyeuse Entrée* rather than any other power; and that those turned out or made to suffer due to the changes be reimbursed either by royal or provincial funds, especially as "la loi constitutionnelle" guaranteed those positions for life. The demand that all officials and judges swear their oaths directly to the constitution struck a chord of particular power, as it actively put authority back into the Estates's, or at least the province's, hands and would ensure it stayed there.

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<sup>53</sup> Kammen, 18.

It also served to somewhat undermine Vienna's power by preventing judges and officers from swearing an oath to the government in Austria. The final point, concerning those who would lose their positions and income, displayed a remarkable concern for the real-life consequences of Joseph's actions. Here, the Estates' grievance was not entirely selfless, though of course the question of life-long pensions potentially paid from provincial coffers was no small matter; but the overarching consternation seems to have stemmed from legitimate anxiety over the welfare of those who would be made redundant by Joseph's reforms.<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to note a parallel here with the ecclesiastical grievances, especially regarding Joseph's closure of contemplative monasteries and convents; the brothers, priests, and particularly nuns turned out of their homes were painted with sympathetic brushstrokes far beyond the simple power struggle over the jurisdiction they fell under. The misunderstanding between Joseph and his Southern Netherlandish subjects proved deep; where he saw only mechanical reforms, they saw lives disrupted.

Similarly, the Flemish nobles were apparently aware of speaking selfishly, defending interests beneficial only to them, and they took steps to preempt such an accusation. In a move not repeated by the Brabantine Estates, the *Notables* of Audenarde told their audience (and themselves) that they were airing grievances held by the entire province, not illegitimately speaking for others. They assured their Emperor that, "consternation was general throughout all the orders, & as much in the countryside as in the towns; the number of families more or less ruined, Sire, would

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<sup>54</sup> "Remonstrances des Nobles, Notables, &c. de la Châtellenie d'Audenarde," 7.

bring tears to your eyes, if the tableau were painted before them.”<sup>55</sup> While the Nations of Brabant would accuse the Estates, only once, of overstepping their bounds by speaking for the whole people, the Brabantine assembly never attempted to justify themselves apart from statements confirming that they did, beyond a shadow of a doubt, have the right to represent all Brabantines. This assumption was critical, as it informed moves after independence was achieved. The provincial Estates and then the Congress in which their members concurrently sat purported to speak for all the peoples of their provinces and the eventual United States of Belgium, regardless of class or whether they had voted for the representatives. As the editor of one published version of Van der Noot’s *mémoire* wrote in a brief preface to the work, the Brabantine Estates were “all at once the Fathers and the Representatives” of the “*Peuple*.”<sup>56</sup> The fact that the Flemish nobles anticipated the question of the Estates’ legitimacy in speaking for the people—and answered it seriously—shows that notions of representation and sovereignty were not uniform throughout the provinces. Yet this response—that they were an appropriate voice for collective concerns—indicated that they ultimately adhered to the same ideas. No one had voted for them and yet they felt justified in speaking for the province as a whole.

The Brabantine Estates’ nine points of grievance were accompanied, in an edition published on 30 April, by an interpretation and response by the Nations.<sup>57</sup>

While the two bodies would come to espouse the same arguments, and the many

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “AVIS AU LECTEUR,” to *Mémoire sur les Droits du Peuple Brabançon et les Atteintes y Portées, au nom de S. M. L'Empereur et Roi, Depuis Quelques Années, Présenté à l'Assemblée Générale des États de ladite province, par Mr. H. C. N. Vander Noot, Avocat au Conseil Souverain de Brabant*, Le 23 Avril 1787, KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), B 4952 II, (Brussels, 1787), I.

<sup>57</sup> “Remontrance des Neuf Nations, Par laquelle elles protestent contre la Première Instance, Capitaines de Cercles, &c. ‘A Messeigneurs les États de Brabant,’” Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), Double B 1679, 1787.

provinces would eventually coordinate their arguments and resistance efforts, the Nations' interpretation betrayed some discord among the official bodies in Brabant. Notable is a passage in which the Nations questioned the Estates' place in even asking for a favorable resolution from the Imperial Government "with which, regarding the aforementioned agreement, they have nothing in common."<sup>58</sup> This arose, it appears, from the fact that the Nations read the inaugural pact as existing between the Duke and the People, whom the Estates could represent but not replace. The Nations were making a distinction of degrees. The Estates represented the people with regard to internal decisions, but did they have the power to negotiate with the Imperial Government regarding administration? Perhaps Vienna or the Governors-General ought to negotiate with the likes of the Nations or other manifestations of the People (whatever that may mean), rather than only the Estates. Given the fact that the 1 January edicts were meant to diminish the power of the Estates considerably, the proposal was not entirely absurd. It was somewhat of a one-off, however, since the Nations went on to defend the traditions and constitution of Brabant to the teeth.

The Nations declared that they could not see how it would be possible to demand favorable resolutions that would satisfy His Majesty since the proposed reforms (and presumably, any solution Joseph would agree to) were diametrically opposed to the *Joyeuse Entrée*.<sup>59</sup> They took each specific grievance and explained either their opposition to the Brabantine Estates' handling thereof or how no solution could possibly be satisfactory. Point by point, the Nations contested the Estates'

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.



handling of negotiations, questioning the legitimacy of the *remonstrances* sent to the Governors. They saw many of the compromises proposed by the Estates as potential violations of the constitution by the very body meant to be protecting it. Eventually, the Nations accused the Estates of not taking pragmatic realities into consideration. The justice system reforms seemed to ignore, for example, the travel difficulties that would arise if judges were reallocated in new ways. Not only that, but they pointed out that the Estates trampled the very traditions they claimed to want to protect.<sup>60</sup> Essentially the Nations, while complimenting the Estates on their zeal, accused the representative body of wasting time in negotiating something that would never be acceptable, for it would always violate the *Joyeuse Entrée* to introduce clauses of non-permanence to government offices, to create imperial circles administered by intendants, or to presuppose new judges and officials. For the Nations, the Brabantine Estates had done far too much to attempt compromise with the Emperor and his reforms when they should have been more rigorously upholding the *Joyeuse Entrée*. This was, of course, in large part a product of the Nations being one of the most privileged groups in a province where “privilege defined relationships between the component parts . . . of society,” hoping to hold to the special treatments originally granted to them centuries before.<sup>61</sup> This also appears to be the only time the authority of the Brabant Estates was called into question by any official body.

When it came to Joseph himself, the *Joyeuse Entrée* continued to form a contract between the Duke of Brabant and the “Peuple Brabançon,” as Van der Noot’s *mémoire* emphasized, “you, MESSEIGNEURS, in contracting with the Duke,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>61</sup> Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France*, 33.

you contract in the name, & as representing all the people.”<sup>62</sup> In essence, he confirmed for all that the Estates were proclaiming themselves representative of each and every person in Brabant, something which, Henri Pirenne posits, was not at all contested by a people who had no hesitation in recognizing the body as such, despite the Nations’ single, emphatic protest on this score.<sup>63</sup> This is reflective of the passive sovereignty characteristic of the British system, especially before the American Revolution. In seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, sovereignty “resided in the people at large and reached the representatives without the people at large doing anything to confer it.”<sup>64</sup> A similar mechanism was thus at work in the Southern Netherlands. The Estates were already, in their eyes and the eyes of their lawyers like Van der Noot, representative of the people. For them to announce this as such and assume the power to protest on the people’s behalf did not require consultation of the actual constituency. In large part due to the reception of Van der Noot’s *mémoire*, and the fact that the Nations did not again publish an open challenge to the Estates’ position as spokesmen for the people at large became the predominantly accepted interpretation.

The Audenarde nobles concluded by asking for a retraction of the two offending *Diplômes*, and that Joseph include their Estates in his grand plans. This differed from the majority of the documents produced during this period of resistance, in that these Flemish nobles did not focus their final energy on condemning Joseph’s initiatives. Of course they had protested against the reforms

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<sup>62</sup> Van der Noot, “Mémoire sur les Droits,” 9-10.

<sup>63</sup> Pirenne (1926), 423. This total acceptance was not entirely the case, as the Nations took some issue with this point and the democrats would contest it after independence.

<sup>64</sup> Morgan, 49. See also Horst Dippel, “The Changing Idea of Popular Sovereignty in Early American Constitutionalism: Breaking Away from European Patterns,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 16 no. 1 (Spring 1996): 21-45.

proposed and objected that the circles and intendants were entirely damaging to the country, but their final point was a plea to be involved and included in deliberations. The subtle distinction was that their larger grievance was with Joseph's methods, not necessarily his outcomes.

In contrast, Van der Noot's *mémoire* took up the merits of the edicts of 1 January 1787. The reform of the provincial governments directly threatened the Estates themselves, and the lawyer had been specifically commissioned by the Brabantine body to refute the edicts. Van der Noot quoted the violated articles of the *Joyeuse Entrée* at length before coming to the conclusion that, "this same ordinance, or Edict, is so diametrically opposed to the commitments that his Majesty has taken, & has promised under oath to uphold & observe vis-à-vis the Brabantine people," that it had not been validated by the Conseil de Brabant and was therefore not to be enforced.<sup>65</sup> This resistance, steeped in law, was further strengthened by the first, fifth, and fifty-ninth articles of the *Joyeuse Entrée*, the use of which by Van der Noot showed a meticulous adherence to law and detail, firmly placing the resistance in a powerful legal framework.

Van der Noot dissected the edicts clause by clause, refuting each of Joseph's initiatives using constitutional arguments. His pleas became more and more theatrical, in the style of the day, as he fell away from the neutral position that his *mémoire* was not meant to undermine Joseph II, and openly spoke to the despotism on display with the reforms. Always cautious not to tread too far, however, he

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<sup>65</sup> Van der Noot, *Mémoire sur les Droits*, 27.

included assurances that, despite all these examples, their sovereign was just and equitable, with nothing but the happiness of the provinces in mind.<sup>66</sup>

From a more pragmatic perspective, the lawyer turned to the logistics of the proposed government reforms, which he predictably found wanting, just as the Estates, Nations, and Flemish nobles had. Van der Noot attempted to prove the impossibility of Joseph's reforms on the basis of realistic implementation. How could a single deputy represent the Estates of Brabant, for example? Furthermore, how would this deputy be paid? By Vienna? By the Estates? If the deputy were at the direct behest of the Emperor, surely he would not, then, have the province's needs and wants as his priorities, something the Estates, as members of the community themselves, always would.<sup>67</sup> Here was a frank willingness to question Joseph's logistics and planning, beyond simply protesting against the Emperor's right to dictate reforms writ large. Again and again, the *mémoire* came back to the idea of the governmental contract that Joseph was violating, impressing upon its audience that the Estates were not violating any codes of conduct or committing any grave sin against their Sovereign, as it was he who was in the wrong by proposing edicts and reforms that directly contradicted the constitutional contract. "Consequently the aforementioned Diplôme [was] diametrically opposed to [the Emperor's] contract, to his promise, & to his oath. What can one, or what should one expect from he who transgresses his given word, his contract, good faith, & even his oath?"<sup>68</sup> More even than political hand-slapping, Van der Noot seemed to be accusing Joseph of personal shortfalls, of moral lapses unbecoming to a sovereign. Van der Noot was coming

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 55.

close to questioning Joseph's very leadership. For, if he believed that a deputy in the Prince's employ could never be beholden to both the province's interests and those of the Sovereign – interests that he had dubbed “diametrically opposed” – then Van der Noot could not believe that the Sovereign's interests were beneficial to the province.

In all the protests issued after 1787, the treatment of the Church by Joseph was a point of contention, used against him as an overarching proof of his despotism, despite the fact that there had been little protest when Joseph originally announced and implemented the ecclesiastic reforms. As Beales notes, “Whereas the nobility and other laymen had not felt inclined to fight for the preservation of contemplative monasteries, they now backed churchmen, secular and regular, in opposition to the emperor's programme of further church reform.”<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, the section in Van der Noot's *mémoire* that specified Brabant's grievances, began with the 17 March 1783 ordinance to suppress “useless convents,” something suddenly seen as “la premiere pierre d'achappement de toutes les infractions faites à ses engagements, depuis son avènement au trône.”<sup>70</sup> This subtle biblical reference—“He will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall,” Isaiah 8:14—was not only indicative of the highly Catholic nature of society in the Southern Netherlands but also hinted at the wholeheartedness with which the secular powers would now take up ecclesiastical causes. While adding the caveat that he was utterly convinced that Joseph's actions were not deliberate attempts to destroy the provinces' “rights & privileges,” the fact that Van der Noot

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<sup>69</sup> Beales, *Prosperity*, 218.

<sup>70</sup> Van der Noot, *Mémoire sur les Droits*, 12.

started off with grievances against anti-ecclesiastic measures was a testament to the strength of support for the Church, albeit belated, its importance to the Belgians, and the interconnectedness of secular and ecclesiastic issues in the Belgian provinces at the time. Recalling ecclesiastical transgressions on the part of the sovereign equally served a useful purpose for the Brabantine lawyer, a purpose that perhaps explains why political resistance to these church reforms came so long after their implementation. Van der Noot and other protesters recognized the genuine Belgian attachment to the clergy, and they used it and built on it to make it an even more integral part of Belgian identity as a way to buttress their political resistance. Making the Church, and institutions like the University at Leuven, integral to Brabantine and broader Belgian identity made Joseph's violations all the more insulting.

In concluding, Van der Noot's *mémoire* emphasized the idea that the Brabantines were not wrong to resist Joseph's reforms, a sentiment echoed in all the other April complaint documents. The Brussels lawyer quoted a passage from the fifty-ninth article of the *Joyeuse Entrée*, which explicitly allowed for disobedience in the case of a Sovereign neglecting his duties or breaking his word. The Estates' lawyer recommended sending deputies to Vienna to speak to Joseph directly, again citing contractual government as providing their right to do so. They needed no permission from the Government to send a delegation, certainly not if it was a representative committee sent to negotiate with one party of their legal contract, he assured them. This was an important distinction, as Vienna would request a delegation only a few weeks later, and the Estates of several provinces would find

the summons insulting. The final sentence of the *mémoire* was reserved for a last assurance that it had been written out of attachment to Prince and Patrie.<sup>71</sup>

Though nothing concrete came of the April documents, the rate of publications did not abate and the resistance only continued to strengthen throughout 1787. On the first of May, the Estates of Namur, one of the southern-most provinces, wrote to the Governors-General seeking permission to sit in assembly following receipt of the 1 January Diplômes. They complained that they had already made this request on 27 March but had yet to hear anything back. The reforms were beginning to be enacted by Austrian officials, causing much alarm and “douleur” in the province.<sup>72</sup> As was swiftly becoming the norm, the province’s main grievance was founded in Joseph’s violation of the oaths he had sworn to protect the “constitution” of Namur. That oath was, once again, considered a “pacte constitutionnel” between the sovereign and his subjects.<sup>73</sup>

Four days later, on 5 May the Estates of Flanders sent a new *Représentation* to the Emperor, a document that was much more forgiving of innovation than Van der Noot and the Brabantine Nations had been. In many ways, it resembled the spirit of the first *remontrances* written by the Brabantine Estates, who were then harshly criticized by their Nations. Without the presence of a powerful, conservative guild voice in Flanders, the Flemish Estates were more open to innovation, and they continued mainly to object to Joseph’s methods. The ecclesiastical reforms were mentioned, again speaking to the interwoven nature of state and religion in the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>72</sup> “Représentation des États de Namur, A Leurs ALTESSES ROYALES, à Bruxelles,” in *Révolution Brabançonne, Gand: 1787 II* held at University Library Ghent (Ghent, Belgium), Ref G17135 tot 17154, 1 May 1787, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 10.

provinces. Writing with more pragmatism than drama, the Flemish Estates explained the specifics of their justice system, emphasizing that they did not desire to see abuses—“if there existed any”—left unpunished, but that they simply could not accept any reforms that went against the constitution.<sup>74</sup> The fact that the Estates of Flanders employed this argument spoke not only to their more progressive stance compared to the Estates of Brabant but also indicated the still-forming intellectual arguments of the resistance.

#### CHARLES D’OUTREPONT AND JOSEPH’S METHODS CONTESTED

The intellectual malleability of the initial protests against Joseph’s reforms shone through when Charles Lambert d’Outrepoint presented his considerations on the constitutions to the Estates of Brabant on 23 May. Though he was a lawyer to the Conseil de Brabant, d’Outrepoint’s pamphlet was presented to the Estates and read aloud in their General Assembly. Like the Flemish Estates, d’Outrepoint allowed for some legitimacy of Joseph’s reforms in principle, but his *Considérations* consisted of thirty-two pages defending the resistance to them.

D’Outrepoint’s opening asked his audience to consider the broader, century-wide implications of their struggle. The eighteenth century was one of liberty: “she triumphs in America ; what will be her fate in the Austrian Low Countries?”<sup>75</sup>

Echoing an argument made by the Nations in their Remonstrance, the Conseil’s lawyer reminded the Estates that their province had “a wise constitution which had

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<sup>74</sup> “Représentation faite A SA MAJESTE L’EMPEREUR, Par les Députés des Etats de Flandre, en date du 5 Mai 1787,” in *Révolution Brabançonne, Gand: 1787 II* held at University Library Ghent (Ghent, Belgium), Ref G17135 tot 17154, 12-23.

<sup>75</sup> D’Outrepoint, “Considérations,” 3-4.



placed the Laws precisely between the Throne and the People.”<sup>76</sup> Unlike Henri Van der Noot and, to a degree, the Flemish nobles, d’Outrepoint clearly placed the emphasis on the People, not the Estates or assemblies. This argument would eventually grow to be one of the major differences between conservative and democratic revolutionaries after June 1789. His *Considérations* thus represented a first move toward stronger emphasis on the people as more than passive patrons of the government. He invoked them as the font of sovereignty while Van der Noot and the earlier *représentations* had glossed over the relationship between the people and the provincial governments, simply pointing out that the latter naturally represented the former.

Like the other documents written in defense of Belgian liberties against Joseph’s reforms, d’Outrepoint used history to legitimize his arguments. Several times throughout his *Considérations*, the lawyer combined these history lessons with more philosophical musings, at times shifting his arguments to a general discussion of the inefficiency of tyranny as a method of governing. In warning that sovereigns ought not to employ despotism against their own subjects, d’Outrepoint compared Phillip II, the Emperor who had lost the seven northern provinces in the sixteenth century, to Nero.<sup>77</sup> Oppression, he indicated, actually made people lazier, as it was only the enjoyment of their own liberties that spurred them into purposeful action. He quoted historians on the effect that Phillip’s disastrous policies had had on the provinces, building toward an argument that would warn Joseph of the consequences of his actions.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

At one point, d’Outrepoint even cautioned Joseph to be aware of the international implications of his bad behavior toward the provinces. It was essential that a ruler fulfill his obligations, the lawyer advised, because not only did broken promises give the population a bad example, they lowered Joseph in the esteem of other countries who might contract with him, eventually harming the people.<sup>78</sup> The tone of this cautionary advice to a ruler—as though spoken to an errant child—contained a selfish element as well, as a Prince whose international standing was in jeopardy would negatively affect the provinces. An added advantage in this line of attack was that it allowed Belgian writers to implicitly comment on Joseph’s own character, by comparing him with the sovereign that had caused the United Provinces to secede.

Explicitly, d’Outrepoint clarified that where Phillip II had been a true despot—again, the Nero of the his age—intent on destroying the culture and liberty of the Low Countries, Joseph offered a distinct contrast: “Worthy rival of Marcus Aurelius, he announced in his way of life, that Princes are born for their subjects, that their subjects are not born for them, & that there are only enemies of the Prince, who separate his interests from those of the State.”<sup>79</sup> Like the American revolutionaries had hoped about George III, d’Outrepoint expressed a sincere hope that Joseph himself were not to blame for the upheaval, but that others had woefully misguided him. If only Joseph were confronted with the reality of his actions as the Estates of Brabant had wished, he would see the effects on families thrown out of their homes, and, as Van der Noot had implied in his flatteries of the Emperor, would see his

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 21.

error. Indeed, d'Outrepoint wondered aloud why Joseph's advisors did not remind him that Phillip II's policies had not worked. Past and precedent ought to be able to teach both parties how to resolve their differences. History had shown that alarm bells must ring when the constitutions were violated, regardless of the merit of the goals.

Moreover, a powerful argument was to be made in chastizing Joseph for assuming the same laws were appropriate to any and all his lands.<sup>80</sup> Joseph had, over the course of his lifetime, “somehow become imbued with the conviction that all the lands he ruled ought to be governed in exactly the same way, that he must have the same absolute power over every province, that no differentiation was fair or could be beneficial, and that only thus could the Monarchy be made into a proper state and achieve its full potential.”<sup>81</sup> “Yet,” for d'Outrepoint, “the form of the Government must be adapted to the character of the people one intends to govern.”<sup>82</sup> The “Belges,” the Conseil's lawyer emphasized, were a people in a country quite apart from the Austrians. This was an important manifestation of the growing national consciousness in the intellectual community of the provinces. That they were not Austrian or Silesian or any other thing meant they were legitimately something else—legitimately Belgian. Though d'Outrepoint wrote for the Brabantine Estates, much of his language addressed the Southern Netherlands at large—whose inhabitants he definitively called *les Belges*—and he pondered their national character. As such, d'Outrepoint was also making one of the first contributions to the

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<sup>80</sup> Beales illustrates Joseph's views on this subject well, and they do clash directly with the opinions d'Outrepoint expresses on the matter. See especially the section on Belgium in Chapter 14, “‘Just one body, uniformly governed’: Hungary, the Tyrol, Italy and Belgium, 1784 to 1787,” in Beales, *Joseph*, 499-525.

<sup>81</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 63.

<sup>82</sup> D'Outrepoint, “Considérations,” 26.

collectivity that would come out of the resistance to the Emperor's reforms. As the provincial bodies sent similar protests and complaints to the imperial government, they came to see their cause as a common one, and d'Outrepoint's *Considérations* was one of the first iterations of this realization.

D'Outrepoint investigated this character and the portrayal of his countrymen to Joseph, wondering aloud whether they had been misrepresented to the Emperor, leaving him unable to judge their needs or abilities adequately. This was especially relevant for d'Outrepoint with regard to filling posts with foreigners. He pointed out that when Phillip wanted to turn the Belgians into slaves, he inundated the provinces with Spanish officials. What, then, should the Belgians think of the fact that Joseph was sending them Germans?<sup>83</sup>

Regarding their national character as portrayed to the Sovereign, d'Outrepoint confronted the image of his countrymen candidly. "Our bonhomme has been confused with weakness, & our submission with cowardice ... we have been presented the shackles of slavery as if we had asked for them ourselves."<sup>84</sup> The difference between a free and an enslaved people, according to d'Outrepoint, was that an enslaved people only recognized force and thus reacted with force and violence; a free people abstained from violence as long as possible in favor of the laws in which they had faith "& it is this hope, that the virtues & the resolve of the representatives of the people have cemented, that has rendered, SIRE, your Belgian people so docile at the very moment their liberties expire."<sup>85</sup> The *remonstrances*, supplications, and grievances were not weak documents by a people too cowardly to take up arms—

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 29.

they were the mark of a people accustomed to their liberty and used to defending it through legal channels.

Where d’Outrepoint refrained from examining the merit of Joseph’s measures themselves, he beseeched his sovereign to realize that uniformity was not possible in such a patchwork empire as his. The reforms Joseph was attempting to enact were already in place in most of the lands belonging to the Monarchy, but d’Outrepoint reminded his sovereign that, for example, the export and import activity that was so vital to the Belgian economy was not nearly as significant in Austria, and the same bureaucratic system would and could not work in the two very different countries. Belgium was not to be lumped in with Joseph’s other holdings. In fact, d’Outrepoint was playing on rumors and fears of such fusion, some stemming from the very real project Joseph had entertained of exchanging Belgium for Bavaria. Above all, despotism, declared d’Outrepoint, bred horrific crimes of a kind that were not found in Belgium, but were daily reported in newspapers from Vienna.<sup>86</sup> The remedy to unrest and crime, as d’Outrepoint saw it—and in opposition to Van der Noot and the more conservative members of the Estates—was consultation with the people. Subjects of a sovereign must be consulted, and happiness reigned when this was the case, as the Flemish nobles had also pointed out.

D’Outrepoint went on to compare the resistance bubbling in the Belgian provinces with more contemporary examples. “Let us glance at America,” he directed his audience. There, Spanish colonies suffered under oppression, serving no purpose beyond enriching the coffers of their motherland. In the “Anglo” colonies, though, republicans had triumphed and been lost to “England,” to her deficit, as she

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.,12-13.

had sought to make them slaves rather than embrace them as brothers. Suddenly, historic examples conveyed a heavier warning. Here d'Outrepoint was implicitly comparing the actions of the Belgian provinces with those of the 13 colonies that became the United States of America. The parallel was unmistakable, including the issue of taxation as central to questions of power and authority.<sup>87</sup> The links to the British world became even more salient, as d'Outrepoint addressed the constitutions themselves in an entertaining rhetorical flourish. “. . . You who have served as model to the brilliant Charter of England & who is equally as perfect as she; perish the monster who has suggested to the August Joseph II to annul you!”<sup>88</sup> Combining admiration of England with praise for the *Joyeuse Entrée* and advice to Joseph, d'Outrepoint was thus raising Belgium to that standard and thereby demanding the same international respect.

Eventually, d'Outrepoint would bring these two strands together by emphasizing the skills of the Belgians, who he claimed had influenced the Magna Carta with their government as a modern hybrid of republics and monarchies. The most striking example d'Outrepoint employed was that of Belgian industry. “The English, the French, the Spanish have received from us the first lessons of industrialization...”<sup>89</sup> Similarly, trade was a centuries-old experience for the Belgians, forever situated at a crossroads, and its success was facilitated by their mix of republican and monarchical government. “Yet, SIRE, this commerce will never flourish, except in the shade of a Government as Republican as Monarchical:

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<sup>87</sup> Nor was it only d'Outrepoint who made this comparison, though his was the first and most coherent link this early in the resistance to Joseph's reforms. “People related the events in Belgium to the recent American Revolution: even Kaunitz made the comparison in writing to Joseph.” [Beales, *Joseph*, 514.]

<sup>88</sup> D'Outrepoint, “Considérations,” 22.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

Despotism kills [commerce], because arbitrary authority, being able to silence the Laws when it pleases, robs all confidence from subjects as well as foreigners.”<sup>90</sup>

Whether the governments of the Belgian provinces actually straddled a system of republican and monarchical systems was immaterial. It is important to note that, like many of the other aggrieved documents published in 1787, d’Outrepoint used economic arguments to refute Joseph’s actions, similar to what the Estates of Flanders or the Nations of Brabant had done. Those bodies had tied the effects of Joseph’s specific reforms to economic woes, while d’Outrepoint was making the larger argument that free government created free enterprise.

This attack on Joseph’s political philosophy was in keeping with d’Outrepoint’s self-appointed goal. Where Van der Noot attacked Joseph’s reforms for their content as well as their style, d’Outrepoint showed himself more willing to concede the need for new ideas and some fresh perspectives in the provinces. In contrast to Van der Noot’s *mémoire* or the Remonstrances issued by Brabant’s Estates and Nations, which very much judged the content of Joseph’s decrees, d’Outrepoint explicitly told his audience that this was not his objective: “I do not examine at present, if the new plan of reform is good or bad in faith: I will only observe that its goodness can never be but relative.”<sup>91</sup> For d’Outrepoint, the method of Joseph’s reforms was much more insulting than the content. Joseph’s motivations, imperial officials had told the Belgians, stemmed from questions of abuse. The Flemish nobles had countered that if correcting abuses were the aim—though they denied that any such abuses existed—the proper channels must still be observed. D’Outrepoint

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 11.

echoed that sentiment, saying, “There is abuse chez nous, they say. – The greatest abuses are neither in our constitutions nor in our Laws, but in the inobservance of one or the other.”<sup>92</sup> If Joseph wanted to correct abuses, he should consult the Estates of each province, not least because they were physically there and “know the needs of their countrymen, & have no interest in abusing Your Majesty.”<sup>93</sup> It was impossible to correct abuses using Joseph’s methods without doing as much harm as good.

These arguments supported a main theme: that Joseph’s measures were damaging the provinces overall, something d’Outrepoint’s audience would have expected to hear. His admission that the sovereign was “doing evil but for doing good,” however, necessarily implied that some good was meant by Joseph’s actions, an argument the Estates and Van der Noot were not making, lest they admit their own shortcomings or institutional downfalls. Nevertheless, d’Outrepoint followed this implicit admission with descriptions of the popular upheaval and civil unrest—such as the student riots in Leuven—caused by the attempted reforms, thereby drawing his audience back to the evil consequences of the Austrian actions, and away from his implied agreement with some measure of reform.

Like Van der Noot and the other writers, d’Outrepoint employed vast passages of the *Joyeuse Entrée*, and utilized the now-familiar theme of the contractual relationship created by the Provincial constitutions, which had been validated by the “Laws of God, of nature, and of men.”<sup>94</sup> These reciprocal contracts were not only man-made documents binding the sovereign and people together, but products of the

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 9.



laws of God and nature. Changing them or ignoring them would directly contradict heavenly wishes and the natural laws of the universe. Joseph's attempts were misguided for more than their insulting breach of the oaths between sovereign and province; they defied the rules of engagement and disregarded natural law, which could only spell doom for all involved.

In concluding, d'Outrepoint added a poem by the great French writer Racine, before finishing with the words: "Such would be the respectful & firm Remonstrances that I would present His Majesty : It could not at all displease him, because it contains nothing but the simple truth, & Joseph II is worthy of hearing it because he is worthy to reign."<sup>95</sup> A concluding note such as that could do nothing but display an ironclad belief in the truth and in Joseph's good intentions. It also denied Joseph the possibility of disagreeing without admitting he was unfit to rule, a clever flourish of logic on d'Outrepoint's part. Whatever the effects of the decrees, whatever clumsy attempts had been made to institute reforms, d'Outrepoint left no doubt that the Emperor was to be respected and that negotiation and strength of will on the part of the Belgians would bring agreeable solutions to all.

With participation in the resistance, whether directed at the Emperor, his reforms, or his methods, now solidified on all sides and in all the major provinces, it was clear that Joseph's policies could not be enacted. On 30 May, only a week after d'Outrepoint's *Considérations* were shared, the Estates of Brabant resolved to stop all tax levies as of 1 June and a demonstration was prepared. Rather suddenly, Maria Christina and Albert, fearing the worst, "lost their heads" and consented to all

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 31.

requests for annulment of the edicts.<sup>96</sup> After this, the Estates officially aligned themselves with the opinion of the Nations, rejecting d'Outrepoint's more progressive, measured response in favor of the reaction advocated by Van der Noot. This is not to say that d'Outrepoint and those who shared his view were cast out, but only that a decision was made on the part of the Brabantine Estates to pursue a line of total repeal rather than negotiation with Vienna.

The Governors' concession caused logistical issues as well. Were the provinces to take their word for it, when Joseph had stripped them of executive power upon his rise to the throne? In June, the Estates of Brabant wrote to Chancellor Kaunitz about this very question. Importantly, rather than referring to the *Peuple Brabançon* alone, they wrote on behalf of the *Peuples Belgiques*, reinforcing the coalescing unity of purpose for the provincial governments. Among their requests for his intervention on their part, they asked that Joseph deign to confirm the declaration annulling the edicts issued by his sister and brother-in-law at the end of last month, and that he outfit them with the powers necessary to execute it.<sup>97</sup> This demonstrated a frail alliance between the Belgians and the Governors, an indication of loyalty on the part of the Estates to those who had actually spent time in provinces, in parallel to the Belgian willingness to remain dutifully in the Empire. Before ending their letter, the Brabant Estates complained of "incompetents" holding some of the new posts, which included an insinuation that these were foreigners who had been appointed, rather than Belgians chosen by the Estates and the traditional

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<sup>96</sup> Pirenne (1926), 432.

<sup>97</sup> *Copie de la Lettre écrite à Son ALTESSE le Prince de Kaunitz, Chancelier de Cour & d'ETAT, par Messieurs les Trois ETATS de Brabant*, KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium Politiek-België 1787 (Leuven, Belgium), 22 June 1787, 2.

local mechanisms.<sup>98</sup> This echoed d'Outrepoint's warning about Joseph sending the provinces Germans and dovetailed nicely with complaints from the bishops about the new Austrian professors at Leuven.

The Brabantine Estates' only motive in writing the missive, the Estates assured the Chancellor, was that of service to their constituents and to the sovereign. The next day, the Estates also sent a letter to the Governors-General, including a copy of their letter to Kaunitz. It is clear that they were using every avenue possible to remedy the situation, to achieve their goals, and to win Joseph's favor for a positive outcome.

#### PROVINCIAL UNITY: THE VIENNA DELEGATION AND AN INCREASE IN VIOLENCE

In May, after he had learned of the protests and his Governors' actions, Joseph ordered requests sent out for a delegation to Vienna so that he could explain his plans to provincial representatives directly. The request was meant as a proverbial carrot to go with the stick he had sent in the form of fourteen infantry and one cavalry regiments to the provinces.<sup>99</sup> (The Ottoman threat would see them rerouted to the East before they reached the Low Countries.<sup>100</sup>) The delegation requests did not reach the provinces until the beginning of July, where they elicited two reactions, the second of which would change the course of the resistance to Joseph's reforms as it revealed and furthered the emergence of a Belgian identity.

The first response to Joseph's invitation was a flurry of letters from the various Estates to the Governors, asking for explanation. The Governors explained to

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Beales, *Joseph II*, 516-517.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 524-525.

the Estates of Brabant that the sovereign's request for deputies to Vienna had been accompanied by orders that they themselves also meet with him in person as soon as possible. Joseph had been pained, Maria Christina and Albert said, to see the "alarms" that the new system of administration had set off, that the Belgian *remonstrances* had touched his paternal heart. The delegation was meant as a goodwill gesture, to restore peace in the provinces and recover their relationship to Vienna.

The Flemish Estates were insulted by the request for deputies, "as if a mediation of this nature were necessary for such faithful subjects."<sup>101</sup> They complained that such a delegation would be useless since Joseph had already been told of their complaints numerous times and none of the provinces would now change their grievances simply by appearing in person. They then listed their grievances again, as if to prove their ready access.<sup>102</sup> It seemed politics were hardening in the face of Joseph's demand, as the Flemish Estates once willing to at least concede the possibility of reform, now questioned the very motives for reform.<sup>103</sup> Returning to a past mechanism, they reminded the Governors that it was not just their own privileges and selfish grievances they aired. They ended by begging the Governors to convince Joseph that he was, in fact, doing the opposite to remedy the situation. Whether the Governors-General responded to this missive is unclear.

The second and more consequential reaction to the request for a delegation to visit the Emperor was a letter sent out by the Estates of Brabant to the other

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<sup>101</sup> "Représentations des États de Flandre, En date du 8 Juillet 1787," in *Révolution Brabançonne, Gand: 1787 II* held at University Library Ghent (Ghent, Belgium), Ref G17135 tot 17154, 1.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

provinces on the eleventh of July. It contained a clear rallying cry, a plea for solidarity framed around common grievances feeding into the burgeoning idea that “the constitutions of the provinces actually formed a single constitution, common to the whole country, and forming a common guarantee against the Prince.”<sup>104</sup>

Moreover, the letter offered a vision of a unified single “Nation,” of a “*Peuple Belgique*” with a long and glorious past being brought to ruin by a tyrant.<sup>105</sup> The Brabantine Estates declared to their fellow Southern Netherlandish assemblies that it was time that the provinces threw their lot in together. They spoke of creating a “union” and a “coalition,” and of the importance and necessity of doing so quickly. The fundamental laws—which were those of all the provinces, not just the privileged Brabant with her *Joyeuse Entrée*—being violated by Joseph were “founded in the first notions of the social pact, fixed for centuries *chez une Nation* known in the most ancient times by all the distinctive signs of a perfect civilization.”<sup>106</sup> “Our resolution,” the Brabant Estates cried, “firm and inalterable, is to never separate our cause from yours.”<sup>107</sup> The provinces needed to bind themselves together more tightly than ever before, “for the mutual preservation of [their] rights.”<sup>108</sup> These rights, based on political capital and autonomy as well as privilege, were integral to their identity and maintaining them was thus paramount. This summer letter, sent as delegates were preparing to go to Vienna, was a culminating moment for the provinces in 1787, and it would prove a key event for the revolution more generally. This was the

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<sup>104</sup> Pirenne (1926), 423.

<sup>105</sup> “Lettre des Etats de Brabant adressée aux Etats des autres provinces, le 11 Juillet 1787,” in *Supplément aux Réclamations Belges, &c. Formant le XIIe Tome de ce Recueil*, (Brussels: L’imprimerie des Nations, 1789), held in KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), 177.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

first sign of what was to come; the first union, or at least coordination, among the provinces, which would only be strengthened in 1789.

In the days between the Estates' and the Nations' *remonstrances*, popular support began to manifest itself in the streets of the major cities. On 23 April a grand demonstration was held in Brussels that began with a speech by the Count of Limminghe in the Assembly of the Estates where he addressed himself to "all the *Belges*" not just the residents of Brabant.<sup>109</sup> However, unity was not everyone's priority. Van der Noot's *mémoire* of traditional, Brabant-centric views flew in the face of this burgeoning Belgian feeling. He spoke to "the intangibility of privileges, the immediate return to the past" in Brabant, and Brabant alone.<sup>110</sup> The resistance in Brabant was leaning toward a complete rejection of reform and the corollary insistence on a complete repeal of the edicts. Van der Noot's *mémoire*'s basis in law was difficult to contradict, and it became a rallying point in its pedantic defense of the *Joyeuse Entrée*'s many articles, even for the other provinces. Their petitions continued to invoke his arguments and use his legal defenses against Joseph's reforms alongside their own while discarding, or at least overlooking, his Brabant-centrism.

In the midst of the intellectual furor and just before Joseph demanded a delegation to Vienna, on 4 June, Van der Noot, now de facto leader of the Brabantine resistance, met with the heads of the Nations and the "*serments*," their militia units, to discuss the creation of battalions—just in case. It is unclear whether anything

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<sup>109</sup> Pirenne (1926), 426. Pirenne, it should be noted, is quite harsh in his description of Van der Noot overall, calling his *mémoire* a "long, wordy, incorrect, badly-written and pedantic lampoon," by a "narrow-minded conservative, enemy of the 'philosophes,' rogue and insolent defender of privilege."

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

concrete came of the meeting, though violence slowly increased in the provinces.<sup>111</sup> In mid-August, the deputies went to Vienna, where they were given several audiences with both Joseph and Kaunitz. The former treated them to paternalistic lectures over the duties of subjects and ultimately left them with a sense of disappointment and betrayal.<sup>112</sup> For all involved, the delegation to Vienna did little to advance matters as, when the delegates left the Imperial capital “it was far from clear . . . how matters stood.”<sup>113</sup> Back in the provinces, Count Trauttmansdorff, who was given instructions by Joseph to find the instigators of the resistance and restore calm at all costs, replaced Belgioioso as plenipotentiary minister. Before he could arrive, and since the Governors General were also recalled to Vienna, the military commander General Murray was left in charge as both commander of the troops and wielder of executive power.

With the discouraged deputies returned from Vienna, and neither side closer to getting what they wanted, the Estates informed Murray on 28 August 1787 that they again refused the government’s imposts and would continue to protest its actions. This led to increased violence in the towns, especially in Brussels, where a scuffle broke out on 20 September between a mob and Murray’s troops.<sup>114</sup> Panicking somewhat, and convinced—as had been the Emperor’s sister and brother-in-law before him—that tougher measures would only exacerbate an already dangerous situation, Murray, using the special executive powers he had been given, announced the next day that all constitutions would be reinstated in full and that the 1 January

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<sup>111</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 56-58.

<sup>112</sup> See Polasky, *Revolution*, 57, 60; Beales, 521; and Jean-Jacques Heirwegh, “La fin de l’Ancien Régime et les révolutions,” in *La Belgique autrichienne 1713-1794 : Les pays-bas méridionaux sous les Habsbourg d’Autriche*, ed. Harvé Hasquin (Brussels: Crédit Communal, 1987), 472.

<sup>113</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 524.

<sup>114</sup> Pirenne (1926), 438.

edicts would be abolished.<sup>115</sup> The rejoicing in the provinces no doubt matched the fury of the Emperor in Vienna. Two weeks later, on 8 October, Murray was relieved of his post in favor of the General d'Alton, who was known for his brutal tactics. Joseph, it seemed, would not bend.

With brute force in the offing, in November (somewhat anticlimactically) the Estates voted to send that year's taxes, though they accompanied the imposts with reiterations of their grievances and demands.<sup>116</sup> It seems they were hoping to curry favor with Joseph, betting that such a show of goodwill would help diffuse the situation and allow for genuine negotiation. Joseph's only response, however, was a series of edicts designed specifically to irritate the provinces.<sup>117</sup> In contrast to this public reaction, Joseph secretly gave Trauttmansdorff instructions to provisionally abandon the intendants and new tribunals, though he continued full-speed with his ecclesiastical reforms.

For his part, Trauttmansdorff proved a cunning politician, as he used the *Joyeuse Entrée*, the very document the Brabantine resistance was based on, to begin to install the new administration. He claimed that, though it guaranteed positions for life and the existence of the Estates overall, the constitution did not stipulate the precise nature of every aspect of government, and he exploited this void to force the Estates to vote the final taxes of the year on 1 December 1787, after which they disbanded.<sup>118</sup> On 17 December, the plenipotentiary minister decided to push his luck on both sides, reversing the administration to its composition before 1 April 1787—

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Beales attributes this to Trauttmansdorff's diplomatic skills. Beales, *Joseph*, 604.

<sup>117</sup> These are noted as such in Polasky [*Revolution*, 68,] and Beales describes Joseph's less-than-mature motivations in his biography [*Joseph*, 521], as does T.C.W. Blanning [*Joseph II*, 117-119, 171-175].

<sup>118</sup> Pirenne (1926), 443.



that is to say, before any concessions were made by any of Joseph's representatives in the provinces—and scheduling the general seminary to open three days after Christmas. Knowing the Estates of Brabant were no longer in session, Trauttmansdorff anticipated victory, but the Conseil de Justice intervened, refusing to enact the new laws. Come the new year, on 21 January 1788, the Conseil de Hainaut took decisive action by refusing even to publish the minister's declarations, a protest that the Conseil in Brabant mimicked the next day. Popular support continued to build around such legalistic flouting of government will, so that d'Alton increased his troop presence, which resulted in shots ringing out over Brussels' Grand'Place, wounding six civilians. That was enough to scare the Conseils into submission, and they voted to consent to the new laws and disband.<sup>119</sup>

Though the situation now appeared calm from the surface, the violence in Brussels in January 1788 was the moment when broad loyalty for the Emperor among the populace died. Tellingly, not a single recruit enlisted for Joseph's new military campaign into Turkey, and anti-Josephist pamphlets began to appear throughout the provinces.<sup>120</sup> When spring and the semi-annual taxation votes returned, Trauttmansdorff found himself in a weaker position, though his Emperor still refused to give in on any front. As occasional riots flared, Joseph authorized Trauttmansdorff to ban “all subversive pamphlets and newspapers, and had some of them burned by the public executioner.”<sup>121</sup> Then, in a moment of perfect timing for the government, several of Van der Noot's more virulent supporters were rooted out

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 445-6. See also Polasky, *Revolution*, 72.

<sup>120</sup> Pirenne (1926), 447.

<sup>121</sup> Beales, *Joseph II*, 585.

and arrested, and the famous lawyer himself was forced to flee Brabant in August 1788.

With the autumn, the Estates in the provinces found renewed energy. While Namur and Limbourg remained cautious and voted the November taxes, on 18 November 1788 Hainaut again refused; again, Brabant followed its lead. In Flanders, Ghent's municipal administration explained that, until all abuses of the "constitutions & privileges de cette ville" were redressed, not a single cent of the three million florins requested by Vienna would be sent. If, however, the Emperor mandated the reforms' repeal, the city would happily contribute to the province's taxes.<sup>122</sup> Notably, the city's clergy added its support to this, issuing its own resolution on 6 November 1788, which stipulated that, given the *Remonstrances* of the Estates of Flanders and the "Bishops of the Country," they could not consent to the taxes before Joseph redressed his infractions, especially those against the Church.<sup>123</sup> In January, faced with continued recalcitrance from the Estates, Joseph sent more troops to the provinces, and d'Alton forces fired on protesters in the capital, killing "a handful of demonstrators." Alongside soldiers, the Emperor had also sent word to Brabant and Hainaut that he "was no longer tied to either their privileges or the *Joyeuse Entrée*."<sup>124</sup> At first, this put the fear of reprimand back into the deputies, who were terrified of further military action, and had voted to send the duties to Vienna.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> "Résolution de la Ville de Gand, au sujet d'un Emprunt de 3 millions, demandé par le Gouvernement," 6 Nov 1788, in *Supplément aux Réclamations Beligues, &c. Formant le XIIIe Tome de ce Recueil*, (Brussels: L'imprimerie des Nations, 1789), held in KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), 121-123.

<sup>123</sup> "Résolution du Clergé de Gand, relativement au même objet," 6 Nov 1788, in *Supplément aux Réclamations Beligues, &c. Formant le XIIIe Tome de ce Recueil*, (Brussels: L'imprimerie des Nations, 1789), held in KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), 121-123.

<sup>124</sup> Pirenne (1952), 43.

<sup>125</sup> Beales, *Joseph*, 585-586, 604-605.

The resistance, it began to appear, might simply fade into the pages of history. That is, until Joseph again gave the provinces exactly what they needed to rally against him again. When further threats did not materialize after the January votes, more politicking did, as new reforms were introduced at the end of April 1789 to change the make-up of the Third Estate, in the hopes that adding new towns and voices would water down the ever-powerful Nations and Chefs-Villes. In June the initiatives of the 1 January 1787 edicts were again attempted, but Trauttmansdorff and his Emperor had gone too far. The Estates would not obey the minister's order to publish and codify the new system. Joseph's response would decide the fate of his reign in the Southern Netherlands: on 20 June 1789 he annulled all provincial privileges, including Brabant's precious *Joyeuse Entrée*, forevermore. As shall be seen, this produced precisely the opposite of the intended effect, as the resistance then crystalized into a revolution, with armed insurrection organized by a new wing of more progressivist, democratic revolutionaries. Their arguments were much more in line with d'Outrepoint, as opposed to Van der Noot, and they would prove themselves adept at inciting and harnessing popular rage.

## CONCLUSION

The initial resistance to Joseph's reforms stemmed from a feeling of misunderstanding between ruler and ruled, between "two irreconcilable approaches to government."<sup>126</sup> Ultimately, Joseph's own obstinacy brought the provinces

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<sup>126</sup> Derek Beales' description of the resistance in his biography of Joseph is worth reading in full: "The confrontation in 1787 between what was beginning to be possible to regard as 'the Belgian people' or 'the Belgian nation' on the one hand and its despotic ruler on the other was a battle between two irreconcilable approaches to government: on one side the British, Burkean pursuit of piecemeal reform by obtaining the consent of the established authorities, preserving much of the past

together, forcing them to see the strength of their unity, bringing them closer in their fight against his reforms. There may have been a collectivity of the provinces before 1787; indeed, they were considered to be a single entity as they moved between monarchs. But the events of Joseph's reign, and of 1787 in particular, pushed the various provincial Estates into a closer union, and into a predicament in which the inkling of a *Peuple Belgique* became much more useful than it had been before. In moving toward a moment of unity—best exemplified by the 11 July 1787 letter from the Brabantine Estates to their sister assemblies in the other provinces—the Belgians were not erasing their provincialism or undoing the fundamental separation between the provinces; but their representatives—and more and more pamphlet writers—were increasingly embracing a new Belgian identity.

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and accepting the survival of anomalies; on the other the imposition from above of rational, uniform solutions against the wishes of the established authorities.” Beales, *Joseph*, 515.



### CHAPTER 3: FOR HEARTH AND HOME: ARMED REVOLT IN THE BELGIAN PROVINCES

“It sufficed to want to be free, and thus it became.” – “*Transivimus per ignem & aquam, & eduxisti nos in refrigerium,*” opening editorial comments to Volume XV of *Les Réclamations Beligiques Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Relibion & des Loix* published in Brussels in 1790

#### INTRODUCTION

When Joseph annulled the *Joyeuse Entrée* and other provincial constitutions in June 1789, he instantly cut off any means of legal remonstrance against his actions. Without the authority granted in those contracts, the Estates and Councils had little official recourse against Joseph’s reforms. By this action Joseph not only pushed the Belgians to more radical reactions to his reforms but also effectively created a situation that barred him from the political conversation. The Emperor excluded himself from the political process, constituted by “a community of interests.”<sup>1</sup> With all negotiations thus rendered moot, those opposed to the reforms felt they could make their views known solely through action. Just as Joseph’s behavior had caused the resistance begun in 1787, it led directly to the armed revolt that exploded in 1789. In so doing, it helped cement the growing Belgian identity, spurring the burgeoning coalition to develop into a proper political union that would claim independence.

At the beginning of 1789 the leaders of resistance enacted by official bodies were themselves out of the country, having fled into exile in August 1788. In that void, a small group of “audacious men,” who believed in popular support and the power of the people, began agitating. Overall, the year 1789 saw a surge in revolutionary activity in the Austrian Netherlands, and these “determined patriots”

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<sup>1</sup> Geert Van den Bossche, *Enlightened Innovation and the Ancient Constitution: The intellectual justifications of the Revolution in Brabant (1787-1790)* (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 2001), 220.

began making plans and creating infrastructure for an armed popular uprising that would free the provinces from Austrian rule completely.<sup>2</sup> This reach for independence—and now their goal was truly independence—went further than any of the petitions or formal grievances seen in the previous two years, and, along with the more democratic methods and politics of those who facilitated it, it created division and tension within revolutionary leadership.

These newcomers to the political scene would clash with the leaders now in exile, but both groups avoided open conflict until after the war was seemingly won in December 1789. Earlier that year, as the democrats recruited a patriot army and cultivated broad support for independence throughout the provinces, a feeling of unity flourished. From Brabant to Flanders and through Namur and Hainaut the population began to express a clear Belgianness. Politicians plied this new identity, as pamphlets spoke of the *Nation Belge*, the *Peuple Belgique* or *Belge*, and a “Belgian spirit” with more ease and frequency. Broad acceptance of Belgian identity would culminate in the creation of the United States of Belgium by the Estates General in January 1790.

When Joseph rashly suppressed the constitutions and local administrations in June, it enabled the revolutionaries to push their operations into high gear, preparing a rebellion much sooner and with more popular support than the Viennese authorities thought possible. In annulling the traditions and privileges that writers, lawyers, and clerics such as Henri Van der Noot, Charles Lambert d’Outrepoint, the Abbé de Feller, the Bishop of Malines, and the various provincial Estates had been defending since Joseph instituted his reforms, the Emperor crossed a line, igniting new swathes

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<sup>2</sup> Tassier, *Democrates Belges* (1930), 90, 94.

of the population. Now, the issue of method outweighed specifics of reform. While tensions would eventually rise over conceptions of revolution and Belgian identity, in 1789 one thing was clear: a majority of those in power in the Belgian Provinces wished to be under Austrian rule no more and, for the time, that was enough to unify them.

#### PRO ARIS ET FOCIS

Joseph first indicated that the *Joyeuse Entrée* or the other provincial constitutions would no longer tie him at the start of January 1789. This decision had immediate consequences: “each day reports sent to the *Conseil du Gouvernement Général* described new demonstrations of general dissatisfaction.”<sup>3</sup> Public demonstrations and general civil disobedience characterized this discontent, though occasional rioting was also reported. Thus, though Joseph had not yet officially annulled the contracts that he had sworn to uphold, increasing numbers of provincial subjects began to question his motives and methods. In February, a group of young men, mostly lawyers, began to come together to discuss the goings-on in the Provinces—as well as events on the international stage—at the home of Jan Frans Vonck (in French, Jean-François Vonck), a lawyer, like Charles D’Outrepoint, for the *Conseil de Brabant*. Colleagues from the *Conseil* including Jean-Baptiste Verlooy, P.E. De Lausnay, and G. Willems held regular “‘*entretiens patriotiques*’ about the ways to deliver ‘the limitless Belgian genius’ from oppression.”<sup>4</sup> These meetings were complemented by Vonck’s work with another lawyer, M. J. De Brouwer, in publishing clandestine pamphlets to support their revolutionary cause. Vonck also

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 94.



began meeting regularly with a lawyer in Malines, Thomas Van Eynde, who would become one of his closest conspirators in the months to come.

As Vonck and his allies made more connections, and printed and distributed more pamphlets, the small group of conspirators grew and an organization began to solidify. Quickly, Vonck became convinced that “the publication of brochures was an insufficient way ‘to stop despotism,’ [and] soon began to dream up ways to organize a revolution that would lead to complete rupture with the House of Austria.”<sup>5</sup> By May 1789, Jean-Baptiste Verlooy founded a secret society—to be named *Pro Aris et Focis* (For Hearth and Home)—enthusiastically approved by the small group of revolutionary friends.<sup>6</sup> June found Vonck himself recruiting men like the notary De Coster to buy guns, powder, and other supplies. These De Coster then distributed “from Brussels to Mechelen, as throughout rural areas,” accompanied by “all sorts of Brochures, and indeed the one from pro aris et focis.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the society armed and recruited the population simultaneously, disseminating their philosophy together with the tools that would put their ideas in motion.<sup>8</sup>

As Verlooy’s brainchild, *Pro Aris et Focis* aimed to tap into the population’s

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>7</sup> “Memorie van den Notaris De Coster, Inwooder Van Elewynt aengaende de revolutie,” *Bibliothèque de Bourgogne, Vonck Correspondance 1789 AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belges* Unis 218/1. Emphasis and capitalization original.

<sup>8</sup> A brief note on methodology: much of what historians have written about the politics of this new band of revolutionaries is informed by pamphlets written *after* the revolution’s success. Janet Polasky and Suzanne Tassier, for example, both deduce *Pro Aris et Focis*’s politics in large part from pamphlets written after the Estates and conservatives grabbed power in December 1789 and January 1790 (which will be discussed below and in subsequent chapters). Though a valid approach, it is important to remember that the later pamphlets, in reacting to different power dynamics, may have emphasized or highlighted aspects of political theory and policy the writers had not previously felt were paramount. While minimizing reliance on these later pamphlets enables a better understanding of the Belgian approach to revolution, it also means there is less material to work with in defining the movement at its outset. Nevertheless, by addressing the late 1789 pamphlet material separately and in its own context, I will present a more accurate reading of those later works by situating them within the charged atmosphere that characterized the provinces after military victory was achieved.

underutilized, even overlooked, passion. “Three million Belgians,” Verlooy assured his compatriots in the society pamphlet, “groan in slavery ... and easily found among them are seven hundred thousand men in condition to fight and who are malcontent; ... easily could we find three hundred thousand who would risk their well-being and their blood for the homeland.”<sup>9</sup> These willing and able men would be the tools used to accomplish *Pro Aris et Focis*’s dual goals: to organize the villages and towns throughout the provinces into a concerted uprising while simultaneously marshaling a patriot army on the northwestern border. As envisioned by Verlooy, when the army marched into the provinces to confront Austrian troops, villagers and townspeople would stage their own uprising and the combined effort would ensure revolutionary victory.

The pamphlet establishing *Pro Aris et Focis*’s plan and philosophy was direct and candid: as Joseph had ignored the Belgians’ pleas and prayers the society aimed to take back the constitutions by force of arms. The primary impediment to this plan was not arming the population; rather, the only obstacle was organizing the people, which the society now aimed to remedy. As the pamphlet’s author put it:

We are six men, we have sworn final loyalty and the utmost secrecy to each other, with the promise to risk possessions and body for the homeland, here and wherever this can be done fruitfully. Accordingly, we have formed an association, under the name pro aris et focis : of which we will be the heads.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> J.B.C. Verlooy quoted in Tassier, *Démocrates Belges* (1930), 98. The pamphlet from which she takes the quotation is found in a collection of revolutionary material compiled by Rapédus de Berg and edited by Pierre Auguste Florent Gérard. P.A.F. Gérard, *Ferdinand Rapédus de Berg; mémoires et documents pour servir à l’histoire de la révolution brabançonne*, 2 Volumes (Brussels: Imprimerie de Demanet, 1842-1845). While Tassier attributes the pamphlet to Verlooy, Gérard (and De Berg) maintain that Vonck wrote it. I was unable to find the Flemish original in the archives and so the true author remains a mystery. The pamphlet remains very useful, especially as it explains the workings of *Pro Aris et Focis* in great detail.

<sup>10</sup> “Pro Aris et Focis” in Gérard, *Ferdinand Rapédus de Berg*, 295-6.

These leaders, prospective members were assured, were “really good patriots,” and were, crucially, “supported and aided by the principal members of the estates, and that they [were] also of the association which works for public affairs, within as well as outwith the country.”<sup>11</sup> As such, despite being a secret society lead by six anonymous men, the leadership of *Pro Aris et Focis* was making an effort to associate itself with the recognized and established government in the provinces; a government which had actively and legally been resisting Joseph’s reforms for the past two years.

Finally, the leaders put in place procedures for worst-case scenarios. In the event that a member was, “on the grounds of *patriotism*, arrested, taken by force of arms, or imprisoned ... the others would assemble themselves, without delay, in order to deliver their associate, by arms, or by whatever other means they found most convenient.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, patriotism—a chance to defend the homeland—framed the society’s motives; patriotism simmered in the hearts of the population, the organizers of *Pro Aris et Focis* were sure, and patriotism would be their motive for joining the society and risking arrest. From this pamphlet, it would appear that this patriotism was rather loosely outlined as a love of the provinces and their traditional constitutions, vaguely defined. Crucially, they specified no particular province so that the pamphlet could simultaneously refer to the province of the person reading it and the Belgian provinces collectively. As far as this early pamphlet shows, little else was cited as an inspiration for *Pro Aris et Focis*’s activities, making it seem that Verlooy and his co-conspirators hoped to translate a willingness to organize and fight into a philosophical struggle for an ideal and a homeland.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The society also sought to create patriotic committees in the many towns and villages, concentrating around Brussels to start. The “General Committee” of original members based in Brussels sent instructions to the regional bodies laying out the logistics of fomenting an armed resistance. The lawyer De Brouwer, Vonck’s right hand print man, wrote out a series of 6 major points to be followed by the towns and villages of Brabant, and began his pamphlet with a mention of the Sovereign Estates of the province. Again, *Pro Aris et Focis* was taking pains to be associated with the legitimate administration and organization of the provinces. The society’s General Committee, De Brouwer proclaimed, ordered each village, town, or hamlet to designate groups of 18 people to maintain defense and root out any foreigners so that they could hopefully foil any imperial spies. Moreover, he asserted that their aim was to “expel violence with violence,” and extinguish any harm imperial operatives could inflict by immediately bringing them to the attention of the burgeoning patriotic defense corps.<sup>13</sup>

The tactics of *Pro Aris et Focis* were quite clear, then, but what of the politics of the original organizers? Most—in fact, the majority of them—had not participated in any way in the acts of resistance of 1787 or 1788, in part because in most cases these lawyers did not work for the Estates directly. They did not begin to coordinate resistance until Joseph had pushed hard against the constitutions of the provinces—specifically, until he had threatened to annul the *Joyeuse Entrée* and provincial administrations altogether at the start of 1789. Thus, they were not necessarily opposed to Joseph’s reforms themselves. In fact, as bourgeois lawyers from humble

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<sup>13</sup> “Aer ordinantie &c. &c. Der generale comite gesussigneert De Brauwer, 1789,” in *Bibliothèque de Bourgogne, Vonck Correspondance 1789 AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beliques Unis* 218.

backgrounds, many of them stood to profit from the new administrative system, which valued merit above status. Their grievance, once again, was with Joseph's methods, not his intended outcomes. Though Joseph had not yet fully voided the *Joyeuse Entrée*, the Estates, or the other contracts, even by vaguely stating that he no longer considered himself bound by all their stipulations, he had clearly crossed a line in the minds of these bourgeois men.<sup>14</sup> Overall, their letters and writings indicate a profound respect for political method, ironic in men willing to take up arms against their government. And yet, this contradiction highlights precisely the line Joseph crossed: he made the government illegitimate when it ceased to hold itself to the contract agreed to by both sides. These men were pushed to take matters into their own hands when legal methods were denied them and the sovereign proved himself reprehensible and illegitimate in annulling them.

The key to the success of *Pro Aris et Focis* was its secrecy. Recruits only knew who had recruited them and then recruited their own trusted comrades, each supporter in turn sworn to complete secrecy. Within the society, only codenames were used—created by taking the first name of a saint and a place as surname, such as “Jean Brabant”—so that the inner circle knew how many members it had, but knew not a single given name.<sup>15</sup> Of course, members were warned to “only enroll loyal men, and only those whose intentions are well known.”<sup>16</sup> The leaders wrote to each other in code, posing as merchants making business deals: uniforms were referred to as “boxes” in which to put the troops (referred to as “lemons”), while the man who would eventually lead the growing patriot army was referred to as

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<sup>14</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 89-91.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

“koopman,” which translates as “merchant,” “dealer,” or “trader.”<sup>17</sup> That merchant was introduced to Vonck by the canon de Brou, an intimate member of *Pro Aris et Focis*. His name was Jean André Van der Mersch.

Born in Flanders in 1733, Van der Mersch was a veteran of both French and Austrian military service and had been “always a sworn enemy of tyranny and despotism.”<sup>18</sup> He had even tried to participate in the American War of Independence, but without success.<sup>19</sup> Soon after, in 1778, he had enlisted with the Austrians in their war against Prussia, but only obtained the rank of colonel, though he had hoped for that of general major; this left him dismayed and “very unhappy with Austria, who compensated Belgians little for service, unless they were of high ancestry.”<sup>20</sup> His sentiments, contemporaries and historians have concluded, fit easily with the sympathies and goals of Vonck and his colleagues. Retired and living at his country home in Dadizeele by the summer of 1789, the Colonel was “enthusiastic” when Vonck approached him through mutual friends.<sup>21</sup> A meeting was set for 30 August in Beckerzeel, a place chosen for its inconspicuous nature, halfway between Brussels and Ghent and tucked off the main road. Vonck was immediately charmed by the old soldier and quickly told him everything, including the realities of Van der Noot’s refusal to cooperate with *Pro Aris et Focis* up to that point. The Brussels lawyer

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<sup>17</sup> An explanation of these code words is added, in his own hand, to a letter from Vonck dated 21 August 1789, in *Bibliothèque de Bourgogne, Vonck Correspondance 1789 AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beliques Unis* 218/1.

<sup>18</sup> Pirenne quoting Hans Schlitter (1926), 466; Tassier uses the same quote from two *mémoires* written by Vonck, 136; Van der Mersch’s date of birth comes from the Emilien Malingié, *Le livre des jours, ou relation fidèle de tout ce qui s’est passé de remarquable dans l’Abbaie de Saint Pierre lez Gand, et des principaux évènements arrivés dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens, depuis le 1 Janvier 1787 jusqu’au 26 9bre 1789, inclusivement. Par moi Emilien Malingié religieux et Secrét. de la dite Abbaie, Tome 2*, Universiteitsbibliotheek Ghent, 547. The monk, according to Tassier, was a cousin of Van der Mersch’s.

<sup>19</sup> Tassier (1930), 137. She offers no further information, explanation, or reference for this fascinating piece of information.

<sup>20</sup> Malingié, *Livre des jours, Tome 2*, 547; Tassier (1930), 137.

<sup>21</sup> Pirenne (1926), 466; Polasky, *Revolution*, 107; Tassier (1930), 136.

heartily believed, despite Van der Noot's resistance, that "engaging the country in a revolution ... was the Belgians' only and legitimate resource."<sup>22</sup> Offered the military leadership, Van der Mersch accepted easily. Now it was up to the society and its allies to be sure he had an army worth commanding.

This army was being recruited, as were many of the members of *Pro Aris et Focis*, from the countryside and towns, persuaded by Vonck and Verlooy's case that Belgium could and should deliver itself from Joseph's tyranny. All of this recruitment and the creation of a patriot army required funds, but it seems that the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* had made the right connections in this respect. A "substantial" amount of financial aid was provided by the Abbot of Tongerlo, Godfried Hermans, who would eventually become the chaplain-in-chief to this patriot army as well as a military commander in the campaign against Imperial troops.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, his abbey became a major printing center for the society.<sup>24</sup> According to Vonck, the Abbot was enthusiastic about the plan from the start and had offered to mortgage all of his abbey's assets in Holland. Hermans had even gone personally to Antwerp to enlist wider ecclesiastical support for Vonck and Verlooy's plan. Ultimately, only the Abbot of Saint-Bernard, Benoît Neefs, joined, but these two prelates lent considerable influence and money to the operation, especially when the time came to convince Van der Noot and his allies to combine forces with *Pro Aris et Focis*, as there were several prelates already in the former's camp.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the wealthy Bruxellois banker Édouard de Walckiers put forward a large amount of funds when he joined *Pro Aris et Focis*.

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<sup>22</sup> Tassier (1930), 138-9.

<sup>23</sup> Jan C.A. De Clerck, *Jean-François Vonck (1743-1792)* (Brussels: Hayez, 1992), 91.

<sup>24</sup> Van den Bossche, 155.

<sup>25</sup> Tassier (1930), 104.

The society grew quickly. Within a few days “*une quantité*” of people of “all ranks and conditions” had joined, and Vonck quickly had De Brouwer’s brochures distributed throughout the francophone region as well as the Flemish.<sup>26</sup> One member later attested that Vonck and his allies successfully recruited forty-six thousand conspirators in less than six months, though he was probably exaggerating for effect.<sup>27</sup> The popularity of the movement was certainly helped by external factors. On 18 June 1789 Joseph dissolved the Estates of Brabant and the province’s *Conseil* and also formally declared the *Joyeuse Entrée* null and void. One day later the Estates General of France declared themselves the National Assembly. The “numerous readers of the *philosophes*” throughout the provinces were excited, as was the population more generally by the letters, pamphlets and editorials that circulated.<sup>28</sup> With the added boon that the Emperor himself and a large part of his army were fighting the Turks on the far side of the Empire, it seemed the moment was ripe for an armed revolution in the Belgian Provinces.

At the same time, the fervor created by events in France made things all the more precarious for the revolutionaries in Belgium. The Austrian ministers were on high alert, especially once French nobles began to flee to the Provinces, where the citizenry did not warmly welcome them.<sup>29</sup> The day after the Estates and *Joyeuse Entrée* had been annulled, and the day the French declared their National Assembly, the Abbots of Tongerlo and St. Bernard fled to Dutch territory, where they began making inroads with Van der Noot’s Breda Committee.<sup>30</sup> Even before the Bastille

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>27</sup> De Clerck, 91.

<sup>28</sup> Tassier (1930), 104-105.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

<sup>30</sup> The committee is discussed in the next section.



fell, the situation was anxious. Already the Belgian clergy and traditionalist communities saw the French as anticlerical, or at least lax in their Catholicism. Others sympathized more with the country as it formed a national assembly and began eroding aristocratic privilege. As the Belgians prepared their armed revolt, in the fever of organizing all-out revolution, many were galvanized by events in France. It did not hurt that France was their despotic sovereign's ally, and so upheaval in that country could only improve Belgian chances on the European political stage. On 6 July, General d'Alton, commander of imperial forces in the provinces, wrote to Joseph: "France, so close to us, furnishes currently the example of authority attacked with success and of an entire military which forgets its duties."<sup>31</sup>

As the summer wore on, the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* could not ignore the fever fed by French affairs. Reports describing the end of the *ancien régime* were ubiquitous in newspapers. Though Vonck, Verlooy, and their associates maintained that the Belgians could rely on themselves "in order to regain their liberty," there was at least one place that Vonck and his coconspirators felt they needed to send an envoy.<sup>32</sup> On 10 August *Pro Aris et Focis* sent the lawyer Torfs—son of a liquor trader, recently lawyer for the Abbey of Tongerlo, and one of the "charter members" of the society—to Paris.<sup>33</sup> His mission was to find out whether the Belgians could "count on the sympathies of the National Assembly and incidentally if it was in their intentions to provide aid to Austria in the case that Prussia and the United Provinces lent their assistance to the Belgians."<sup>34</sup> Importantly, this was not a delegation to solicit aid from the French; it was an expedition seeking assurance that

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Tassier (1930), 108.

<sup>32</sup> Tassier (1930), 94.

<sup>33</sup> Tassier (1930), 35, 103; Polasky, *Revolution*, 91.

<sup>34</sup> Tassier (1930), 122.

the French would remain neutral, yet sympathetic, with regard to Belgian aims. This delicate statesmanship characterized the first major tactical difference between these new revolutionaries and those who looked to Van der Noot: while the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* turned to the population of the provinces to overthrow Austrian governance and wanted to rely solely on their patriotic strength, Van der Noot was encamped in the Netherlands at Breda, soliciting help from the countries of the Triple Alliance.<sup>35</sup>

#### THE BREDA COMMITTEE

Henri Van der Noot had fled the Austrian Netherlands in August 1788, after several of his co-conspirators had been arrested. His first stop had been London, from which he continued to direct resistance through his correspondence. When the British Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, refused to meet with Van der Noot, the Belgian lawyer moved to Breda, just across the border from Brabant near Antwerp. By 10 May 1789 he had begun making his case to Laurens Pieter van de Spiegel, the Grand Pensionary for Holland—influential throughout the United Provinces—a case that included the possible reunification of all the provinces or “the formation of a federative state with a foreign prince as *stadhouder* and a constitution modeled on that of the United Provinces.”<sup>36</sup> De Spiegel responded guardedly to Van der Noot, downplaying any success a project to appoint a *stadhouder* to the Southern Netherlands might have, though he was careful not to discourage the Belgian’s cause entirely. Ultimately, he felt the Republic of the United Provinces needed to

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<sup>35</sup> Created in 1788, the Triple Alliance was a diplomatic league among Great Britain, Prussia, and the United Provinces.

<sup>36</sup> L.P.J. Van de Spiegel, *Résumé des négociations, qui accompagnèrent la révolution des Pays-Bas autrichiens; avec les pièces justificatives* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1841), 16.

“conserve the affection of the disaffected Belgians without quarrelling with the emperor.”<sup>37</sup>

In fact, Van de Spiegel did send a note to the Count of Hertzberg in Berlin to the effect that the countries of the Triple Alliance should meet “in order to prevent the disgruntled Belgians from throwing themselves into the arms of the French...”<sup>38</sup> Hertzberg was receptive, even zealous, and soon General de Schlieffen, governor of Wesel, arrived in The Hague. He met with Van der Noot, before travelling to London “to make formal propositions on the subject of the affairs of the Low Countries.”<sup>39</sup> Later, Van der Noot even secured a formal declaration from the Prussian agent “of assistance against all aggression by the French or the Austrians, in the event that the Low Countries freed themselves of imperial authorities.”<sup>40</sup> The Prussians, it seemed, were willing to offer preliminary support in the event the Belgians succeeded in overthrowing the Austrian government.

As Van der Noot settled into Breda, many of those who had supported or participated in his concerted resistance through the Estates in the previous two years began to join him there. This migration eventually led to the formation of the so-called Breda Committee. Notably, the Canon Van Eupen, who would be Van der Noot’s secretary and official secretary to the eventual United States of Belgium, lent his assistance in maintaining correspondence and organizing the nascent committee. On 1 July 1789 some members of the Estates of Brabant signed a document declaring that they “had chosen, conscripted, and committed the very noble sir Henri

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<sup>37</sup> Van de Spiegel, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Though the immediate fall-out of this letter was the positive reinforcement Van der Noot received, in July 1790 just such an international meeting materialized—the Congress of Reichenbach—and, ironically, played a major role in the failure of the United States of Belgium. Van de Spiegel, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 19.

Charles Nicolas Van der Noot [their] fellow citizen ... to represent [their] complaints, [their] grievances and [their] rights and those of several sovereign powers, to the sovereign princes...at least those that will be necessary to obtain a reestablishment of the primitive rights of the people,” giving him “full power to negotiate and contract in [their] name and that of the people.”<sup>41</sup> Their expectation, then, was that he would parlay with the other European powers for military assistance in ridding the provinces of imperial troops and Austrian officials. Van der Noot obliged from Breda, travelling occasionally to Berlin and London and continuing to send letters pleading the provinces’ case.

Though only the Brabantine Estates officially deemed him minister plenipotentiary, Henri Van der Noot chose to speak for the provinces as a whole in his dealings, testifying to the growing unity of purpose and consciousness in the provinces. According to Van de Spiegel’s account, Van der Noot explained to the Dutch pensionary that he negotiated with the authority not of the Estates but with that of their most influential members, as their meeting took place two months before the Estates signed their document declaring him plenipotentiary minister. More thought-provoking still is the fact that the two men discussed “la Belgique,” not Brabant or the *Provinces Belges* or the *Pays-Bas catholiques, autrichiens*, or otherwise.<sup>42</sup> Nomenclature is important and the use of *la Belgique* between the two men demonstrated a degree of acceptance of a single Belgian entity, even if only superficially. Thus, though Van der Noot and his colleagues looked outside the provinces to solve their problems (versus the approach of *Pro Aris et Focis*), they did

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<sup>41</sup> Untitled manuscript, *Papiers historiques et politiques d’Henri van der Noot*, AGR *Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belgiques Unis* 186, 60.

<sup>42</sup> “Conversation entre le Grand-Pensionnaire et van der Noot. (Traduit d’un écrit de la main du Grand-Pensionnaire),” in Van de Spiegel, 51.

see the Southern Netherlands as an entity, as individual provinces bound together culturally and politically.

Provincial unity was not total, however. While *Pro Aris et Focis* had published its pamphlets in both Flemish and French and was endeavoring to recruit an army throughout the Southern Netherlands, regardless of provincial boundaries, the Estates of the individual provinces were not officially united, despite their concerted efforts in resisting the Emperor's reforms. Brabant's letter of 1787 had coordinated efforts, especially regarding the joint delegation to Vienna, but it had not precipitated concrete political union. There was little doubt that the Estates of Flanders, Brabant, Hainaut, Namur, and the other provinces wanted the same thing—to be left to their traditional privileges—but Van de Spiegel questioned whether success could be achieved given his perception of “jealousy existing between Brabant and Flanders.”<sup>43</sup> This divergence would be remedied that autumn, with official declarations of unification from both Estates, but in May there was as yet no such public action.

Ignorant of the work of Vonck, Verlooy, and their coconspirators, Van de Spiegel was skeptical of concrete collaboration and confederation among the administrations. In fact, on pointing out that the Belgians had “neither an army nor a leader” to execute a successful revolution, the Dutch official was disappointed when Van der Noot's response included “nothing positive concerning the means of resistance that existed in Belgium.”<sup>44</sup> Had Van de Spiegel been speaking to leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis*, of course, he would have received quite a different answer, but it was not until later in the summer that the two groups would merge and successfully

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

execute an armed revolt.

By late August, the Breda and *Pro Aris et Focis* committees were diverging more obviously in their politics, and their memberships were separating. Early on, many of the revolution's rank-and-file supporters had failed to make any distinction between the two groups and were often members of both, as "twenty-one of the forty original registers from Brussels joined Van der Noot in Breda while eleven stayed in Brussels to work with Vonck."<sup>45</sup> They "saw [the] new Brussels committee [created by Vonck, Verlooy, and their friends] as an extension of the original resistance movement. They assumed that the local insurrections organized by Vonck would be supported by Van der Noot's revolution."<sup>46</sup> Many of the members of the Breda Committee who made the journey to the Netherlands were artisans and shop-keepers or were directly associated with Brabant's Third Estate or Brussels' corporate culture, and almost all had supported the resistance begun in 1787.<sup>47</sup> Van der Noot and Van Eupen sent letters to the courts of the Triple Alliance, and to other diplomats or their envoys abroad, pleading for international assistance, trying to achieve the Committee's new goals: to enlist foreign troops to liberate the provinces while simultaneously finding a new sovereign for the Southern Netherlands. They were interested primarily in returning to the status quo before 1787, with a sovereign who would adhere to their contracts and respect the provinces' autonomy, rather than fomenting a popular uprising that would irreversibly empower the people.

Conversely, Vonck's resistance to using foreign troops persisted throughout the summer. Rather than having a foreign army march in, Vonck and his supporters

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<sup>45</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 99.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

hoped to muster a patriot army that would then be assisted by the local population. They were confident in this plan in part because of the immediate success of their secret society. Nevertheless, in the summer of 1789, Vonck did not seem to find this key difference, between the goals of his society and those of the men in Breda, insurmountable. In a letter sent the day after he secured Van der Mersch's participation, on 31 August, Vonck informed Van der Noot that General Van der Mersch, who knew the Germans quite well, had cautioned that extreme prudence was needed in dealing with them and that the Belgians should be wary of letting them into the "depot," code for allowing German troops into the provinces.<sup>48</sup> As such, he was requesting that Van der Noot acquiesce to a consolidation of the committees, given that their members were separating and making them more distinct when unity seemed more prudent.

#### MELDING THE COMMITTEES

Vonck had first proposed merger of the two revolutionary groups in mid-August, in a circular letter praising Van der Noot and asking him to "command the combined forces."<sup>49</sup> At the same time, *Pro Aris et Focis* distributed a new pamphlet, dated 14 August, that specified the association's plans. The General Committee leaders would be available and would offer whatever was necessary to anyone, "so that as the day will come of the Salvation of the FATHERLAND, all men in general, old and young, big and small, ecclesiastical and worldly will be required to stand by their Compatriots [*Mede-Vaderlanders*] whether it were by giving Weapons,

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<sup>48</sup> "Myn Heer ende getrouwen Vriend!" Letter by Vonck dated 31 August [1789], *Bibliothèque de Bourgogne, Vonck Correspondance 1789 AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beliques Unis* 218/1. For a French version see Gérard, *Ferdinand Rapédius*, 298-301.

<sup>49</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 92.

Powder, Cobbles [to throw], etc.”<sup>50</sup> They even stipulated that non-members were included in those responsible for the provinces’ salvation. Thus, the founding members of *Pro Aris et Focis* were campaigning publically for a coalition.

Privately, Vonck asked one of Van der Noot’s associates, J.J. Moris—a lawyer and member of the Breda Committee who would become secretary for the Estates of Brabant after independence—to see Van der Noot personally about a union. Moris’ response was that “the sensitive nature of Van der Noot’s plans required that the Breda Committee keep its activities secret.”<sup>51</sup> Vonck insisted on knowing what the Breda Committee’s ultimate goals were, and “learned ‘with surprise and under the greatest secrecy’ that [Van der Noot’s] project was: 1) to have foreign troops enter the country [*patrie*]; 2) to name the second son of H.M. the prince of Orange *stadhouder*; 3) to pay two million to Holland, England, and Prussia every year.”<sup>52</sup> Despite such divergence from his own goals, Vonck saw the value in having a single leader to front a revolution that would deliver the *vaderland* from Joseph’s despotism, and Van der Noot was already a public face of resistance, especially as he’d been forced into exile and fêted as a martyr to the cause against Joseph.<sup>53</sup> As such, De Brouwer, who had been printing and distributing many of *Pro Aris et Focis*’s pamphlets for Vonck, went to Breda on behalf of the patriot band.

Van der Noot again refused to command or train any recruits brought in by the secret

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<sup>50</sup> “Pro Aris et Focis.” 14 August 1789, *Bibliothèque de Bourgogne, Vonck Correspondance 1789* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beliques Unis 218/1.

<sup>51</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 92.

<sup>52</sup> Tassier (1930), 100. No currency is specified.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, see footnote 1 p.91. Indeed, after the revolution’s success in chasing the Austrians from the provinces, Vonck would publically decry a pamphlet written by Verlooy extolling, to the detriment of Van der Noot, Van Eupen, and the Breda Committee, the role *Pro Aris et Focis* and its leaders had played in the revolt. “Avis de l’Avocat Vonck au Public,” in *Révolution*, KBR, Brussels, 2.



society.<sup>54</sup> In fact, he continued to refuse even in the face of young men rushing to Breda during the summer in order to volunteer for the impending revolt. On one level, his “refusal to cooperate with *Pro Aris et Focis* was based on a profound suspicion of a potential rival.”<sup>55</sup> As the summer wore on, however, and the European powers continued to hedge their responses to Van der Noot and his colleagues, it became clear that the Belgians would need to unite if they wanted to overthrow the Austrian government.

In his resumé of the revolution, the Dutch Pensionary L.P.J. Van de Spiegel asserts that the patriot forces, rallied by the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis*, set out en masse for Breda on 10 October. This was not entirely correct, as the society had split earlier in the summer, fleeing detection and then persecution. As recruiting increased and more and more volunteers came forward, and especially after Van der Mersch agreed to lead the army, the leaders needed to find territory in which to drill. The town of Hasselt, in Liègeois territory, became the hub of *Pro Aris et Focis*’s activities, and a large part of the society’s leadership stationed itself there organizing the army and continuing to find arms and materiel.<sup>56</sup> By the autumn, Imperial officials were quite suspicious and in October Vienna formally asked the Liègeois government for permission to enter their territory in search of rebel fighters. “Caught in an impossible situation,” the mayor of Liège consented but also warned the Hasselt committee who were able to scatter the patriot army.<sup>57</sup> It was on the tenth of October that Austrian troops marched into the territory, finding not Van de Spiegel’s

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<sup>54</sup> Polasky, *Revolution* 92.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>56</sup> Liège was engaged in its own revolution against its Bishop, and succeeded in ousting him and creating a more democratic government in the spring and summer of 1789. When the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* approached the mayor of Liège, he was receptive.

<sup>57</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 113.

mustered troops but only what came to be known as the “*armée de la lune*,” after the story spread that the imperial troops had found not a trace of a patriot army.<sup>58</sup> Fears of a growing insurgency were temporarily assuaged in Vienna, but the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* had to move quickly. With Van der Noot at Breda slowly warming to the idea of combining efforts, reestablishing the volunteers there was the most logical solution—the army thus relocated, in a rather less triumphant version of Van de Spiegel’s march.

After the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* in Brussels were betrayed by a spy a few days later, many of them escaped and found their way to the Dutch town. Thus, by mid-October, Van der Noot, Van Eupen, Van der Mersch, Vonck, the Abbots of Tongerlo and St. Bernard, and numerous other patriots found themselves meeting face-to-face—collaboration was inescapable. Meanwhile, Belgian farmers, artisans, lawyers, merchants, and shopkeepers surrounded Breda, practicing military maneuvers with no weapons. The patriot army could not drill or practice with anything other than props in Dutch territory after 16 October, when the Estates General of the United Provinces formally forbade the Belgians from military exercises in an effort to keep peace with Joseph. Such an interdiction likely seemed little more than a formality in the minds of those training under the watchful eye of Van der Mersch; after all, these young men had flocked to Breda, as one of them put it in his journals, leaving everything behind “in order to stand for our fatherland.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, patriotism—as an incarnation of love for country—was one of the primary

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<sup>58</sup> At least one popular engraving of the time depicted the Belgian patriot army perched on the moon, laughing at the bewildered Imperial soldiers searching for them in Liège. For a detailed description of the episode, see Polasky, *Revolution*, 106-114. For an example of depictions of the incident, see Delsaerd and Roegiers, *Brabant in Revolutie*, 40.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Polasky, *Revolution*, 93.

motives for those who followed the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* and the Breda Committee, as Verlooy had predicted in founding the secret society. The society had equally cultivated this patriotism by building it into their recruitment pamphlets and speeches. They had needed it and had anticipated finding it, suggesting that patriotism, like nationalism and identity, can be fostered and created. Van Eupen informed the Chevalier de Roode, the Breda Committee's envoy to London and then The Hague on behalf of the provinces, that when they did finally march toward Austrian forces, the "national troops marched, to reconquer their hearths, and return to independence."<sup>60</sup> The volunteers had come to fight for their country.

#### ARMED REVOLT

By mid-October, with most of the leaders of both *Pro Aris et Focis* and the Breda Committee in Breda itself, surrounded by volunteers and recruits, the time was ripe for military action. General Van der Mersch's army, drilling nearby, seemed ready and the Vonckist leadership pushed for the patriots to engage the Austrians sooner rather than later "that they might catch the Austrians unprepared."<sup>61</sup> In the end, a date was chosen based on ecclesiastical leadership; the Abbots of St. Bernard and Tongerlo, those supporters of *Pro Aris et Focis* who had helped raise much of the funding for the army, suggested 24 October, the Archangel Raphaël's feast-day. Though agents went ahead with negotiations in Liège, the Triple Alliance countries, and France, the standard was raised on 24 October without foreign cooperation and the army mustered from Hoogstraten, the closest town in Brabant. Before they

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<sup>60</sup> Van Eupen to De Roode, 23 October 1789, in *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d'Etat des Etats Belges-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belges Unis 189, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 120.

departed, they were ignited by a reading of the *Manifeste du Peuple Brabançon* (*Het Volk Van Brabant* in its Flemish version), written mostly by Henri Van der Noot, though approved by the revolutionary committee. Essentially a declaration of independence, the *Manifeste* declared Joseph II stripped of his titles.<sup>62</sup> This rallying standard was then distributed by the troops in the different towns they marched through, a detail confirmed by one of the soldiers in Van der Mersch's army.<sup>63</sup> Alongside this *Manifeste*, Van der Noot issued a letter to the people of Flanders and West-Flanders. This supplemental letter informed the Flemish people that the *Manifeste* "was not to instruct you on the motives that have brought us to this, because you have felt them so much yourselves; but to invite you to join us, & to join your forces with ours, to defend the Religion of our Fathers, our Rights & our Liberty against the common enemy."<sup>64</sup> The popular participation in the liberation of Ghent would prove the Brussels lawyer correct in his hunch that the Flemish were as motivated to fight for their independence from Austria as the Brabançons, but equally made this letter seem superfluous, even arrogant.

Three days later, the patriot army defeated imperial forces at the town of Turnhout. Importantly, the victory was ensured by the participation of the local population.<sup>65</sup> In fact, throughout their campaign, the patriot soldiers were met with crowds who "showed a lively enthusiasm" at their arrival. The soldiers were "welcomed with the sounds of the bells and chimes ... flags [were] displayed from

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<sup>62</sup> This declaration will be examined in further detail in the next chapter, in the context of the subsequent declarations of independence issued by the other provinces over the course of the next several months.

<sup>63</sup> "Marche Route du S.A. j: gouman avec l'armée patriotique," *Bibliothèque de Bourgogne, Vonck Correspondance 1789 AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beliques Unis* 218/1, 1.

<sup>64</sup> "A ceux de Flandre & West-Flandre," in *Supplément aux Réclamations Beliques, &c. Formant le XIVe Tome de ce Recueil*, (L'Imprimerie des Nations, 1789), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), A4961, 301.

<sup>65</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 121.

hoostraeten [sic] to Turnhout.”<sup>66</sup> The fact that they were met in many of the towns by such enthusiasm spoke to the success *Pro Aris et Focis* had had in informing, organizing, and rallying the rural and urban populations. On 29 October, A.C. Vandermaesen wrote to a fellow patriot in Hasselt from Zondhoven, not far from Diest and much of the fighting that, “the bourgeois [town militia] and women infinitely and effectively supported the patriotic combatants these last having raised all the [cobble]stones from an entire street in order to destroy the enemy from windows...”<sup>67</sup> Not all the inhabitants were so actively involved: when the troops moved back into Dutch territory temporarily, one member of Van der Mersch’s force described “an infinity of inhabitants [who] followed having abandoned their hearths and bringing with them their wives and their children, and as many pieces of furniture and personal effects as possible.”<sup>68</sup> These civilians caught up in the fighting were fleeing to safer territory, following their patriot army so as to escape the pursuing Austrians.

Most accounts of citizen involvement, though, emphasized support and aid given to the army. On arriving in Namur in November, the combatants found “the entire town illuminated, and [the patriot forces] were received with demonstrations of joy most lively.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, this anonymous patriot soldier recounted several communities alerting the army to danger by ringing the *tocsin* when imperial soldiers approached, indicating that even if the locals did not actively engage the Emperor’s

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<sup>66</sup> “Marche Route du S.A. j: gouman avec l’armée patriotique,” *Bibliothèque de Bourgogne, Vonck Correspondance 1789* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beliques Unis 218/1, 1.

<sup>67</sup> A.C. Vandermaesen to unknown in Hasselt, 29 8bre 1789, *Bibliothèque de Bourgogne, Vonck Correspondance 1789* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beliques Unis 218/1. Lack of punctuation original.

<sup>68</sup> “Marche Route de S.M.,” 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

troops, they were willing to support the patriot army strategically. A witness to the forces directed by M. de Kleinenberg reported that “on passing through Dinant, a town in Liègeois territory, the entire town came out to the street by which [they] marched.” They were surrounded, he said, “by applause and ‘*vive les patriotes*’ endlessly.”<sup>70</sup>

These shows of enthusiasm were often accompanied by direct involvement in the battles and skirmishes between patriot and imperial forces. The city of Ghent was taken “with the support of the citizens,” giving the patriot army “control of one of the key fortresses in Belgium.”<sup>71</sup> It took a full five days for the patriots to wrest the city and its citadel from the imperial troops. On the second day of fighting in the city, when the patriot army assembled at seven in the morning, many citizens of the city mustered alongside them, according to the secretary of Ghent’s St Pierre Abbey. They shouted that they fought for their wives and daughters, for their own property and well-being, and for their way of life.<sup>72</sup> As the battle wore on, over the next two days, even neighboring towns began to participate. A propagandist pamphlet describes a patriotic scene: “[The patriots’] number grew day by day, the barbarity of the soldiers having made even the Bourgeois who heretofore straddled the fence take up arms. Neighboring towns sent their youth; many came in mobs from the countryside to line up under Patriotic standards.”<sup>73</sup> The whole surrounding area, the patriot propaganda claimed, was willing to chase the Austrians from Flanders’ most

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<sup>70</sup> “Marche Route de S.M.,” 3.

<sup>71</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 123.

<sup>72</sup> See accounts of the battle of Ghent in “RELATION Officielle de la prise de Gand,” in *Les Réclamations Belges Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Religion & des Loix, XV<sup>e</sup> volume de cette collection* (L’Imprimerie des Nations, 1790), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), A4961, 145-159, and Emilien Malingié, *Le livre des jours, Tome 2*, 553-566. Citation from Emilien Malingié, *Le livre des jours, Tome 2*, 559.

<sup>73</sup> “RELATION Officielle,” 153.

important city. Whether droves of villagers came or only a handful, by the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, “the entire City of Ghent was entirely in the hands of the Patriots.”<sup>74</sup> Not all the inhabitants of the surrounding area were happy with this, as there were whole villages who did not support the revolution, but they had little recourse once the patriot forces began to gain the upper hand, as the imperial administration, ironically, had seized all firearms in order to prevent support for the patriots.<sup>75</sup> Without active local resistance to Van der Mersch’s forces, patriot propaganda could make support for the revolution look unanimous. Pamphleteers exploited violence committed by the Imperial troops, describing their enemies as monsters who deserved to be routed in a revolution, galvanizing popular opinion against the imperial military.

Belgian writers throughout the provinces took up the cause of Ghent’s population. They reported that the enthusiasm for Belgian victory seemed to extend even internationally: the revolutionary newsletter *Mercure Flandrico-Latino-Gallico-Belgique* reported that upon reading and hearing of the “cruelties committed at Ghent, by Austrian Troops,” 12,000 young men of the national guard in Paris “formed a resolution to [go] join the patriotic Army of the Low Countries,” and that it had taken all of LaFayette’s “prudence” to restrain them.<sup>76</sup> The accuracy of this claim is not germane here; rather, it is an excellent illustration of the Belgian mindset and pride, as well as their attitude toward the French. The events in Paris did not *cause* the events in the Austrian Netherlands, but neither were they ignored there. To be sure, Belgian writers expressed a gamut of opinion about the French and their

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>75</sup> Luc Dhondt details this well in his article “La Cabale des misérables’ de 1790. La révolte des campagnes flamandes contre la révolution des notables en Belgique (1789-1790),” in *Études sur le XVIIIe Siècle* Volume XVII Fêtes et musiques révolutionnaires: Grétry et Gossec, Roland Mortier and Hervé Hasquin, eds., 107-134.

<sup>76</sup> “LACONISME POLITIQUE Du 9 Décembre 1789,” in *Mercure Flandrico-Latino-Gallico-Belgique*, 16.

evolving revolution. This excerpt from a democratic-leaning publication displayed a subtle admiration for LaFayette and his country, with an overarching delight in a Belgian sense of achievement. It also spoke to the intricacies of European power dynamics, as France was meant to be Austria's ally, especially now that Prussia was aligned with Britain. Thus, the threat of the French actively showing interest in helping to defeat the Austrians in their own territory was a blow to the stability of international relations and balance of power. If not even the French, who had torn down the Bastille, could continue to support their political ally in Vienna, then truly the Belgians' revolution was legitimate and noble, a worthy cause to which the populace should rally.

Support for the revolution manifested physically as well as in print. At Mons only a few days later, "battalions of villagers ripped paving stones from the streets, building barricades from which they stoned the approaching Austrian army. . . ..*Together*, the patriot army and the villagers again routed the Austrians."<sup>77</sup> The revolution envisioned by *Pro Aris et Focis* only a few months before had come to pass: the population of the provinces, from Flanders through Brabant and into Hainaut and Namur, rose up against imperial troops and aided the grassroots patriot army. The population supported the revolution so much so that Pierre Van Eupen remarked about it to the Chevalier de Roode. In a missive sent on 18 November, he declared that their "revolution becoming formidable by a furor, not less than general, had produced an effect, that you will not believe."<sup>78</sup> The tactics of Vonck, Verlooy, and their colleagues had worked so well that the traditionalist members of the Breda

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<sup>77</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 123. Emphasis mine.

<sup>78</sup> Van Eupen to de Roode, 18 November 1789, in *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d'Etat des Etats Belgiques-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belgiques Unis 189, 10.



Committee, who had earlier seen these as foolhardy endeavors, could only marvel.

Furthermore, the revolution had the support of the few Belgians in the Austrian army. Van Eupen wrote to de Roode that his uncle had been one of four officers at Turnhout “who had refused to spill the blood of their brothers.”<sup>79</sup> Desertion was rampant among imperial forces, and increased as the armed conflict dragged on. Engendering such conflicting loyalties had been a concerted, successful tactic of *Pro Aris et Focis*; “[the lawyer] De Brouwer, [the notary] Emmerichts, and [the banker] Walckiers’s efforts to bribe Austrian soldiers to desert and swear fidelity to the patriots met with success,” throughout the summer.<sup>80</sup> After the patriot army invaded and successfully routed the Austrians at Turnhout, morale among imperial troops was so low that “from that moment on, desertion threw itself into the ranks of the Austrian troops: henceforth nothing could impede these wretched soldiers from exchanging the Emperor’s nine farthings [*liards*], often peppered with baton blows, against Van der Noot’s ten pennies [*sous*], spiced by a relatively high dose of liberty.”<sup>81</sup> During the battle for Brussels, in early December (described below), entire battalions deserted.<sup>82</sup>

By the end of November the patriot Belgian army had defeated the Austrians several times, had taken the important fortress at Ghent, and had liberated much of the Brabantine and Flemish countryside. They were making inroads around Namur and held parts of Hainault as well. Still, Van der Mersch was not entirely confident

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<sup>79</sup> Van Eupen to de Roode, 11 November 1789, in *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d’Etat des Etats Belges-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belges Unis 189, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 107. Tassier confirms this, adding that they often “distributed money” as further incentive but always justified the desertions with Rousseau’s contractual philosophies. Tassier (1930), 110.

<sup>81</sup> P.A.F. Gérard, *Ferdinand Rapédius de Berg*, 362.

<sup>82</sup> See *RELATION EXACTE DE LA PRISE DE BRUXELLES, PAR SES HABITANS* (Brussels: Imprimerie de Bruxelles, 15 December 1789);

that his homegrown forces could triumph in a true battlefield situation, especially given their quickly depleting resources—both monetary and material—and so he favored negotiating a ceasefire while the Belgians still had the upper hand.<sup>83</sup>

The General took his case to the revolutionary committee, now a combination of leaders from *Pro Aris et Focis* and the Breda Committee. The Vandernootists saw his proposal as “defeatist” and dismissed it out of hand.<sup>84</sup> In fact, Van der Mersch had arranged meetings with Austrian officials before he actually sought consent from the Committee, in part because a patriot soldier had intercepted a package of mail between Trauttmansdorff and General d’Alton, commander of His Majesty’s troops. The letters indicated frustration and exasperation between the two, creating an atmosphere of confusion and poor planning for the imperial forces. Van der Mersch wanted to take advantage of state of confusion, while also buying some time to regroup and reequip his own corps.

General d’Alton sent a delegate, the Colonel de Brou, to meet with Van der Mersch. On 2 December, the two agreed to a ten-day ceasefire to give the Breda Committee time to approve a full two-month armistice. The ceasefire, officially called the *Armistice de Horsmael*, stipulated Colonel de Brou as negotiator for the Emperor and Van der Mersch as “commander-general of the patriotic army,” and that the armistice would affect Luxembourg, Limbourg, Namur, Brabant, and Flanders—though Van der Mersch had to insist upon the inclusion of Flanders. Further, it specified that the patriot army would remain in the towns of Diest and Leau in Brabant as well as the Flemish towns and cities of Ghent, Brugge, Oostende,

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<sup>83</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 123-4.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

Ypres, Furnes, and Menin (with a league and a half perimeter).<sup>85</sup> When Van der Mersch informed the committee members of these terms, they were livid. In a letter to the Chevalier de Roode, sent 3 December 1789, the canon Van Eupen deemed the General's request "imprudent," though he believed ultimately it would not cause as much trouble as the rest of the Committee seemed to dread.<sup>86</sup> Overall, the Committee condemned Van der Mersch's actions, though it was notably the Vandernootists who directly denounced him. The ecclesiastical members, especially, were in no mood to negotiate with the Emperor or his representatives.<sup>87</sup> The plenipotentiary minister himself nearly came to blows with the general, and Van der Mersch reportedly even offered his resignation. The rest of the Committee, realizing that the Flemish commander was still immensely important to the revolution, managed to restore calm and convince Van der Mersch to stay at the head of their patriot forces. This would be only the first of many "very lively scenes" between the traditionalist leadership and the democratically leaning military commander.<sup>88</sup> Ultimately, Van der Mersch kept his ten-day truce, though he informed his Austrian counterparts that he "was not authorized to consent to an armistice of two months."<sup>89</sup>

Ten days was enough, however, as it gave the patriot forces time to reassemble, even giving individual soldiers a chance to visit their homes for a few days, and vastly improving morale. Equally, the patriots' tales of their exploits "stimulated the warlike spirit of the population and increased the discouragement of

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<sup>85</sup> "Armistice de Horsmael," in Van de Spiegel, 112.

<sup>86</sup> Van Eupen, Letter dated 3 December 1789, *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d'Etat des Etats Belges-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR *Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belges Unis* 189, 18.

<sup>87</sup> Adolphe Borgnet, *Histoire des Belges à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Volume 1, second edition (Brussels: Lacroix, Verboeckhoven, & Co., 1861), 117.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

the [Austrian] troops.”<sup>90</sup> Moreover, despite the low levels of supplies that concerned Van der Mersch and his commanders, the truce and high levels of morale precipitated further activity by the urban populations, specifically that of Brussels. As one pamphleteer put it, “the success of the Patriotic army having occasioned a suspension of arms between the two parties, for ten days, favorable proposals, & certain signs of the weakness of [their] enemy, animated the population.”<sup>91</sup>

Brussels’ populace, unaware of Van der Mersch’s more anxious motives for requesting the ceasefire, saw only their patriot army’s victories and d’Alton’s agreement to a ten-day truce. Their logical conclusion that the Austrian forces were weakening meant that popular insurgency—of the sort envisioned by the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* all along—could easily be encouraged. Women and children harassed troops throughout the city, especially at the numerous barricades set up by the Imperials, where these Bruxellois demanded that the Austrians “reestablish the passages of the City [which were] almost all disrupted.”<sup>92</sup> Surprisingly, and no doubt encouragingly for those revolutionaries within the city limits, government officials acquiesced to their requests.<sup>93</sup> It seemed the Austrians viewed the city as a powder keg and wanted to preserve calm as much as possible, reinforcing the sense that they were weakening in the face of Belgian rebellion.

Though the majority of its leadership was now in Breda, key members of *Pro Aris et Focis* remained in place throughout the provinces. Édouard de Walckiers was in Brussels and he and his fellow members of the patriotic society there “understood

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<sup>90</sup> Tassier (1930), 179.

<sup>91</sup> *RELATION EXACTE DE LA PRISE DE BRUXELLES, PAR SES HABITANS* (Brussels: Imprimerie de Bruxelles, 15 December 1789), 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

that the moment had come to attack the Imperials in the capital.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, in early December they had formed a new revolutionary committee—essentially a new arm of *Pro Aris et Focis*, as most of the members were part of the secret society’s inner circle—in Brussels.<sup>95</sup> They helped distribute tricolor cockades in red, yellow, and black—Brabant’s traditional colors—during 10 and 11 December, reportedly at the cathedral of St. Gudule “to shouts of ‘*vivent les patriots*.’”<sup>96</sup> Some even forced soldiers in the vicinity to sport cockades as well.<sup>97</sup> Despite these incitements, the city at first appeared quiescent. The author of a pamphlet relating events in the capital during the uprising gave credit to the Austrian forces, and their commanders especially, for avoiding a massacre by imploring citizens to “withdraw quietly to their homes.”<sup>98</sup> Their restraint worked, it seems, as the author reported that the night from 10 to 11 December passed “pretty quietly, & without a single shot fired from any side.”<sup>99</sup> The next morning, however, was less tranquil.

When the signal sounded for the imperial troops to assemble, promptly at 10am, the citizenry and citizen militia assembled itself as well, marching toward the squares “where the soldiers with the Artillery had gathered, leaving however all the streets well guarded.”<sup>100</sup> Several skirmishes ensued throughout the city, with both sides causing injuries and deaths and taking prisoners. The *tocsin* was sounded and, as one pamphleteer put it, patriotic zeal eventually overwhelmed Brussels, so that soon even the most timid of patriots were invigorated. Finally, at 10:30pm, the

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<sup>94</sup> Borgnet, 121.

<sup>95</sup> Tassier (1930), 202.

<sup>96</sup> Borgnet, 121; Polasky, *Revolution*, 128; *RELATION EXACTE DE LA PRISE DE BRUXELLES*, 4.

<sup>97</sup> *RELATION EXACTE DE LA PRISE DE BRUXELLES*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

citizens attacked the 300 troops and 3 canons stationed at the “*Place de la maison de Ville*” and eventually overpowered them, boosting patriotic morale immensely. Once the *place* was barricaded and outfitted with some of the artillery the insurgents had been able to seize, the citizens of Brussels had an excellent entrenched position from which to defend themselves.<sup>101</sup> By midnight, calm had returned and both sides awaited what the next day would bring.

The morning of 12 December, General d’Alton wrote a letter to the commander of one of the *serments*, the city militia, the Baron Van der Haegen. In it, he assured the Belgian patriots that his soldiers would neither harass nor attack members of the population “for the general welfare & the security of the Citizens of this town.”<sup>102</sup> Van der Haegen, however, remained prudent and stationed his men around the city where Austrian troops might try to take advantageous positions. As skirmishes continued in the higher part of town (Brussels being built on a hill), the patriots learned that the revolutionary army was approaching Mons, boosting their morale and emboldening them to intensify their attacks on imperial troops.<sup>103</sup> Soldiers were deserting by the hour, many even switching sides to fight under the command of city militia or members of the clergy. Guerrilla tactics drove the Austrians to utter confusion and eventually, by 11 am, they began to retreat from the city altogether.<sup>104</sup> Outside the city limits, farmers from the surrounding villages, having heard the *tocsin* and the general melee, shot at “any who showed themselves outside the gates.”<sup>105</sup> By noon, all the Austrian troops and officials—including Count

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in *RELATION EXACTE DE LA PRISE DE BRUXELLES*, 8.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>104</sup> Tassier (1930), 182.

<sup>105</sup> Pirenne (1926), 471.

Trauttmansdorf and General d'Alton—were fleeing the city, evacuating so quickly that they left behind most of their records and paperwork.<sup>106</sup> When the patriot forces arrived, they had little fighting to do. As the editor of one pamphlet collection wrote, “The army that the Capital had awaited for its deliverance, was no longer necessary; it sufficed to want to be free, and thus it became.”<sup>107</sup> Within the next few days, an anonymous pamphlet titled “L’Orateur de la Belgique Australe,” published through a new “Imprimerie patriotique,” implored his fellow “Belges” to go “one more step . . . [to] be free.”<sup>108</sup> The people of Brussels had taken matters into their own hands, proving “to both hemispheres, that it is not numbers but bravery and unanimous will that constitutes the true strength of a nation.”<sup>109</sup> Reconciliation with Joseph was no longer an option, it was time for the Belgians to come together and secure their freedom.

Several days later, on 18 December, Van der Noot, Van Eupen, and a majority of their colleagues on the Breda Committee entered the capital in parade, honored by the citizens and the local government. Van der Noot was hailed as a “Belgian Washington,” and the traditionalists were fêted by crowds, welcomed unquestionably as the authors of independence, with the democrats kept conveniently out of sight. Indeed, Van der Noot had even contrived to send Vonck to Ghent earlier that week in order to keep him out of the public eye.<sup>110</sup> The next day the Estates of

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<sup>106</sup> Tassier (1930), 182; Polasky, *Revolution*, 129; *RELATION EXACTE DE LA PRISE DE BRUXELLES*, 10-11; Borgnet, 122; Pirenne (1926), 471.

<sup>107</sup> “Transivimus per ignem & aquam, & eduxisti nos in refrigerium,” in *Les Réclamations Belges Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Religion & des Loix, XV<sup>e</sup> volume de cette collection* (L’Imprimerie des Nations, 1790), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), A4961, xiii.

<sup>108</sup> “L’Orateur de la Belgique Australe. De l’imprimerie patriotique. 1789,” in *Révolution belges 1788-1789*, 18, KBR, 4.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> See Polasky, *Revolution*, 133; Tassier (1930), 203; Pirenne (1926), 472.

Brabant convened for the first time since Joseph had disbanded them in June, and post-revolutionary business began throughout the provinces. The immediate aftermath was heady and harmonious in victorious independence. It would not take long for the shine to begin to fade and for the many divisions among the revolution's leaders to cause discord, but goodwill triumphed in mid-December.

#### A "NATIONAL" TRIUMPH

The national uprising and popular armed revolt was accompanied by official provincial unification. On 30 November, after the liberation of Ghent and in the midst of successive victories for the patriots, the Estates of Flanders publically sent an "ACTE D'UNION" to their counterparts in Brabant. This relatively short communiqué began with sincere affirmations of the "similar spirit" both provinces felt regarding their traditional rights, as well as professions of solidarity in having suffered "for numerous years [under] a despotic and tyrannical Government."<sup>111</sup> Given the immovable nature of despots, they had seen no other way to free themselves except by force, and now the only way to "make their State of liberty stable, was to unite their fate with that of the Province of Brabant." A treaty of union would accomplish this, ensuring that any negotiations with Vienna going forward would be approached jointly.

More than a simple promise of unity, though, the Acte proposed a true confederation, embodying the burgeoning political identity and unification in the provinces. It asserted—at the suggestion of Van Eupen—that henceforward the

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<sup>111</sup> "ACTE D'UNION proposé par les Etas de Flandre à ceux de Brabant," in *Les Réclamations Beligues Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Religion & des Loix, XVe volume de cette collection* (L'Imprimerie des Nations, 1790), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), A4961, 144.



Estates of Flanders consented to “*Souveraineté commune* of the two Estates,” which would be borne out by a Congress (to be established) in which deputies from both provinces would assemble. The activities of the Congress would revolve around “sentiments founded on the principles of a pure [*exact*] justice, and dictated solely by the common good.” These common deputies would limit themselves to securing a combined defense, deliberating only on issues of war and peace, including a “National Militia,” common fortifications, and foreign relations—“in a word, on all that regards the common interests of the two Estates.”<sup>112</sup> The two Estates were laying the groundwork for a confederate government, but, equally importantly, they put an official, governmental face on the sentiments the popular uprising had fostered.

Two and a half weeks later, on 19 December, the Estates of Brabant formally replied, publishing their response for all to see. Only one paragraph long, the acknowledgement of Flanders’ proposal signed by the Brabantine Estates’ pensionary De Jonghe was concise and to the point. It resolved “to approve and to ratify, as far as necessary, all conventions recovered in the Acte, with solemn promise to conform to these, & to deliver such an Acte to the Estates of Flanders.”<sup>113</sup> By the end of December, Brabant released more specific policies for the governance of the province. On 31 December, having recessed from the 26<sup>th</sup> through the 30<sup>th</sup> of that month, the Estates of Brabant officially declared, before any other stipulations, “That the sovereignty that was exercised by the former Duke, [would] be henceforth

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>113</sup> “*Le premier usage que les Etats de Brabant firent de leur Liberté fut de ratifier l’Acte d’Union que leur proposoit la Flandre; cette ratification, datée du 19 Decembre, étoit conçue en ces termes:*” in *Les Réclamations Belges Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Religion & des Loix, XV<sup>e</sup> volume de cette collection* (L’Imprimerie des Nations, 1790), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), A4961, 121.

exercised by the three Estates of Brabant.”<sup>114</sup> This would become supremely important, as democrats and other pamphleteers would question the Estates’ rights to claim the monarch’s sovereignty.<sup>115</sup> They further specified that the province’s Constitution would remain the same.

Pierre Van Eupen informed de Roode in London of developments, adding, “We sit at Brussels, all the Provinces [meaning their Estates] sit in their capitals . . . Several Provinces have already presented themselves to the union of Brabant and Flanders.”<sup>116</sup> A week later, he bragged that the Estates—of which he, Van der Noot, and many of their conservative colleagues were now firmly a part—“had done the impossible in order to convince The People that nothing needs to be changed *chez nous*, that Walking in the footsteps of [their] Fathers, footsteps consecrated by so many centuries, [they were] sheltering themselves from the danger of young and inexperienced novelty.”<sup>117</sup> This provoked outrage from excluded members of *Pro Aris et Focis*, especially Verlooy, who felt that their pivotal role in the revolution had earned them a seat at the political table. This will be discussed further in the next chapter, but what is important here is that, as the groundwork was laid for a confederation of multiple provinces, the traditionalists, seated primarily in the Brabantine Estates, continued to prime arguments against democrats and royalists clamoring for reform, and thus perpetuated the bifurcated nature of the revolution.

At the end of 1789, the majority of the provinces were free of imperial

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<sup>114</sup> “EXTRAIT des Résolutions des Etats de Brabant des 26, 27, ainsi que des 29,30, & 31 Décembre 1789,” in *Les Réclamations Beligiques Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Religion & des Loix, XVe volume de cette collection* (L’Imprimerie des Nations, 1790), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), A4961, 123.

<sup>115</sup> This conflict is the subject of chapter 5.

<sup>116</sup> Van Eupen to De Roode, 22 December 1789, in *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d’Etat des Etats Beligiques-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR *Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/États Beligiques Unis* 189, 22.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

control by virtue of the efforts of the Breda Committee, *Pro Aris et Focis*, and the popular support from sections of both rural and urban populations. Large swathes of the rural population “were royalists . . . but the population was too afraid to overtly exhibit this.”<sup>118</sup> Skirmishes did continue on the borders, particularly around Luxemburg, which remained in Austrian hands, and the Duchy of Liège, where imperial troops were still stationed. Imperial troops remained in an awkward siege situation in the citadel at Antwerp until well into the new year. The continuing martial situation would cause friction between the Congress and the Army, as the central government, and particularly Van der Noot as its *de facto* leader, would clash with army officers and generals sympathetic to democratic aims.<sup>119</sup>

Despite the exceptions to complete liberation from imperial bonds and the royalism of some subdued rural communities, there was a distinct sense of coming-together in politics and the public sphere of pamphlet literature, a feeling of unity among the provinces as emphasized in various publications. Like the “Orateur de la Belgique Australe,” writers began to publish pamphlets calling for unity among their compatriots, now most often referred to as “Belges.” One pamphleteer compared the newly-liberated provinces to ancient Greece, where young men who died fighting against tyranny were so honored by their republic that “their statues were placed near the altars of their gods.” Just as the Greeks had come together to defend their liberty, “the *Nation belgique* provided similar reasons to emulate those who deigned to brave fatigue, dangers and death, for the defense and the common happiness of the

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<sup>118</sup> Dhondt, “La Cabale des misérables’ de 1790,” 116.

<sup>119</sup> This is further discussed in the next chapter.

Homeland.”<sup>120</sup> The author of a journal that purported to chronicle the history of the revolution in Hainaut spoke of the “people” with ambiguity, blurring the lines between a people of Hainaut and a Belgian people. His description of the battle for Ghent was telling: “Ghent reached out to Hainaut; the cause of the one or the other province was the same.”<sup>121</sup> For the Hainuyer author, “all of Europe” was watching “les Belges.”<sup>122</sup> Patriotism fused with a budding national consciousness that surpassed more local provincial attachment. The volunteers of the patriot army had not fought to liberate their own provinces, but all the provinces combined, and the revolutionary pamphleteers emphasized this side of popular support for the revolution alongside the growing political unity among the provincial governments.

Common happiness and well-being within the Belgian Netherlands was a frequent theme, touched on by writers who sympathized with politics both conservative and democratic, as well as by the provincial Estates themselves. The Estates of Brabant, just before Christmas, declared that their membership would stay the same—thus forestalling any calls for new elections (and discussions of new politics)—and remained mindful that “it was [the Estates’] duty to work for the general well-being of all the Provinces.”<sup>123</sup> The Estates of Malines, on the last day of the year, resolved to join the union of provinces, given “that the advantage the *Peuple Belgique* won with a zeal & a courage ... must be attributed to their unanimous attachment to the cult of their Fathers, & to the Laws and Traditions that

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<sup>120</sup> “OBSERVATIONS Sur les causes et les effets de la puissance du génie national,” in *Mercure Flandrico-Latino-Gallico-Belgique*, Tome 1 (L’IMPRIMERIE PATRIOTIQUE, 1789), 13-14.

<sup>121</sup> “Journal historique de la révolution du Hainaut,” 1789, in *Révolution belge 1788-1789*, 16, KBR, 12.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>123</sup> “EXTRAIT des Résolutions des Etats de Brabant, du 24 Décembre,” in *Les Réclamations Belgiques Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Religion & des Loix, XVe volume de cette collection* (L’Imprimerie des Nations, 1790), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), A4961, 121.

have made the Low Countries one of the happiest parts of Europe for so many centuries.”<sup>124</sup> They argued that not unifying with the other provinces would lead to disorder and anarchy, and eventually to another despotic government. The Malinois strongly asserted the “sole & grand object that anchors [their] well-being, namely harmony & union with the other Provinces.”<sup>125</sup> Vigilance had to be maintained in order to combat the (undefined) “common enemy,” the resolution concluded, further underlining the sense of unity among the different administrations.<sup>126</sup>

Though Pierre Van Eupen’s correspondence displayed a sense of Belgian unity, it was tempered by his constant Brabant-centrism. As a Brabançon he wrote to the agent de Roode in London about anticipating “a revolution in Hainaut and Namur,” about the “Brabançons having become masters of Ghent,” and the Estates of Flanders resolving to raise 20,000 more men “for their defense and that of the other Provinces” late in November.<sup>127</sup> Yet he also emphasized the support of the rural and urban populations and spoke easily of “our brave Brothers, and all our Provinces,” indicating by his choice of pronoun a feeling of solidarity and inclusion rather than alienation and other-ness.<sup>128</sup> Thanks to the work of *Pro Aris et Focis*, the

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<sup>124</sup> “Resolution des Etats de Malines, du 31 Décembre 1789, pour engager le Peuple à l’Union,” in *Les Réclamations Belges Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Religion & des Loix, XVe volume de cette collection* (L’Imprimerie des Nations, 1790), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), A4961, 267.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>126</sup> As a side note, many of these statements from the various provincial Estates also contained warnings of “public disturbances” or “enemies from within,” betraying fears of royalist activity within the provinces, as well as foreshadowing conflict between traditionalists and democrats. These will be examined in subsequent chapters, as conflict between traditionalists and democrats raged during the spring of 1790. Such warnings do not, however, diminish the degree of unity and patriotism extolled by these documents, as they use the good of the country as a *whole* as the basis for their arguments, calling on all the inhabitants of their respective provinces to act with patriotism and support the “Nation” by endorsing the Estates and the inchoate United States of Belgium.

<sup>127</sup> Van Eupen to de Roode, 18 November 1789, 13; 16 November 1789, 8; and 26 November 1789, 17, respectively, in *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d’Etat des Etats Belges-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belges Unis 189,

<sup>128</sup> Van Eupen to de Roode, 18 November 1789, 10.

Flemish, Hainuyer, and Namurois citizens—as well as Brabant’s—had been well prepared to fight alongside the patriot army. Two things are important here: first, that Van der Noot and Van Eupen saw the revolution as Brabançon, organized and executed by their provincial compatriots; and second, that despite this, they did want a union of the provinces and saw coalition as a positive, helpful step in securing an independent future. At the end of 1789, support for a confederation played into the overwhelming joy felt throughout the liberated provinces and the coalition translated to a confederated political union when the United States of Belgium were created in January 1790.

#### CONCLUSION

Throughout the resistance to Joseph’s methods, the *Imprimerie des Nations*, operated out of Liège by Jean-Jacques Tutot, published many pieces relevant to the revolution. Eventually Tutot issued a seventeen-volume series, the majority of which was compiled or written by the Abbé de Feller, a confirmed conservative and ex-Jesuit. In it, Tutot included official declarations by the Estates, letters between and among leading figures, and numerous pamphlets. Each volume was divided by province, with a section on the United States of Belgium created after 1789. The Brabant Estates’ response to Flanders was the first entry under the “Brabant” heading of the fifteenth volume, the first to be published in 1790, “when the Brabant Revolution had overcome the imperial government and ... anonymity was no longer a necessity.”<sup>129</sup> The response was introduced as the first resolution undertaken by the

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<sup>129</sup> Jan Roegiers gives an excellent explanation and history of the series, noting its importance and use for historians as well as cautioning that “some of the ‘documents’ published are fictitious” in his

reconvened Estates after Joseph had dispersed them in June, with Tutot choosing to highlight the unity inspired by the revolution rather than the provincial resolutions regarding Brabant's own constitution that came later. The editor was emphasizing that the army's successes and the popular uprisings had facilitated political accomplishments: the formation of a unified political body, one that became more *Belgian* as the autumn wore on. Indeed, Tutot noted that Malines, Tournais, Namur, and Hainaut would also accede to the Acte.<sup>130</sup> The United States of Belgium was formally created in January 1790, and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

In the end, 1789 was a very good year for Belgians with aspirations of independence. Overall, a national spirit was evident in many of the writings published in the provinces during the revolution. The editors of the *Mercure Flandrico-Latino-Gallico-Belgique* explained that, as the title suggested, their weekly bulletin contained things in French, Flemish, and Latin because “there are, among us, lovers of these three...” Admittedly, they confessed, this would “pass in all other nations for a ridiculous motley collection,” but it was, “*chez les BELGES*, but an amusing and useful variety.”<sup>131</sup> The editors fêted Van der Mersch's forces as the “*Troupes nationales*” and noted the general joy at the routing of Imperial troops.<sup>132</sup> While the 1787 and 1788 *remonstrances* and resistance writings had emphasized provincial interests—the speeches by Charles Lambert d'Outrepoint and the Count of

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article “At the Origin of Revolution: Printing in Exile,” *Quaderno* 38 (2008), 322-332. Citation from page 326.

<sup>130</sup> “ACTE D'UNION,” 145.

<sup>131</sup> *Mercure Flandrico-Latino-Gallico-Belgique*, Tome 1 (L'IMPRIMERIE PATRIOTIQUE, 1789), 2.

<sup>132</sup> “LACONISME POLITIQUE, Du 13 Décembre 1789,” in *Mercure Flandrico-Latino-Gallico-Belgique*, Tome 1 (L'IMPRIMERIE PATRIOTIQUE, 1789), 24. For other examples, see descriptions of the military campaign above.

Limminghe as well as the Brabantine letter for unity excepted—these writings from 1789 represented a new phase that included a more holistic vision. Now, “Belgian” was the mainstream adjective in pamphlets as well as official communiqués.

At the same time, the actions of the Estates upon gaining their independence quickly caused friction, especially between their more traditionalist members and the radical associates of *Pro Aris et Focis*. The leaders of the secret society felt they deserved a role in crafting the new country they had helped free but the Estates had seized Joseph’s sovereignty for themselves, unquestioned. These issues—and the Estates and Vandernootists’ deliberate ignoring of them—would cause unrest while the United States of Belgium were being created. Things would not come to a head until March, when the democrats realized just how out of power they were. In December 1789, crafting a new central government was the most pressing task and it was to that that the Estates and their members now turned. Rather than a nation built on popular support and common people’s actions, this new government would be established on the traditional foundations of the old contracts Joseph had violated.





## CHAPTER 4: CREATING A STATE: INDEPENDENCE AND CENTRAL GOVERNMENT FOR THE SOUTHERN NETHERLANDS

“L’union fit la force.” – *Manifeste du Pays et Comité de Hainaut, December 1789*

“To be Free, you have but to want it & unite yourselves.” – *Lettre en forme de manifeste de leurs hauts puissances les quatres consistoires, représentant le Peuple de la Ville & Cité de Tournay & ses Banlieues ; & les Etats du Tournèsis: Aux Gens de Loi & Habitans de tout état des Villes & Campagnes, 16 July 1790*

### INTRODUCTION

As December 1789 ended, the majority of the Belgian provinces—Luxemburg was still in Austrian hands—found themselves free of imperial troops and officials. The provincial Estates convened and deliberated the best course of action. The Brabantine body had declared itself in possession of the sovereignty left by Joseph’s void. The other provincial assemblies took governmental reins as well, at least *de facto* if not officially. Brabant and Flanders had formally announced a union and the other provinces were each in turn declaring their intent to join. Very quickly, preparations began for the formation of a central state—the Congress mentioned in the Flemish Estates’ original request for union to their Brabantine colleagues.

Alongside the creation of the new United States of Belgium, as the country would be called, each province would also formally declare itself independent. Independence declarations drew on the political science of the day, molded and influenced by the likes of Montesquieu, Rousseau, Locke, Holbach, and Vattel as well as the recent successful revolution of Britain’s thirteen mainland North American colonies. As the eighteenth century progressed and thinkers interrogated the relationships between and among states, it became increasingly accepted that states were sovereign and equal in relation to each other. The Swiss philosopher and diplomat Emmerich de Vattel emphatically explained this in his influential *Law of*

*Nations*, first published in 1758, arguing that, no matter how small or powerful a state, it could expect not to be molested by its peers without due cause.

David Armitage, in his book on the 1776 American Declaration of Independence, points out that the Americans had tapped into Vattel's philosophy by asserting that new states could obtain the "right to existence, independence, and equality." In fact, the Americans explicitly put Vattel's *Law of Nations* into practice, raising "issues of recognition" in making themselves legally equal to the other world powers by declaration. There was no guarantee they would be successful when the members of the Continental Congress signed the document in July 1776, committing to paper their intention to form a new republic, independent from Great Britain and Parliament. The act of doing so, however, proved a powerful step in actually achieving such status; with military victory, there was little doubt as to what the legal status of the new country would be. They had declared themselves independent and so they would be—regardless of doubts others held or predictions that this would not last, the experiment would at least go ahead.<sup>1</sup>

In 1789 the Belgians had the advantage of hindsight. They had seen the success of the American revolutionaries in asserting the United States as a new sovereign state accepted by the European powers as such. In view of this, the Estates of each of the southern Low Country provinces, still politically independent from one another, issued declarations of independence. The Breda Committee and *Pro Aris et Focis* members had written the first declaration—the *Manifeste du Peuple Brabançon*—as the patriot army had mustered at the end of October and soldiers

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<sup>1</sup> David Armitage, *Declaration*, 85. The University of Ghent links to a full text of Vattel's *The Law of Nations* (in French, *Le droit des gens*) through the Hathi Trust at <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/ucm.5317972048>.

carried it through the Flemish countryside as they marched toward Ghent.<sup>2</sup> As each province issued its subsequent declaration, they added to the ritual and molded the *manifestes* to fit their specific need. Each also used the opportunity to strengthen ties between the provinces, as the *manifeste* authors nodded to the part their counterparts had played in winning independence. They pledged to remain loyal to each other even as they declared their independence from the Habsburgs.

More than anything else, the Belgian revolutionaries felt that they had earned the right to assert themselves as fully-fledged players on the international stage as a new nation equal in its sovereignty to the likes of Britain or Prussia. Their self-perception was changing. Now that military victory had made independence possible, at least for the time being, the Belgian revolutionaries conception of a nation morphed. The initial resistance of 1787 and 1788 that championed the status quo of an autonomous set of governments within a larger empire had changed. A supraprovincial national feeling that could support a new Belgian state now joined provincial patriotism. The revolutionaries had chased the Austrians and many sympathizers from their territories without foreign assistance; they had created a successful network throughout the countryside to rally people to their cause and spread information; and they had continued the work of governance without the benefit of imperial bureaucracy. While most of these successes would not last, as shall be seen, they did give the revolutionaries a sense of power. Moreover, the political science into which they tapped gave them a powerful weapon: the idea that the people were a new force to be reckoned with and that that people deserved an independent state.

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<sup>2</sup> See previous chapter.

Yet this “popular will” did not mean the same thing to all. Indeed, the very definition of “people” and how their will came to be known and expressed was unsettled. The conservatives felt that the Estates, conseils, and various corporate entities, in looking out for the greater good of the country as a whole, adequately represented the interests of the people. No changes needed to be made to the existing political system. The more liberal Vonckists were in favor of a more direct interpretation of representation that would require some reshuffling and changes to the way things were done in the provinces. Despite the disagreement, both conservatives and democrats invoked the “*Nation*,” the “*Peuple*,” and their will consistently.

There was an important external element necessary for statecraft over which the Belgians had little control: they needed the European powers to formally recognize and accept them. Though Van der Noot obtained mild success in gaining support from the United Provinces and Prussia, the Triple Alliance had offered little concrete assistance thus far. Negotiations would continue, of course, but with the situation in France as it was, the Belgians were fighting a losing battle, whether they knew it or not. The declarations of independence they issued were meant to ease this process, in the same way the American Declaration had paved the way for international acceptance alongside diligent diplomatic work. As so often happens, international events proved too powerful, and Belgian stability and leverage proved too weak, for the revolutionaries to remain masters of their own fate; but at the start

of their experiment, things looked promising and so their *manifestes* and the United States of Belgium they created were imbued with rhetoric of hope and ambition.<sup>3</sup>

With this backdrop, the members of the provincial Estates continued the practical work of creating a central government that would incorporate the separate provinces into one entity capable of trading, negotiating, and generally interacting with the international community. With the revolutionary committee having sent envoys to Prussia, the United Provinces, and Great Britain, and the official union agreed by the Estates of Brabant and Flanders at the end of 1789, there was already some groundwork. As Van Eupen wrote to the Chevalier de Roode, the revolutionary envoy in London, on 22 December, “Several Provinces have already offered themselves to the union between Brabant and Flanders ... [the Estates of Brabant] have just dispatched invitational letters to all the provinces to invite them to send us deputies in order to conclude the aforesaid union with us.”<sup>4</sup> The Estates General would add to this union when they met in the new year, constructing a federal government over their provincial political divisions, making use of the new unity of spirit and purpose among the provinces.

#### DECLARING INDEPENDENCE

As discussed in the previous chapter, Henri Van der Noot and the revolutionaries with him in Breda in October 1789 had written the *Manifeste du Peuple Brabançon* as the patriot soldiers prepared to march into Flanders. To be sure, the document was a declaration of independence. The *Manifeste* incorporated a

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<sup>3</sup> The international situation is the subject of Chapter 6.

<sup>4</sup> Van Eupen to de Roode, 22 December 1789, in *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d'Etat des Etats Belges-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belges Unis 189, 22.

statement of the new political philosophy of a state's place on the international stage alongside the older, established methods of airing grievances against a sovereign. Most of the provinces issued such documents, combining elements of older examples—such as the *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* issued by the inchoate United Provinces in 1581—with the new philosophies encapsulated in the 1776 American declaration. Though the product of a rebellion meant to conserve the old order—with which Van der Noot and his colleagues could certainly identify—the Dutch Act of Abjuration could not guide them to publically declaring independence. For that, they needed later eighteenth-century philosophies and examples of their successful implementation. The American declaration had put the new philosophies into practice “not only in claiming statehood as an escape from empire, but also in declaring independence as the mark of sovereignty.”<sup>5</sup> Though the patriot army marched to liberate all the provinces and the autumn of 1789 saw a growing triumph of Belgianness, provincialism was still strong. The Belgian revolutionaries did not allow the Brabant-centric document read out over the heads of the troops mustering at Hoogstraten to be the last word; they each engaged in some kind of explicit announcement of their independence and status internationally, going beyond the sixteenth century contractual obligations and using the newer eighteenth-century philosophies of a government based on the consent of the governed. Thus, the forming Belgian nation, though it would have a single central state, still operated alongside the smaller nations of Brabantines, Namurois, Hainuyeurs, Flemish, Malinois, Tournaisises, Limbourgiens, and Gelderlandes.

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<sup>5</sup> Armitage, *Declaration*, 113.

When victory was in hand at the end of December 1789, the Estates of Hainaut issued their own *manifeste*. The Estates of Flanders published a *manifeste* in January 1790, those of West-Flandre did so in March, and in June Limbourg followed suit. In July, in response to internal struggle and pressure from the Congress in Brussels, the four Consistoires of Tournai published a *Lettre en forme de Manifeste*.<sup>6</sup> There is also a record of an official independence ceremony held in Namur in January 1790.<sup>7</sup> Namur's independence ceremony and its written account, though not the same thing as a *manifeste* written to declare the province's independence to the world, indicated the importance of these rituals. Their rhetoric, exemplified by pomp and circumstance described in the Namurois account, spoke to a deep-seated need to express independence explicitly, in addition to any logistics or military reality that established independence as a fact. The publication in Luxembourg of an anonymous *manifeste* after the liberation of the other provinces further emphasized this desire. Acknowledging that the province was not actually independent, since the Austrians were still in control of the territory, the Luxembourgish author nevertheless expressed solidarity with the other provinces and professed a longing to join them in their independence as well as their experiment with a new central state.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the independence declarations emphasized the

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<sup>6</sup> The Tournai *manifeste*'s full title is: '*Lettre en forme de manifeste de leurs hauts puissances les quatre consistoires, représentant le Peuple de la Ville & Cité de Tournay & ses Banlieues ; & les Etats du Tournésis: Aux Gens de Loi & Habitans de tout état des Villes & Campagnes.*'

<sup>7</sup> I have not found a declaration of independence from the Estates of Namur thus far in the archives. "Relation de la Cérémonie, par laquelle la Province de Namur a consacré son Indépendance," in *Les Réclamations Belges Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Religion & des Loix, XV<sup>e</sup> volume de cette collection* (L'Imprimerie des Nations, 1790), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), 275-277.

<sup>8</sup> '*Manifeste de la Province de Luxembourg*', 281-286. For further information on Luxembourg and its participation in and reaction to the revolutions of 1787-1793, see Pit Péporté, Sonja Kmec, Benoît Majerus, & Michel Margue, *Inventing Luxembourg: Representations of the Past, Space and Language from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010),



contractual nature of government, their former loyalty to the sovereign and the legitimacy of the revolution, as well as the increasing unity of the provinces.

The *Manifeste du Peuple Brabançon* began with a preamble taken directly from the Baron d'Holbach's *Politique Naturelle*, published anonymously in 1773 in London. Given that the document is mostly attributed to Henri Van der Noot, as he signed it in his capacity as minister plenipotentiary and his writings include several drafts of the declaration, the appearance of d'Holbach is surprising, given his radicalism and Van der Noot's conservatism. It is unlikely that Van der Noot would have known who had written the *Politique Naturelle* and even less likely that he would have known it was the same person who had penned atheistic, supremely materialistic works like the *Système de la Nature*. Given Holbach's strictly guarded anonymity, it was not until several years after his 1789 death that he was revealed as the author of most of his work, or indeed that some of the works were linked to the same author at all. Jeroom Vercruysse, in an article on the *manifeste* and Holbach, contends that it was not until at least 1800 that Holbach was finally named the author of so many radical texts. What is more, the *Politique Naturelle* enjoyed a fair amount of success, as it was translated and reissued several times in the two decades after it came out; it was quite natural for Van der Noot to cite its anonymous author as a "Publicist, who today enjoys the highest reputation." Vercruysse indicates that Holbach's work was favorably reviewed throughout Europe, and that a second printing was required in the same year it was originally issued, in addition to a new edition that appeared the next year before three more editions were released in the

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149-150 (a section on the "Brabant Revolution") and G. Trausch, "Le Luxembourg Face à la Révolution Brabançonne," in J. Lorette, P. Lefevre and P. De Gryse, eds. *Actes du Colloque sur la Révolution brabançonne 13-14 octobre 1983* (Brussels: Centre d'Histoire Militaire, 1984), 187-209.

1790s.<sup>9</sup> As such, and as a close reading of the *manifeste* combined with Van der Noot's own notes indicates, it was not so strange that Van der Noot used the *Politique Naturelle* to open the Brabantine *manifeste*.

The Baron d'Holbach, a French *philosophe* who convened one of Paris' most prestigious *salons* in the eighteenth century, was secretly the author of a number of highly controversial works, including the radical *Le Christianisme Dévoilé* and *Système de la Nature* published under the pseudonym M. Mirabaud. These works severely criticized not only the Church but also religion in general, emphasizing instead man's rationality. He wrote his later work on politics in a similar vein, in line with the likes of John Locke in advocating a contractual nature of government that depended on both ruler and ruled maintaining their roles. For Holbach, social relationships of reciprocity were the basis of politics, which translated to a government that existed to maintain the general welfare. In the *Politique Naturelle*, the earliest of his more politically oriented writings, Holbach expressed this through the contractual nature of government.

Holbach asserted that government rests on popular consent:

Whatever the form of a Government, the rights of Sovereignty, in order to be legitimate, must be uniquely founded on the consent of the Peoples; all power is essentially limited by the primitive goal that Society proposes for itself; aiming constantly to conserve itself, to remain in force, to make its fate pleasant, [Society] can consent only to methods that fulfill these views.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> J.Vercruyse, "Van der Noot, Holbach et le Manifeste du peuple brabançon," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 46, 4 (1963), 1224; Henri Van der Noot, "Manifeste du Peuple Brabançon." 24 Oct 1787, in *Supplément aux Réclamations Belgiques, &c., Formant le XIIIe Tome de ce Recueil* (L'Imprimerie des Nations, 1789), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium, A4961, 258. As a side note, Henri Pirenne disdained Van der Noot and his *manifeste* as "badly written drivel, backward and narrow-minded in its veneration of the past and ignorant of enlightened philosophies or political systems." [Pirenne (1926), 426.]

<sup>10</sup> Baron d'Holbach, *La Politique Naturelle*, first edition published in Amsterdam by Marc-Michel Rey in 1773, quoted in Vercruyse, "Van der Noot, Holbach et le Manifeste," 1225.

Van der Noot and his conservative colleagues interpreted this in its loosest sense, using their own conception that “the People” need not actually be consulted regularly, only represented by a group of the population who would always have society’s best interest at heart. They used Holbach’s *Politique Naturelle* while maintaining their intent to conserve the old regime, this time with the Estates as sovereigns simultaneously embodying the will and consent of the People. The Brabantine *Manifeste* returned to those contractual ideas stressed in the Baron’s work at various times.

As far as the revolutionaries at Breda were concerned, the sovereign was made fully aware of his obligations when he swore his oaths, and so were his subjects. Arguing that Joseph could not have offended the Belgians out of ignorance or a simple misunderstanding, the *Manifeste* stated that, since “the Prince had undertaken a contract with the People or its Representatives, he must know his commitments and his obligations.”<sup>11</sup> Importantly, the contract rested not on the sovereign’s will but on the wishes of the “Nation.”

No one can deny, that when Laws are dangerous (harmful) or contrary to fundamental Law, to the Constitution & to the will of the Nation, it [the Nation] has the right to refute them, to revoke their powers & to oppose the breach of trust. The will of the Nation is always the supreme Law, for the Sovereign as for the Subject ; it is the consistent measure of power for the former & of obedience for the latter ; it is the common bond that unites the Nation to its Leader & and the Leader to the Nation ; this bond is reciprocal ; as soon as the Sovereign breaks it, the Subjects are no longer tied to it.<sup>12</sup>

The Estates had upheld their commitments, the *Manifeste* clearly stated. “Moreover, the aforementioned Representatives of the People or the Estates, at the very start of these infractions [by Joseph II], made humble protests, but persuasive; they

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<sup>11</sup> Van der Noot, “Manifeste,” 264.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 283.

addressed them directly to the Sovereign.”<sup>13</sup> The Estates had done their part by engaging with the Monarch—it was only Joseph’s refusal to see reason that had led to an armed revolt. The laws Joseph II enacted and his treatment of the Provinces in the abstract and of their representatives sent to Vienna were contrary to the established contract between ruler and ruled.

The provincial *manifestes* used Joseph’s violation of the contractual nature of government as justification for deposing Joseph, just as the *représentations* and *remonstrances* had relied on the contractual nature of government in their arguments initially opposing Joseph’s reforms. The Belgians invoked Joseph’s violation of their rights and his annulment of the constitutions and contracts for independence. Ultimately, “the Revolution was fought to exact respect for the Brabant political culture, which was understood to constitute a community of interests.”<sup>14</sup> Joseph had violated the contractual nature of government and had trespassed against Belgian rights, thereby forfeiting his role in the community. In so doing, he had also changed the nature of the Belgian nation and its relationship to its state. Where the empire had failed to safeguard the nation’s privileges and status, a new independent state would try.

Published on 16 July 1790, the *Lettre en forme de manifeste* issued by the Consistoires of Tournai took pains to explain to its audience that when God created Man he did not also create sovereigns; they were the creation of humankind and as such a people need only recognize “a single *legitimate* Sovereign.”<sup>15</sup> Since it was the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 258 ; Ibid., 264.

<sup>14</sup> Van den Bossche, 220.

<sup>15</sup> Platteau, “Lettre en forme de Manifeste de leurs hautes puissances le Quatre Consistoires, Représentant le Peuple de la Ville & Cité de Tournay & ses Banlieues, & les Etats du Tournésis: Aux Gens de Loi & Habitans de tout état des Villes & Campagnes,” in *Le Livre Belgique, ou Oeuvres*

People who had instilled in their leader any and all sovereign power, if its will was actively disrespected or ignored, especially through use of force, it was not the People who rebelled against the Sovereign, but the Sovereign “who rebel[led] against legitimate power, against the power that [came] from God by the choice of the People, as his commission itself prove[d].”<sup>16</sup> The Belgian revolutionaries, even the ordinary people who had risen up and helped defeat the imperial troops with cobblestones, pitchforks, or muskets, could hardly be blamed for reacting as they had. Similarly, the Estates of Hainaut, in their *manifeste* issued on 21 December 1789, reminded their readers that the reasons for revolution did not lie with the system of government in the provinces: “The laws were wise: their nonfulfillment had produced disorder.”<sup>17</sup> Echoing the sentiments d’Outrepoint had expressed in May 1787, the Hainuyers highlighted the error of Joseph’s methods over the specifics of his reforms. The entire debacle could be pinned on Vienna and Joseph’s policies, and reform could be dismissed as a misguided attempt to fix society through innovation when what it really needed was restoration of the traditional.

Indeed, recalled the writers, the Belgians had not even originally sought to free themselves from the Habsburg Empire, as their petitions and *remonstrances* solicited peaceful redress and a return to a status quo. They were not a rowdy group of nationalists calling their compatriots to fight for an independent political entity for the sake of it. As a culmination of the *remonstrances* sent so frequently to the Emperor and his representatives in Belgium and Vienna, the *manifestes* fulfilled an older tradition. The *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe*, after all, had been a long list of

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*choisis concernant les troubles des Belges vers la fin du 18ème siècle, Tome 6ème* (Brussels, 1790), Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, VH 27139 A VI, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>17</sup> DuPré, “Manifeste du Pays et Comité de Hainaut,” 10.

grievances justifying the United Provinces' shift from the realm of Philip II to that of their new sovereign Francis d'Anjou. For the American historian Gary Wills, the 1776 Declaration of Independence announced "the failure of reform by petition," and it is easy to see that the same process was at work in the rebelling Austrian Netherlands.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the eighteenth-century politics were a progression from the sixteenth and seventeenth century understanding of government and sovereignty.

The Belgians straddled the two theories perfectly, with all the *manifestes* expounding at length their justification for revolution by incorporating many of the original grievances they felt had gone unheeded for too long. The Consistoires of Tournai explicitly reminded their audience that they had tried, "by the most respectful protestations," to compromise and to find a solution to the disagreements with Vienna.<sup>19</sup> Towards the end of the *manifeste*, they devoted an entire page to the subject: "How many sacrifices had [the province] offered and utilized for two years? What humble *Représentations* had she not exhausted before coming to the sad and last means of Independence ordered by Religion, Justice, and Love of Motherland?"<sup>20</sup> Van der Noot's *Manifeste* cited the attempts by the Governors-General, Joseph's own sister and her husband, to smooth over the situation, to mediate between the obstinate Emperor and the righteous Belgians. He quoted them at length, and praised them for having recognized the error of the decrees, thus further justifying the revolution. The Flemish used the cease-fire negotiated between General Van der Mersch and "*le Gouvernement*" on 2 December as proof that "the Emperor ha[d] not only recognized Flanders as a legitimate belligerent party, but he

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<sup>18</sup> Gary Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 65.

<sup>19</sup> Platteau, "Lettre en forme de Manifeste," 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

handed the fate of the military the justice of our cause.”<sup>21</sup> Joseph’s general had (to his sovereign’s detriment) implicitly validated the revolution by negotiating, something unthinkable with regard to an illegitimate band of rabble-rousers. If even Joseph’s representatives in the Provinces—his own family and hand-picked commander—admitted the error of his reforms and his implementation, then the Belgians could hardly be blamed for refusing to comply.<sup>22</sup>

The repetition of the earlier *remonstrances* in the *manifestes* served a second purpose in rhetorically illustrating the emotional difficulty, whether feigned or genuine, the Belgians had experienced in deposing their monarch. The authors of the *manifestes* all emphasized their respective provinces’s proven loyalty to both branches of the Habsburgs. Rohaert of Flanders declared his province had remained loyal despite detrimental policies implemented by the Emperor Charles V and his son Phillip II and the taxation reforms of Maria Theresa. Her son’s ineptitude had, however, set in motion a “*révolution inévitable*.”<sup>23</sup> While the Flemish pensionary only enumerated a few of such specific offenses—Rohaert sniffed that the violations were too well known to need explanation—he made clear Joseph’s culpability.

One thing that does however merit disclosure, is that this cruel beginning to the Austrian domination could not introduce to Flanders disobedience, in taking the side that its interests dictated, to unite itself to the United Provinces: it sacrificed its resentment and its interests to its innate attachment to its Sovereigns: circumstance, which alone should convince the world impartial, that, under this last Government, things have been pushed to a horrible extreme.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> J.F. Rohaert, “Manifeste de la Province de Flandre,” 4 Jan 1790, in *Les Réclamations Belges Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Religion & des Loix, XVe volume de cette collection* (L’Imprimerie des Nations, 1790), KU Leuven Main Library Tabularium (Leuven, Belgium), A4961, 175.

<sup>22</sup> Van der Noot, “*Manifeste*,” 272.

<sup>23</sup> Rohaert, “*Manifeste de la Province de Flandre*,” 162.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

Rohaert returned to the loyalty expressed in the earlier *remonstrances*, again tying it closely to a Flemish identity. In this way, the Estates of Flanders carefully pointed out their loyalty, and implied that they had a right to revolt in 1789 precisely because they had not done so in the past.

Similarly, Monsieur Marrannes, author of the *manifeste* written for the Estates of West-Flanders, expressed a sincere belief that Austria owed the Province more than it had acknowledged, given “the attachment and fidelity” to the House of Habsburg held by the *Belges*.<sup>25</sup> The *Manifeste* assured its audience that, even as a political part of France during the tumults of the last century, West-Flanders had maintained its loyalty to the Habsburgs, despite its subsequent treatment as conquered territory by its “old Master.”<sup>26</sup> Marrannes linked this to bitterness about having been the principal theatre for wars over the centuries, a point the *manifestes* of Flanders, Hainaut, and Tournai brought up as well. Loyalty to the sovereign proved an important component to each provincial identity, and it would become an important element in the debates about what it meant to be Belgian as well. These shows of loyalty legitimized not only the revolution and independence but also highlighted the Belgians’ larger point. The unwarranted actions of a derelict sovereign had pushed them to this end, and once provoked a people were perfectly within their political rights, according to the likes of Montesquieu, Holbach, Locke, Jefferson, and others, to revert to their natural sovereignty and chose a new ruler. Such rights having put them in the position to declare themselves independent, the Belgians were now entitled to govern themselves as they saw fit.

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<sup>25</sup> Marrannes, “*Manifeste de la West-Flandre*,” 170.

<sup>26</sup> West Flanders had been ceded to France in the seventeenth century and returned to Austrian rule only after the Treaty of Utrecht (1713). *Ibid*, 171.



Citing the provincial “Constitutions” to which the sovereign had to swear allegiance, the October *Manifeste* drew a direct link between Holbach and other *philosophes*’ theories and the Belgian struggle specifically. Here, at the start of the declaration written to bolster the volunteers marching into Flanders from Breda, Holbach’s ideas served to anchor the legitimacy of the revolution. The famous anonymous author had proclaimed, “There remains in the body of the Nation, a supreme will, an indelible character, an inalienable right, a right anterior to all other rights.”<sup>27</sup> These words echoed those used thirteen years earlier by the representatives of half of Britain’s American colonies as they severed their own imperial ties. In Ghent, the Estates of Flanders even decided to quote the famous 1776 American Declaration of Independence.

When the pensionary for Flanders’ Estates penned his province’s own *manifeste* declaring the relationship to the sovereign null and void, the link to the American Declaration went from an expression of common eighteenth-century philosophy to direct citation. Jean Ferdinand Rohaert’s *Manifeste de la Province de Flandre*, rather than quoting popular but anonymous political theory, directly copied the language (and even punctuation) of Thomas Jefferson’s document. He began:

Since it has pleased the Divine Providence, through a combination of circumstances in all respects extraordinary, to return us to our natural Rights of Liberty & Independence, breaking the ties that bound us to a Prince of a House whose domination was always fatal to the interests of Flanders; we owe our contemporaries & our descendants a faithful account of the causes & events that led to & achieved this happy revolution.<sup>28</sup>

He closed:

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<sup>27</sup> Holbach, quoted in Vercruyssen, “Van der Noot, Holbach et le Manifeste,” 1226.

<sup>28</sup> J.F. Rohaert, “Manifeste de la Province de Flandre,” 4 Jan 1790, 159.

In consequence, inherent to our preceding resolutions & declarations, & calling on the supreme Judge of the universe, who knows the justice of our cause, we publish & declare solemnly, in the name of the People, that this Province IS & has the right TO BE a *free & independent state*; that it is released from all obedience to the Emperor Joseph II, Count of Flanders, & the House of Austria.<sup>29</sup>

For the Flemish, the homage to the American Revolution could not be more explicit or appropriate. The Dutch merchant Jh. Mandrillon's book about the American Revolution published at the very beginning of 1790 and written for Europeans, included a separate chapter on the form of government in each new American state, as well as a brief explanation of the overarching central government created by the Articles of Confederation in 1781. About the Revolution as a whole, Mandrillon wrote that American independence was "one of the greatest and most memorable events of the century," and declared unequivocally that the "surprising and rapid revolution had changed the political and mercantile system of Europe."<sup>30</sup> Though there is no direct evidence the revolutionary leaders in the provinces read it, *Le Spectateur Américain* was published in Brussels as well as The Hague, an indication that it sold in the Brabantine capital.<sup>31</sup>

The American Revolution offered a powerful example for a new state, since its "primary intention" was "to affirm before world opinion the rights of one people organized into thirteen states to enter the international arena on a footing equal to other, similar states."<sup>32</sup> This was exactly what the Belgian revolutionaries hoped to do. Yet, despite Rohaert's use of Jefferson's introduction and conclusion, the Belgian

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>30</sup> Mandrillon, *Le Spectateur Américain*, (Amsterdam and Brussels: De la Haye & Co, 1785), 133.

<sup>31</sup> As an interesting side note, Thomas Jefferson owned a copy as well; William Short has it listed in his catalogue of Jefferson's Library. Short's Catalogue of Jefferson's Library, *Miscellany 1779-1836*, William Short Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Microfilm. Box 64 Reel 32.

<sup>32</sup> Armitage, *Declaration*, 64.

*manifestes* did not seek to tie their revolution to the American, nor did they attempt to implement the elements of social revolution implied in the American declaration—none of the Belgian provinces sought to brand all men as equals or recreate a society based on individual rights. The conservative followers of Van der Noot and the Estates especially wanted to maintain the quasi-medieval status quo that prized corporate privilege and divided society hierarchically; after all, the members of the Estates benefitted as components of the privileged corps who enacted the “will” of the “nation.”

The Americans were not the first example of people to forcibly extract themselves from an empire. Two centuries earlier, the northern Netherlands had successfully broken away and formed the United Provinces, having fought a tempestuous campaign against Philip II’s forces. In fact, the original upheaval had included all of the Low Countries, with Brussels as its original hub, but eventually the Duke of Parma quelled unrest in the South while William of Orange was able to continue rebellion in Holland and Zeeland. In the end, only those provinces north of Flanders and Brabant seceded. In July 1581, they issued the *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe*. Though the revolt did not end until well into the seventeenth century, the *Plakkaat* (or Act of Abjuration) is often called the Netherlands’ “declaration of independence.”<sup>33</sup> Two years earlier the Unions of Utrecht and Arras, which were respectively Calvinist and Catholic, had been set up in the north and south as pseudo-governments as the provinces fought with Philip’s troops and among themselves. Rather than indicating the creation of a new state, the Calvinist Union of Utrecht was meant to simply reaffirm the continuation of active conflict against the Spanish

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<sup>33</sup> Though by no means an academic measure, the Act’s Wikipedia page is quick to emphasize this.

sovereign. The Act of Abjuration, issued by the Estates General, “coresponded [*sic*] to the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 only in forswearing the sovereignty of the king.” The Dutch historian Herbert Rowen concedes that independence of the kind achieved by the American revolutionaries was far from the underlying motive for the *Plakkaat*.<sup>34</sup> As he points out, “the very purpose of the abjuration was to clear the way for the assumption of sovereignty by a foreign prince”—initially Elizabeth I of England and then the French duke Francis d’Anjou upon her refusal. As such, it was a document akin to the *remonstrances* and *representations* sent so many times to Joseph and his agents by the various bodies of the Southern Netherlands, and indeed had been an example to the writers of those many complaints; but it was not a declaration of independence.

Unsurprisingly then, to judge from the *manifestes*, the Dutch revolt of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a large part of the Belgians’ collective story, was not foremost in Belgian minds as they declared independence. Henri Van der Noot mentioned it in the revolutionary *Manifeste* as the document came to its climactic end, the last in a series of historic precedents for a people to void their sovereign. After the “*Assemblée Générale de la Nation des Francs*, held in May 922,” the Swiss Cantons, and the mutiny against Jean IV, Duke of Brabant at the start of the fifteenth century, came “Philip II, King of Spain, & Sovereign of the Low Countries, who gave birth to one of the most flourishing Republics of Europe.”<sup>35</sup> “However,” the Brussels lawyer added an important caveat, “Philip II had not taken liberties as far,

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<sup>34</sup> Herbert R. Rowen, “The Dutch Revolt: What Kind of Revolution?” *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43, no.3 (Autumn 1990), 582. The Belgian *manifestes* were above all declarations of independence. I address this issue in an article due to be published in early 2015: “Provincial Manifestes: Belgians Declare Independence, 1789-1790,” *De Achttiende Eeuw* 47, no.2 (2015): TBD.

<sup>35</sup> Van der Noot, “Manifeste du Peuple Brabançon,” 289.

[though] very close, as violating the fundamental Laws, & as tyrannizing the People, when he was declared relieved of Sovereignty.”<sup>36</sup> After all, having remained under Habsburg rule since the sixteenth century revolt, Van der Noot had to concede some points to Philip II—he could not paint him as worse than the undeserving Joseph II. By formulating his point in this way, Van der Noot made Joseph look all the worse, even more despotic than the emperor that d’Outrepoint had dubbed the sixteenth century Nero.<sup>37</sup> Though Van der Noot acknowledged the Belgians’ connection to Spain and did not ignore the example of “one of Europe’s most flourishing Republics” in the United Provinces, the homage and respect extended no further than this brief mention.

Overall, there was a significant shift in the use of the Dutch Revolt within the writings produced by the conservative camp in Brabant. Before independence, the “restoration of Philip’s domination over the Belgian provinces” was included in the story, but was largely ignored after December 1789.<sup>38</sup> The earlier pamphlets used the episode in its entirety “because it justified the active right of resistance as well as encouraging the expectation for redress and full restoration of authority.”<sup>39</sup> By the time independence became the ultimate objective, Philip’s restoration was dropped as “a resolute, but unacknowledged, blanking out of the South’s return to obedience in favour of the North’s elevation into an independent and successful republic.”<sup>40</sup> The ulterior motive behind this shift, aside from the obvious justification of independence for the Belgian Provinces, was the need to court the United Provinces. By

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 2 and discussion of Charles d’Outrepoint’s “*Considérations sur la Constitution des Duchés de Brabant. . .*”

<sup>38</sup> Van den Bossche, 223.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

emphasizing the legitimacy of the revolt that had created their Republic, and “the continuity between the Dutch Revolt and the Brabant Revolution,” the Provinces could subtly ingratiate themselves with their cousins to the North without explicitly demanding the reunion of the two territories.<sup>41</sup> By the time the volunteer army was mustering in Hoogstraten to march toward Ghent, independence had become the revolution’s motive; the Belgians were no longer actively seeking a new sovereign, though they were still keen to receive foreign aid and the Vandernootists had not given up on material assistance from the Triple Alliance. The leaders of the emerging Belgian nation were beginning to dream of having their own political state within Europe. As such, the *Manifeste* paid little more than lip-service to the sixteenth century Dutch example.

Importantly, the *manifestes* acknowledged the growing level of unity among the provinces. Though individual declarations of independence reinforced the political division and autonomy among and between the provinces, the documents also indicated the pan-provincial nature of revolution and independence. The October *Manifeste*, though Brabant-centric, implied a larger view of the nation, especially given that the patriot army marched through more than just one province. In fact, the document embodied the tension between provincial and Belgian identity. Several times the *Manifeste* referred to all the provinces at once. Similarly, the Flemish pensionary Rohaert praised Brabant’s role in the revolt: “It was in these moments of alarm that our brothers in Brabant, more mistreated even than us,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. This reunion was explicitly called for by other authors, however. In particular, a book called *La République Belge* (published in three volumes between November 1789 and the fall of 1790) argued persuasively and aggressively for just that outcome. It should also be noted that Van den Bossche’s book exclusively examines the Province of Brabant, leaving aside the political theories found in pamphlets published by authors in the other Provinces.

presented themselves to aid us in shaking off the yoke of tyranny.”<sup>42</sup> The *conseillier-persionnaire* DuPré, writing for the Estates of Hainaut, spoke of the general sufferings of the “*Provinces Beligues*” and the “*Pays-Bas*,” while Platteau in Tournai paid homage to “the union, the zeal, the eagerness, [and] the Patriotism” displayed in Brabant, Flanders, Hainaut, and “the other Belgian Provinces” in his *manifeste*.<sup>43</sup> While cross-referencing was not a definitive indicator of complete unity, it demonstrated a level of cooperation and respect among the provinces, so that their declarations of independence acknowledged a level of interdependence and collaboration. They may have been declaring themselves independent from the Habsburgs but they would simultaneously remain loyal to each other.

In its final paragraphs, the *manifeste* issued in Tournai called its citizens to arms and reminded them that maintaining independence, and therefore happiness, depended upon the citizens themselves. Platteau quoted the Congress in Brussels, saying, “*To be Free, you have but to want it & unite yourselves.*”<sup>44</sup> This internal power, realized in the course of the successful armed revolt, reiterated the Belgians’ argument that they could and should govern themselves by relying on each other. The provinces had belonged to several larger empires over the centuries and subsequently had gained a collective identity. That identity now began to serve a stronger political purpose as it bolstered the creation of a single Belgian nation, able to stand independent on the European stage (if not for long).

As the resistance of 1787 had intensified, the Estates had come together and coordinated their opposition, with the support of the corporations, *conseils*, and

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<sup>42</sup> Roheart, “*Manifeste de la Province de Flandre*,” 174.

<sup>43</sup> DuPré, “*Manifeste*,” 21; Platteau, “*Lettre en forme de Manifeste*,” 55.

<sup>44</sup> Platteau, “*Lettre en forme de Manifeste*,” 55. Emphasis original.

religious actors. In 1789, when armed revolt and independence became the goals, the revolutionaries had consolidated their efforts. In the account of the official independence ceremony held in Namur, the Abbott of Boneffe pleaded for concord and peace “not only between the Provinces, but in each Province itself.”<sup>45</sup> The Hainuyeur DuPré put it best when he asserted in his *manifeste* that, “full of confidence in the benefit of the *cause commune* to all of Belgium, we did not delay in joining our efforts to those of the other Provinces.”<sup>46</sup> Now, he and the other provinces would bind themselves together politically as well, putting into practice his apt phrase that, “*l’union fit la force.*”<sup>47</sup>

#### CREATING A STATE: STRENGTH IN UNION OR THE BEGINNING OF THE END?

After the patriot army wrested Ghent from imperial control, the Belgians established a *comité général des Pays-Bas* in the city. The committee called for the Estates of Flanders to form an alliance with those of Brabant—represented by the Breda Committee headed by Van der Noot and Van Eupen—on 22 November 1789.<sup>48</sup> A member of the *comité général* explained in an account left by the marquis de Bruges that J.F. Rohaert, the very man who would sign the Flemish declaration of independence two months later, presented the committee members with a plan on 29 November, in the form of “two scraps of paper without address, without date and without signature.”<sup>49</sup> Taking cues from Van der Noot and Van Eupen in Breda, the

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<sup>45</sup> “*Relation de la Cérémonie, par laquelle la Province de Namur a consacré son Indépendance,*” 276.

<sup>46</sup> DuPré, “*Manifeste,*” 21.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> L.P. Gachard, “*Documens Politiques et Diplomatiques sur la Révolution Belge de 1790; publiés avec des notes et des éclaircissemens* (Bruxelles: H. Remy, 1834), footnote 1, p.2.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in L.P. Gachard, “*Documens Politiques et Diplomatiques sur la Révolution Belge de 1790; publiés avec des notes et des éclaircissemens* (Bruxelles: H. Remy, 1834), footnote p3.



*pensionnaire* and clerk for the Estates insisted that the committee deliberate and decide upon the resolutions immediately, and that the act of union between the two principle provinces be kept secret and unpublished. Indeed, the *pensionnaire* would not even give the *comité* more than the basic facts outlined on the two “scraps.”<sup>50</sup> Though the committee wanted more time, they realized their requests would fall on deaf ears when, just after the unproductive meeting with Rohaert, another pensionary presented them with the announcement that the *Conseil d’État* proposed by Rohaert was already being assembled by the Brabantines. It “had been named *Congrès*, and . . . many changes had been made to the plan that we had communicated, . . . of which however [the pensionary] disclosed nothing.”<sup>51</sup> Here, then, was a struggle among at least three separate actors: the Flemish Estates (or at least their clerks), the members of the *comité général*, and the Breda Committee headed by Van der Noot and Van Eupen, purporting to speak for the Estates of Brabant. The picture becomes even more complex when the Estates of the other provinces were added to the mix. Considered chronologically, however, the creation of the United States of Belgium is somewhat easier to follow.

On 30 November 1789, the Estates of Flanders had sent an *Acte d’Union* to the Estates of Brabant, spearheaded by the clerk Rohaert and hastily, if hesitantly, approved by the *comité général*. The Estates of Brabant, unofficially represented by the Breda Committee, did not publically respond until 19 December, after their installation in Brussels following the flight of the imperial administration. The next day, on 20 December 1789, the Brabantine Estates sent formal invitations to the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 4.

Estates of the other liberated provinces to join the union. In a letter signed by the clerk De Jonghe, the Estates reiterated their independence first and foremost:

The happy revolution that we have just achieved gloriously under the visible auspices of God, has put the supreme power in our hands, by virtue of which we have just declared ourselves free and independent, and the former duke Joseph II deposed of all sovereignty, honors, etc. of our country and the duchy of Brabant.<sup>52</sup>

The invitation deferred to the wisdom of the other Estates, declaring that the Brabantines had no doubt their compatriots would see “how much such a union, and all others even more intimate, must be useful and even necessary to the conservation of our liberty.”<sup>53</sup> Essentially, they were arguing that a state created from their unity could stand firm on the international stage and secure the tenuous victory won by the patriot army. Above all, the invitation stressed the need for haste, ending with a plea that the addressees respond quickly, “because time is short, and the well-being of the homeland requires it.”<sup>54</sup> As Van Eupen noted in his missive to the Breda Committee’s representative in London, two days after the invitation was sent out, several of the provinces had already responded positively. Though they did not intend to forsake their traditional power and provincial governments, the members of the Estates realized that combining their political power and capitalizing on the sense of provincial unity in the formation of a new United States of Belgium was their best option. Thus, nationalistic fervor did not create the new Belgian state but rather convenience, necessity, and the unity almost unintentionally created by the revolution resulted in “Belgium.”

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<sup>52</sup> De Jonghe, “Lettre des Etats de Brabant aux États des autres provinces, leur notifiant la déchéance de Joseph II, prononcée par eux, l’union qu’ils ont contractée avec les États de Flandre, et les invitant à envoyer des députés à Bruxelles: 20 décembre 1789,” in L.P. Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

The *Manifeste du Peuple Brabançonne* was included in some of the missives, as it was to the Estates of Namur, who wrote to Van der Noot on the twenty-eighth of December to say they had received it. In light of the contents of the *Manifeste*, and for “other diverse reasons particular to [their] province,” the Estates of Namur declared themselves independent and would accede to the union proposed by the Brabantine Estates.<sup>55</sup> They ended their letter by avowing their sincere appreciation for Van der Noot’s “interest ... in the happiness of the Brabantine nation and ... [his] attention to extend it to all the Belgian provinces.”<sup>56</sup> In this reply, the Namurois acknowledged the power of the declaration of independence in making their decision. Equally, they expressed the tension between provincial attachment and the growing Belgian element of the revolution. In the same sentence, they could praise the conservative leader for his love of his own province and acknowledge that it formed part of a larger whole of those considered “Belgian,” to which the Namurois equally belonged.

These initial responses notwithstanding, on the twenty-eighth another letter was sent out, this time signed by the Canon Van Eupen as “Secretary of State of the United States.” Such a signature indicated that the United States of Belgium were already an entity, essentially presenting the other provinces with a fait accompli—theirs was to decide whether to join Flanders and Brabant, not to give input regarding the creation of the union itself. Conversely, Van Eupen’s signature could have been a bluff, a tactic to inspire confidence. Regardless, it pushed the recipients to act in favor of a union, lest they be left out. In fact, the second letter reiterated the need for

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<sup>55</sup> Petit Jean for the *Etats du pays et Comté de Namur* to H. Van der Noot, 28 xbre 1789, *Correspondance d’Henri van der Noot, Agent plénipotentiaire des Etats Beligues Unis, Tome II 1789 (Suite) (Juillet-Décembre)* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beligues Unis 181, 177.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

haste, and informed its recipients that the Estates of Flanders, Malines, and Namur were already in union with Brabant. These had decided to solicit the other provinces to send them deputies if they had not already done so, or to authorize the deputies sent after the twentieth “to consult together and lay the foundation for the sole sovereignty which [they] had agreed” in choosing the representatives that would make up the sovereign Congress of the new state. Those already in negotiations, Van Eupen informed the other Estates, had “unanimously determined the 7<sup>th</sup> of the month of January next, in order to, at ten o’clock in the morning, in [the Brabant Estates’s] normal assembly, initiate this grand operation.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, the new Congress was presented as definitively established and organized, with the details of its operation to be determined without questioning its existence. The decision to join this existing body was entirely up to the respective provincial Estates. When the Namurois inquired as to the number of deputies expected by the earlier letter, the “Estates of Brabant and United States”—as they referred to themselves before the January date—responded that

nothing was stipulated on the number of deputies who would sit in session at the sovereign Congress, nor on the deputation for the 7<sup>th</sup> of January next to draw up the plan of sovereignty, they had not wanted to take upon themselves the determination of these, so as each province would follow on this point that which it found most convenient.<sup>58</sup>

Attached to the circular invitation was a copy of the resolution of the Brabantine Estates from the day before. It stipulated that, aside from the oath they would swear to the people upon taking up their role as the new sovereigns, they would equally

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<sup>57</sup> Van Eupen, “Lettre des États de Brabant aux États des autres provinces, les invitant à envoyer des députés à Bruxelles, pour poser les bases d’établissement d’un Congrès souverain: 28 décembre 1789,” in L.P. Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Letters between the Estates of Namur and the Estats of Brabant/United States quoted in L.P. Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, footnote p.6.

swear oaths to the Church, “according to the formula of Pious IV.”<sup>59</sup> By 21 January 1790, Van Eupen could happily report to De Roode in London the concluded union among their provinces. All but Limbourg, which had agreed to the treaty but whose proximity to Luxembourg and the many imperial troops still stationed there made ratification imprudent, and Luxembourg, which was still under Austrian control, were officially part of the new United States of Belgium.<sup>60</sup>

The *Traité d’Union* written up behind closed doors in Brussels on 7 January 1790, at only six printed pages, mirrored the American Articles of Confederation, ratified in 1781, quite closely in both content and format.<sup>61</sup> Though historian Thomas Gorman contends that the Breda Committee “had its attention turned to [John] Adams’ *Defense of the American Constitution*,” there is no direct evidence except the remarkable similarities between the two that the Belgians specifically used the American document in crafting their own.<sup>62</sup> The first articles of both constitutions conferred the country’s new name; the Belgians gave their provinces all rights not expressly given to the new congress; pledged to furnish all necessary expenditures for those services conferred to Congress; stipulated a common defense that would be reinforced by mutual military aid; declared that only Congress would conclude treaties, have the power to settle disputes between provinces, declare war, or coin money—all strikingly similar to the Articles of Confederation. The only differences were that the Belgians wrote the Catholic Church into their government as its official

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<sup>59</sup> Van Eupen, “Résolution des États de Brabant, du 27 décembre 1789, mentionnée dans la lettre qui précède,” in L.P. Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> Van Eupen to De Roode, 21 January 1790, *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d’Etat des Etats Belgiques-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belgiques Unis* 189, 25.

<sup>61</sup> The original version of the *Traité d’Union* has been lost. P.J. De Haes published the earliest and clearest version still available in 1790.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas K. Gorman, *America and Belgium: A study of the Influence of the United States Upon the Belgian Revolution of 1789-1790* (T. Fisher Unwin Ltd: London, 1925), 230.

religion and they did not address questions of debt incurred before independence, as the provincial estates already had mechanisms to deal with these. The Congress would be made up of the members of the Estates-General (who were drawing up the *Traité* itself), to be “renewed” every three years, led by a president to be chosen weekly. Van der Noot was kept as plenipotentiary minister, and *de facto* leader of the new country, and Van Eupen was officially named Secretary of State—a function that he was already fulfilling. Finally, the new Belgian constitution stipulated, just as the American Articles of Confederation had done, that the union it created would be “stable, perpetual, and irrevocable.”<sup>63</sup>

In their preamble, the writers of the United States of Belgium’s constitution returned to the language of their *manifestes*, reiterating that Joseph’s actions, in violating his oaths and the Belgian constitutions, had necessitated the creation of a new government to give voice to the People and their Representatives. Though they invoked the people, the representative has made no effort to consult them. The conservative members of the Estates would continue to rely on virtual representation for their authority to rule. Most importantly in January 1790 was that the bond between Joseph II and the Belgians was no more: “In the end the Pact, which ceases to bind as soon as it ceases to be reciprocal, was formally broken on the part of the Sovereign.”<sup>64</sup> This had left the people to their “natural right” which, alongside the stipulations of the oath itself, they claimed, gave them the right “to oppose force with

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<sup>63</sup> Jacques Godechot gives an excellent side-by-side comparison of the two in his book *La Pensée Révolutionnaire en France et en Europe* (Paris: A. Colin, 1964), 18. See also Thomas K. Gorman, *America and Belgium*, 234-239.

<sup>64</sup> *Traité d’Union* quoted in Fred Stevens, “Constitutional Documents of Belgium 1789-1831,” in Horst Dippel, Ed-in-Chief, *Constitutions of the World from the late eighteenth Century to the Middle of the nineteenth Century; Europe vol. 7: Constitutional Documents of Belgium, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands 1789-1848* (Mörlenbach, K.G. Saur, 2008), 41.

violence, and take back an authority, that had only been confided for common happiness and with all the precautions, under stipulations and express reserves.”<sup>65</sup>

The spirit of the resistance and the armed revolution penetrated the document as it capitalized on the new feelings of unity a Belgian sentiment gave the provinces.

Each province’s deputies went back to their Estates and sent word of the *Traité*’s ratification. Hainaut ratified on 13 January, West Flanders and Tournai on the fourteenth, Namur on the seventeenth, and Flanders and Brabant on the twentieth, with the tiny city-province of Gueldre sending confirmation on 22 January 1790. As noted earlier in Van Eupen’s letter to De Roode at the end of the month, Limbourg’s Estates deferred temporarily. According to the archivist Gachard, they announced in Congress on the nineteenth that their province could not yet accede in full to the union, though the journal of session kept by a pensionary for Gueldre that Gachard cites does not give their reasons. In any case, the general assembly responded that they could only agree with their reasons—which, if Van Eupen’s letter is accurate, were the pragmatic ones of refraining to provoke the many imperial troops stationed just over the border in Luxembourg—and that, given their close relationship with Brabant and their earlier acquiescence to the union proposed in November, Limbourg would be considered a full member of the new United States anyway.<sup>66</sup> On the twenty-second, with official ratification by a majority of the provinces secured, the new constitution was printed and considered to be in effect.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> “Journal des séances des États-Généraux et du Congrès depuis le 7 janvier jusqu’au 12 mars 1790,” in L.P. Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 46-47.

<sup>67</sup> Stevens, “Constitutional Documents of Belgium,” in Horst Dippel *Constitutions of the World*, footnote p.50.

Perhaps anticlimactically, Joseph II never witnessed the formal birth of the new nation—he had died two days earlier in Vienna.

Overall, apart from the new common defense and monetary policies that pertained to the United States of Belgium, everything would essentially remain as it was in the provinces. The conservative colleagues of Van der Noot and members of the Estates General were so keen to maintain the status quo that they did not innovate much in creating their new constitution. The Belgian sentiment that unified the provinces in a new central government was not strong enough to override age-old provincialism. In writing their constitution, the members of the Estates simply took the ready-made framework of a weak central government meant to loosely unify separate sovereign bodies from the Americans of a decade before. “Each province would conserve its sovereignty, but it delegated the exercise of all that pertained to collective interests to [a] sovereign Congress.”<sup>68</sup> As the Estates General met to decide on the form for a new central government, there was little or no discussion of expanding the franchise, or even membership in the Estates. This would lead to hard feelings between the conservatives and Vonckists, who felt they had facilitated the revolution’s triumph in successfully organizing the countryside and recruiting the army that had routed the imperial troops from the Southern Netherlands but who now felt shut out of the new government.

This conscious exclusion of Vonckists, as well as any popular opinion, in drafting a constitution or organizing the Congress and its membership was indicative of the conservative domination in the United States of Belgium. Henri Pirenne, who sympathizes with Vonck and his colleagues while disdaining both the conservatives

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<sup>68</sup> Henri Pirenne, “*La Révolution brabançonne*,” in Henri Pirenne and Jérôme Vercruysse, *Les Etats Belgiques Unis, Histoire de la révolution belge de 1789-1790* (Paris: Editions Duclot, 1992), 142.



and Joseph II, condemns these first weeks as a kind of “coup d’État” facilitated by the provincial Estates, who, “[n]ot finding in themselves the sovereignty to which they aspired...declared that they possessed it.”<sup>69</sup> In his view, the Estates usurped the sovereignty held by Joseph, and in illegally and dangerously combining executive and legislative power into one body, thereby creating a situation in which “[t]he absolutism of one [would] be replaced by the absolutism of several privileged corps.”<sup>70</sup>

To be sure, there was almost instant backlash from the Vonckists. Van Eupen himself commented as early as 24 December to Van Leempoels, the revolutionary agent at The Hague, that he “tremble[d] .... that [their] liberty had more to fear from its defenders than from its enemies,” noting that there was already “insubordination towards the Estates.”<sup>71</sup> Though he and his colleagues were doing their best to calm matters, the Canon caught the echo of dangerous whispers. Soon, the Vonckists would begin publishing various pamphlets and broadsides denouncing the United States of Belgium’s Constitution, as well as the moves being made by the individual provincial Estates to wield Joseph’s former sovereignty. Among themselves, the democrats were already outlining their protests. Henri Van der Noot’s cousin, Jean-Baptiste Van der Noot, who became *Colonel Inspecieur Général* for the patriot army outlined “the lawyer Vonck’s plan” as incorporating four main points:

- 1) all that the estates have done, will be but provisional; 2) if it is agreed later that these same estates exercise the sovereignty it will be vitally necessary to have an intermediary corps to prevent these estates abusing their authority; 3) the country side and villages/towns

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<sup>69</sup> Pirenne, “La Révolution brabançonne,” in Pirenne and Vercruysse, *Les Etats Belgiques Unis*, 138.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Van Eupen to Van Leempoels, Envoyé to the Hague, 24 Xbre 1789, *Correspondance de Van Eupen, secrétaire d’Etat du Congrès avec diverses personnes*, AGR, [Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belgiques Unis](#) 191, 25.

that do not have representatives will each chose a representative and outside these choices a number of persons will be chosen for example twelve who will attend the estates' sessions; 4) the third estate will have two votes.<sup>72</sup>

These stipulations, while not particularly radical, were not at all in line with the system the Estates and the conservatives were in the process of setting up, especially with regard to separating power from the Estates. These discrepancies of political vision would lead to a “white terror” that tore the revolution apart and left the Belgian Provinces wide open for foreign intervention.

#### CONCLUSION

Aside from the political backlash mounted by Vonckists in pamphlets, which is the focus of the next chapter, the Congress had difficulties with the patriot army. General Van der Mersch had been recruited by Vonck and shared many of *Pro Aris et Focis*'s philosophies rather than the more conservative notions of Van Eupen, Van der Noot, and members of the Estates. Additionally, the Congress and Brabantine Estates poorly supplied the army stationed in Namur, and Van der Mersch and his officers penned numerous complaints about this from January through April 1790.

Receiving little in response from the Congress, Van der Mersch finally went to Brussels in person. A first trip in January did little, though he strengthened ties with Vonck and the other democrats.<sup>73</sup> Combined with another trip in February, this alliance between democrats and Van der Mersch and his men caused conservatives to spread rumors that the General and the democrats were plotting to overthrow the

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<sup>72</sup> Jean-Baptiste Van der Noot, “Plan de l’avocat Vonck,” *Papiers politiques de Jean-Baptiste van der Noot, Colonel Inspecteur général au service des Etats Belgiques Unis*, AGR *Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belgiques Unis* 188, 23. (Lack of) Punctuation and capitalization original.

<sup>73</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 162-163.

Congress and reunite with the Austrians. They used the armistice he had negotiated in December as proof of his imperial sympathies.<sup>74</sup> In April, the General again returned to the capital, hoping to make his case to the Congress and quell the escalating disputes, but he was immediately arrested.<sup>75</sup> After a trial in Ghent, he was condemned for treason against the Estates and imprisoned in the citadel at Antwerp. Polasky claims that his transfer to their capital outraged the Flemish Estates, while various published materials indicate not only their acquiescence but also that the Flemish body encouraged the Brussels administration to arrest the General in the first place. An ill-fated democratic attempt was made to free the General, but the scheme failed to garner enough public support to defy a smear campaign orchestrated by Van der Noot.<sup>76</sup> Regardless, the Congress made the Prussian commander Schönfeld head of the Army. His progress was soon praised by Van Eupen and things quieted down.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the military debacle, Van Eupen, Van der Noot, and their fellow congressmen saw themselves as working for the “common well-being of all the

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<sup>74</sup> A good example of these rumors is found in the editorial material to *Les RECLAMATIONS BELGIQUES COURRONNEES PAR LA VICTOIRE & LA LIBERTE, PAR LE TRIOMPHE DE LA RELIGION & DES LOIX, XVIIe. Volume de Cette Collection*, L’Imprimerie des Nations, 1790, 27-31.

<sup>75</sup> Van Eupen claimed to De Roode that the Congress had summoned the General.

<sup>76</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 169-170. For the contrary information, see for example *Les RECLAMATIONS BELGIQUES COURRONNEES PAR LA VICTOIRE & LA LIBERTE, PAR LE TRIOMPHE DE LA RELIGION & DES LOIX, XVIIe. Volume de Cette Collection*, L’Imprimerie des Nations, 1790; an ordonnance from the Flemish Estates signed by Joseph De Bast on 14 April 1790 in that volume, pp.141-142 ; “Lettre de Messeigneurs les Députés des Etats de Flandre au Congrès, à leurs Commettans,” in the same volume, pp.142-146; “ORDONNANCE des Etats de Flandre contre les Royalistes, défenseurs de Van der Mersch, Vonkistes, &c. réfugiés sur les frontieres,” in the same volume, pp.147-148s “COPIE D’une Lettre des Etats Généraux de la Flandre adressée au Congrès, en date du 2 Avril 1790.” UGent Biblio ; and Van Eupen’s correspondence to De Roode AGR, Etats Belgique Unis 189 “Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen Secrétaire d’Etat des Etats Belgiques Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres, 23 Octobre 1789-23 Novembre 1790.”

<sup>77</sup> These events make up the bulk of Van Eupen’s correspondence to the Belgian agent in London between February and April 1790. Van Eupen to De Roode, 20 April 1790, in AGR, Etats Belgique Unis 189 “Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen Secrétaire d’Etat des Etats Belgiques Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres, 23 Octobre 1789-23 Novembre 1790,” 46. Janet Polasky gives a very good recitation of the events in *Revolution*, 153-175.

provinces,” and felt that a return to privileges and hierarchy was the surest way to guarantee happiness and stability.<sup>78</sup> Their understanding of the will of the people meant that by maintaining the status quo they were not lining their own pockets or protecting their own prestige (though no doubt these perks were not unappreciated), but were doing their utmost to ensure that the United States of Belgium were, by right, asserting themselves on the international stage and governing themselves as they saw fit in a new sovereign state. Their conception of the nation as an ephemeral populace whom the Estates protected and spoke for but needed not to consult mirrored the conservative conception of Belgianness. They had gained their power through the provincial Estates and so would continue to reinforce provincialism when they could, to the detriment of the growing national consciousness, as the next chapter demonstrates.

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<sup>78</sup> Benoit Alavoine, Charles, Comte de Thiennes de Lombize, Le Chevalier de Bousies, and Gendebien, “Rapport fait aux États de Hainaut par les députés qu’ils avaient envoyés à Bruxelles,” in L.P. Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 8.



## CHAPTER 5: “QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?”: DESCRIBING A BELGIAN NATION

“ . . . it is indispensable that Brabant, Flemish, Hennuiers, Limbourgeois, Luxembourgers, Tournaisiens, Gelderlanders, Namurians, Malinois, they form but one people, but one and indivisible national mass. . .” — *LETTRE D’UN PHILANTROPE*

“Belgium, the age-old asylum of integrity, will never cease to conserve Union, true Liberty, & public Happiness.” — *M.J. De Baste*

### INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that the Belgians eventually lost the fragile independence won in December 1789 in large part because they disagreed. They disagreed about how to govern, who should govern, and how the provinces should relate to each other; they disagreed over the army, over international diplomacy, and over the nature of representation. Much of this debate was carried out in the public sphere, thanks to relaxed censorship after the imperial administration fled. What all sides of the debate shared, however, was a palpable Belgian pride, though they did not agree on exactly what this meant. Their biggest disagreement concerned the very definition of what it meant to be Belgian. This dispute is significant in itself, indicating that Belgianness was important enough to debate. As Marc Lerner shows in his study of political transformation in Switzerland, pamphlet literature and debates that raged in the public sphere offer historians the ability to understand “the debates that contemporaries judged to be the most important as a means to enter into the mindset of the society under study.”<sup>1</sup> Though there was no agreed-upon way to belong to the Belgian nation, all the pamphleteers debating the new identity insisted on their Catholicism and loyalty to the past, just as the *remonstrances* and *manifestes* had insisted on Belgian and provincial loyalty to the sovereign. To be Belgian, one had to

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<sup>1</sup> Lerner, *Laboratory of Liberty*, 22.

treasure continuity, which ensured peace and tranquility, procured through careful preservation of tradition. The most controversial pamphlets were those that strayed furthest from such preservation, as the discussion of “Qu’allons nous devenir?” by Charles Lambert d’Outrepoint and the theories of Jan-Baptiste Verlooy below shows.

At the end of armed uprising in 1789, Van der Noot, Van Eupen and their allies in the Estates of the various provinces moved quickly to take the reins of government. Brabant and Hainaut’s Estates specifically declared themselves invested with the sovereignty formerly held by the Duke, melding their legislative duties with the executive powers once reserved for Vienna.<sup>2</sup> Unable to act quickly enough in the face of the various Estates’ speedy declarations, most members of *Pro Aris et Focis* were left without any official government positions but they managed to express their thoughts on government and governance through the public forum created by pamphlet culture. Many took to their pens to protest, fueling the vigorous pamphlet debate throughout the provinces in the revolutionary period. Authors who disagreed with these democrats churned out their own pamphlet literature in turn. Thus, a public sphere was created. Just as a Swiss public sphere defined by pamphlet literature showcased “the variety of political participation and the debates over differing understandings of liberty,” the pamphlets examined here offer insight into the different ways Belgians conceived of themselves and their revolution.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Pirenne in particular took exception to the “Vandernootists” tactics, labeling them tyrants intent on reestablishing a “yoke” of arbitrary authority despite public protests. He describes general outcry in Hainaut, Flanders, and Limbourg as the Estates sought to restore government administration completely, merely re-appropriating Joseph II’s former sovereignty. Moreover, the creation of the United States of Belgium, negotiated behind closed doors by members of the various provincial Estates and orchestrated by Van der Noot’s, secretary, the Canon Van Eupen, was a manifestation of these bodies’ complete lack of responsibility to the “nation.” Pirenne (1952), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Lerner, *Laboratory of Liberty*, 24.

The new Congress began meeting on 20 February 1790, the same day that Joseph II died in Vienna.<sup>4</sup> That was also the day that Jan Frans Vonck and Jan Baptiste Verlooy, co-founders of *Pro Aris et Focis*, formed a new *Société Patriotique* in Brussels. This time, secrecy was unnecessary, and the club met publically to discuss politics in the provinces, and specifically the best way to construct the new central government. Thanks in part to a pamphlet written by Verlooy the *Société* garnered significant public support. Soon, competing ideologies began to cause unrest, particularly with regard to the army and city militia. A complication arose on the subject of the oaths the officers and volunteers should swear. The Estates insisted the militia units swear loyalty to the assemblies, while the officers, led by the Duke d'Ursel and the Duke d'Arenberg wanted to swear to the people (it is unclear whether they meant a Brabantine or Belgian people, further indicating the fluid nature of regional and national identity at the time).<sup>5</sup> Van Eupen wrote to the Chevalier de Roode that he had assured the officers that the current government was a temporary solution, and that a new organization would be called when calm was restored, which he claimed pacified them, though events proved otherwise.<sup>6</sup> One of the democrats, Alexandre Balsa (sometimes written Balza) similarly insisted, in a pamphlet he wrote on 13 March 1790, that the Conseil de Brabant, for whom he served as a lawyer, should call itself the *Peuple Brabançon en son Conseil* rather

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<sup>4</sup> The Emperor's death, though it had little immediate effect on the provinces as they intended to continue their independence experiment, would prove pivotal by the end of the year, as his brother Leopold was noticeably more adroit at negotiating within the Empire and with the international community.

<sup>5</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 151-152.

<sup>6</sup> Van Eupen to de Roode, 17 February 1790 in *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d'Etat des Etats Belges-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belges Unis 189, 31.



than the old *Conseil souverain de Brabant*.<sup>7</sup> In the end, the volunteers defied Van der Noot and declared d'Ursel their leader.<sup>8</sup> On 15 March 1790, leading members of the *Société* sent a petition asking the Congress to consider reforms, and specifically to call an assembly to establish a new government. In response, the Estates made it illegal for any clubs or societies to meet.<sup>9</sup>

As the Estates and Congress realized they were in a precarious position, they worked to reclaim power. The conservatives branded the democratic petition of 15 March a traitorous call for an *Assemblée Nationale* and simultaneously labeled the democrats irreligious francophiles and royalists who would return the country to the Austrians with the help of the mutinous Van der Mersch and his officers. The slur gathered enough strength to necessitate a response from Vonck, Verlooy, and two of their fellow *Société* members. On 2 April 1790 they published a further declaration clarifying that they absolutely did not intend the creation of such an *Assemblée*.<sup>10</sup> Adding to the military disturbance, on 3 April 1790 the Baron de Haack, General Inspector of the Infantry and President of the Committee of the Army, published an official declaration supporting the 15 March declaration, though stressing that the Army also had no interest in calling for an *Assemblée Nationale*.<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Tassier paints the picture of “a rapidly conducted campaign” in which “the Démocrates were incriminated before a still-hesitant public opinion; they were successfully

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<sup>7</sup> A<sup>dre</sup>. Balsa, “APPEL AUX ETATS DE BRABANT. 1790,” Bruxelles, 13 Mars 1790. KU Leuven Tabularium.

<sup>8</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 151-152.

<sup>9</sup> “Décret du Conseil Souverain de Brabant, suivi sur la Requete du Conseiller & Procureur-Général de Brabant,” in Recueil *Les Réclamations Belges Couronnées par la Victoire & la Liberté, par le Triomphe de la Religion & des Loix, XVIe. Volume de Cette Collection*, l’Imprimerie des Nations, 1790, (KU Leuven Tabularium), 247-8.

<sup>10</sup> “Déclaration relative à l’Adresse présentée aux Etats de Brabant, le 15 Mars 1790.” Namur, 2 April 1790.

<sup>11</sup> “L’ARMÉE déclare,” 3 April 1790.

represented as the ‘enemies of religion’ and the masked partisans for rapprochement with Austria.”<sup>12</sup> Peter Illing, however, indicates that there was no concerted “campaign” launched by the Estates—or any official administration—at all, but rather that the pamphlet war for the political philosophies of the Belgian Provinces was a more spontaneous manifestation, born out of decreased censorship and cheap printing.<sup>13</sup> At any rate, violence increased toward the democrats, particularly in Brussels, and the Estates began ordering the arrests of all those suspected of supporting Vonck and his allies. By the end of April 1790, most of the democrats who were not imprisoned fled to France, where they continued to write and organize, creating a new society called *Pro Patria*, but were much less effective.<sup>14</sup>

The flood of political writings in the first quarter of 1790 has largely been characterized as a war between two camps—one conservative, centered around Van der Noot, and one democratic or progressive, centered around Vonck. In this sense, the Belgian revolutionaries mirrored the Swiss situation Lerner describes in which “there was a major struggle between supporters of fundamentally different visions of Switzerland: those who sought a restoration of the supposedly timeless Old Confederation and those who embraced a mindset that defended the rights of individuals and egalitarian (male) conceptions of popular sovereignty.”<sup>15</sup> In reality conditions in the Belgian provinces were more chaotic, with anonymous pamphlets illustrating a wide gamut of political philosophies, many of which do not neatly fall into one category or another, though Lerner’s broad conception of those who wanted

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<sup>12</sup> Tassier (1930), 284.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Illing, “Reform, Revolution and Royalism in Brussels, 1780-1790” (PhD diss., Christ’s College, Cambridge University, 2007), 27. See especially sections iii and iv of his introduction, “The Sources,” and “Pamphlets,” 15-32.

<sup>14</sup> Again, Polasky presents this narrative in great detail in *Revolution*, 153-176.

<sup>15</sup> Lerner, *Laboratory of Liberty*, 2.

to conserve and those who wanted reform broadly fits. While Vonck was instrumental in the creation and maintenance of *Pro Aris et Focis*, his ongoing role is more open to debate. Calling the democratic reformers of the revolution Vonckists, as historians and contemporaries do, has its advantages—for one, it is a convenient shorthand—but belies the revolution’s complexities, and the simple reality that there was no clear structure that strictly grouped those of similar thinking. Further complicating matters, the *Société Patriotique* left little documentary evidence. A few of the pamphlets written by its members make mention of it, and d’Outrepoint singled out “patriotic societies” as potential directors for his national convention (*if* the Estates would not call it), but many of its members wrote personal pieces that often diverged in opinion. Furthermore, Vonck cannot be viewed as the definitive leader of the democrats. In spring 1790, the Duc d’Ursel could be said to lead the democrats as he staged rallies and used his connections with the army to try to open elections and force the conservative Estates’ hands. Jan-Baptist Verlooy equally played an integral role throughout the revolution. Historian Jan Van den Broeck calls him Vonck’s “coworker” or “collaborator” in *Pro Aris et Focis*, while Yvan Vanden Berghé uses the stronger “founder”; and Janet Polasky writes that Verlooy “organized the first successful armed revolt for Belgian independence,” illustrating the complex nature of the Belgian revolution.<sup>16</sup> This also reveals the multifaceted nature of revolutions across the board: such movements are rarely neat and simple but rather a constant

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<sup>16</sup> The complexity is even more striking as Polasky and Vanden Berge take their characterizations from the biography of Verlooy Van Den Broeck published two years after his article, which depicted Verlooy as Vonck’s collaborator. Jan Van Den Broeck, “J.B.C. Verlooy, Codex Brabanticus,” *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* 46 (1978), 297; Yvan Vanden Berge, Review of Jan Van den Broeck, *J.B.C. Verlooy, Vooruitstrevend jurist en politicus uit de 18de eeuw 1746/1797* (Antwerp: Standaard Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1980), *BMGN— Low Countries Historical Review* 97, no.1 (1982), 103; Janet L. Polasky, Review of Jan Van den Broeck, *J.B.C. Verlooy, Vooruitstrevend jurist en politicus uit de 18de eeuw 1746/1797* (Antwerp: Standaard Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1980), *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 61, no.2 (1983), 414.

flux of allegiances that defy easy categorization. The fact that few pamphlets purported to represent the official plan of any coherent group speaks to the real lack of party structure at the time. There were exceptions, of course, and the Estates's actions demonstrated conservative politics, but the vast majority of pamphlets from the time period reflected fluid responses, oftentimes as individual opinions, to how the country should be run. Similarly, few could agree on exactly what it meant to be Belgian.

Many pamphlets of the revolutionary era have unspecified authors, and thus sometimes unclear motivations. Very little is known about the culture of pamphlets in the Belgian provinces at the time. Most of the authors remained anonymous, the pieces often indicated no exact date, and almost nothing is known of reception, production, or distribution. Still, they remain a valuable resource for understanding the political culture of the Belgian Provinces. Roughly 10,000 pamphlets appeared in the provinces during the revolutionary period, giving voice to all manner of political views.<sup>17</sup> Although the diverse views expressed may not be a "faithful" reflection of "public opinion," they allow historians to "follow the practical political debate over the nature" of revolutionary events "and how contemporaries used . . . language to demand political transformation."<sup>18</sup> Overall, they convey a general sense of the political discourse of the Southern Netherlands at the time, the diversity of opinion in such an open atmosphere, and the common theme of Belgianness that underlined it.

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<sup>17</sup> In their book on the publications in Brabant during and after Joseph II's reign, Roegiers and Delsaerd suggest that between 1780 and 1800 roughly 10,000 different pieces were published. Pierre Delsaerd and Jan Roegiers, *Brabant in Revolutie 1787-1801*, (Leuven: Centrale Bibliotheek K.U. Leuven, 1988), 57. Van den Bossche puts the number at around 2,500 for pamphlets discussing revolutionary events in Brabant over a five-year period (1787-1793). Sébastien Dubois puts it at 4,000 publications between 1780 and 1794. Van den Bossche, 11. Dubois, 417.

<sup>18</sup> Stengers, *Les racines de la Belgique, Jusqu'à la Révolution de 1830*, 124; and Lerner, *Laboratory of Liberty*, 23.

One thing pamphleteers in the provinces had in common was a deep sense of patriotism and even a budding national pride, building on the increasing affirmation of a broad Belgianness. Pamphleteers called on the Estates, the “People,” the “Nation,” the “*Nederlanders*,” and the “*Belges*” to take up the mantle and follow their advice in order to secure the existence of the United States of Belgium. This is the strongest evidence for the emergence of a Belgian consciousness that crossed provincial borders. The story of the conservatives marginalizing the democrats, demonizing them as anti-clerical or, worse, francophiles, is not the central focus here; what matters are the notions of patriotism and national identity present in this public dialogue and the fact that pamphleteers of varying political persuasions expressed them. Conservatives and democrats alike invoked Belgian pride and common origin myths in their pamphlets. As Oliver Zimmer asserts, these myths did not need to be accurate in order to achieve their objective.<sup>19</sup> The in-fighting among revolutionaries centered on shared use of the new pan-provincial patriotism and attachment to the new independent Belgian nation, whose liberty they had won collectively. The revolution had a new battleground: the ownership of Belgianness.

#### DEBATING A BELGIAN GOVERNMENT

Some of the pamphlets distributed from December 1789 through the summer of 1790 were didactic, purporting to teach their readers about the origins of government, both in general and with regard to their specific province or the Belgian Provinces as a whole. Some used literary devices—poems, plays, fables, and satire—to playfully poke fun at various facets of the revolution and the Imperial

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<sup>19</sup> Zimmer, “Competing Memories,” 197. Also see the discussion of Oliver Zimmer’s work in the introduction to this thesis.

administration, or to warn of the dangers facing the provinces, before offering solutions for a lasting prosperity. A large majority were straightforward explanations of a given author's political philosophies. Sometimes they would explicitly refer to revolutionary factions or members, but often they expressed no particular loyalty except to the Nation, the People, and the Provinces. That discussions were kept to political philosophy rather than methods to mobilize the populace speaks to the prevalence of virtual representation and conservative nature of much of the revolution. The common insistence on pan-provincial patriotism over regionalism also indicates the transition from provincial to national sentiment.

In her comparative study of Dutch, French, and American revolutionaries of the eighteenth century, Annie Jourdan convincingly argues that it was through writings like these pamphlets that revolutionaries best demonstrated the emergence of a nation. She posits that over the course of the upheavals, revolutionaries increasingly "aspired to . . . nothing more or less than creating [a national] community and thus 'nationalizing' the people involved."<sup>20</sup> Here, the Belgians rhetorically clashed over the meaning of their nation, and how it ought to be governed; but in so doing they also were trying to gain support for different visions of Belgianness, adhering well to Jourdan's theory that eighteenth-century revolutions "nationalized" the people—that is, molded them into a homogenous entity for their own purposes—even without diverging from elite discourses. What is more, as Jourdan concludes, the national consciousnesses that emerged out of eighteenth-century revolutions were born not of unity, but of dissent.<sup>21</sup> The revolutionaries of

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<sup>20</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

the Southern Netherlands certainly witnessed the emergence of Belgianness in an atmosphere of disagreement during a storm of pamphlet debates.

An examination of a select number of pamphlets, both anonymous and signed, highlights the patriotism and Belgianness expressed by these writers, regardless of their political convictions.<sup>22</sup> Their disagreements, as with the case of Lerner's Swiss pamphlets, were meant to call for reform without undoing the success of the revolution: "challenges to the status quo were meant to destabilize the system in order to expand it, not to destroy it."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, a large majority of authors presented specific political programs that would improve the provinces and the new central state, especially those former members of *Pro Aris et Focis* who joined the *Société Patriotique* in March. Most of these pamphlets addressed elite concerns, primarily political coordination and authority.<sup>24</sup> This chapter examines several of these, along with critical responses to them. In so doing, it outlines the major political battle that forced many democrats into exile and weakened the Belgian state enough to contribute to its failure in November 1790. To set a more general scene, and illustrate the middle ground across which Vonckists and conservatives fought, the examination begins with a more neutral anonymous pamphlet.

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<sup>22</sup> As with the pamphlet literature used in Chapter Two, I have had to make choices about which brochures to use. Again, there is a large amount of material—the fifteen pieces I discuss here are representative of a broader survey I did of closer to 75 pamphlets. I have chosen to focus on some of the more famous pamphlets, in part because historians have pieced together a fair amount about them and their authors, giving me more insight into the motivation behind the words. Archivists and historians have also traced some rebuttals by conservative colleagues or friends of Van der Noot, and I have made an effort to include some of the most prominent of these, as it is interesting to see their use of nationalism in refuting most of the democrats' political ideas. Additionally, I included several anonymous pamphlets in order to broaden perspective and give an understanding of the wider political atmosphere at the time.

<sup>23</sup> Lerner, *Laboratory of Liberty*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Breuille, "The Response to Napoleon and German Nationalism," 268.

Published in London and dated 1790, the anonymous pamphlet “RÉFLEXIONS D’UN BELGE PATRIOTE, OU COMPARAISON RESPECTIVE DE LA RÉVOLUTION DE FRANCE AVEC CELLE DU BRABANT,” used a typical Socratic format that exemplified many of the shorter, unaligned pamphlets published in the provinces in 1790. The author posed five distinct questions to his readers and then sought to answer them, outlining his political perspective along the way. Judging by the questions posed, Janet Polasky’s assertion that “RÉFLEXIONS D’UN BELGE PATRIOTE” appeared on the eve of the first meeting of the Estates’ General is logical.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the pamphlet’s most telling aspect is its focus on the French. The very first question—“What do the Estates General want to do?”—referred to the contemporary Estates General-cum-National Assembly in Paris, not the Estates General meeting in Brussels to create the United States of Belgium. Contrary to what a modern reader might expect, the author saw the French as learning from the Belgians in their revolutionary undertaking, not vice versa. In fact, the author used the French, and offered them advice, as a rhetorical device through which to highlight his own country’s positive attributes and simultaneously differentiate the Belgians and their revolution from the French.

What did the French Estates General want? The *Belge Patriote*’s answer was clear: “the happiness of the nation.”<sup>26</sup> As he pointed out, “every and any good citizen” would desire this, and would want the Estates to occupy themselves with ways to obtain that happiness. Fortunately, the pamphlet assured its readers, Brabant’s Estates could better harness such happiness, as there were more native capitalists in the province than there were in France; the author then proceeded to

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<sup>25</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 136.

<sup>26</sup> “RÉFLEXIONS D’UN BELGE PATRIOTE, OU COMPARAISON RESPECTIVE DE LA REVOLUTION DE FRANCE AVEC CELLE DU BRABANT,” London, 1790 in *Varia sur la revolution Brabançonne*, KU Leuven Maurits Sabbebibliotheek, 7.



anticipate the various methods that these native capitalists might employ. For example, while selling off national debt would put the French at the mercy of foreigners, the Brabantines would no doubt be able to keep most of their capital within their borders. Moreover, the Belgian Church's assets were now being returned to it, preventing the collapse that would no doubt ruin the French when foreign buyers would see "the revenue produced by lands ... exported out of the kingdom either publicly, or secretly."<sup>27</sup>

The validity of converting Church assets was the subject of the *Belge Patriote*'s third question, and his answer revealed much about his political sentiments, how Belgians viewed their clerics, and how important protecting Catholicism was to being Belgian. The clergy's *biens*, the anonymous author argued, were in no position to be sold or seized, whether by a tyrannical monarch or a national assembly, because they were inherently part of the nation. If ordinary citizens' possessions were to be respected, why not the clergy's? After all, "...the nation is the reunion of all citizens and all orders, who compose the Kingdom & the Monarchy, who live under the same laws, recognize for their Leader and for their King, he whose birth transmitted the Throne of his ancestors to him."<sup>28</sup> Importantly, no distinctions were made between citizens and orders, so that clergy formed a part of the nation both as individual citizens and as a corporate group. In attacking what was essentially a group of citizens, the French National Assembly, which the *Belge Patriote* otherwise felt deserved an opportunity to prove itself, was offering a dangerous example to the rest of Europe. A nation could not aspire to freedom while its representatives were willing to confiscate their citizens' possessions.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 15.

“REFLEXIONS” firmly established loyalty to the Church and Catholicism as integral to a Belgian identity.

The *Belge Patriote*'s reflections further embodied the contradictions in political philosophy rampant in the provinces throughout the period. The pamphlet expressed sincere sympathy for the National Assembly, tempered by vigorous insistence that the noble and ecclesiastical Estates did not necessarily have common interests at heart; yet, the author also applied visions of monarchy and royalism with ease. In part, this indicated that most of the Belgian revolutionaries and reformers were offended by Joseph in particular, not monarchy overall, which helps explain the lack of royalist or Josephist activity after the imperial administration fled. While some royalists left the country, a fair number—specifically those who supported Joseph's ends but not his means—joined the reformers. This group, “which swiftly seemed prepared to reach an accord with Leopold II in 1790 . . . suggests more latent support for Habsburg rule during the revolt than is often admitted.”<sup>29</sup> That supporters of Joseph's reforms felt compelled to join the revolution when his means threatened the sovereignty of the Belgian provinces testifies to a deeper sense of nation, more than simple local privilege or pride. The *Belge Patriote*'s comparisons to France allowed him to extoll the virtues of the Belgians, using a foreign other to help define his own nation, something Jourdan finds prevalent in the Dutch, French, and American revolutionaries as well.<sup>30</sup> “More wise” than their southern neighbors, “*Les Belges* . . . had known how to conquer by their weapons and by their bravery this liberty dear and precious to the People as a whole; Wisdom, Religion, and Justice

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<sup>29</sup> Illing, 44.

<sup>30</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 32.

presided over the *Constitution Belgique*, its properties are sacred and respected.”<sup>31</sup>

Compared to the French, the Belgians were “wise and moderated,” and the unity of the three orders, each of which “worked for the good of the Fatherland,” could overcome the shortcomings of Joseph as monarch.<sup>32</sup> In its reliance on arguments of national characteristic to prove political points, “RÉFLEXIONS” conveyed, not a misguided duke violating local privilege, but an affront to national identity and sovereignty, linked directly to the People, defined as both Brabantine and Belgian, who would return to their days of glory through “Union and Peace.”<sup>33</sup>

Outside the safety of anonymity, the more Vonckist pamphlets began to discuss central government and how society would function even before the Belgian Estates General created the United States of Belgium. The lawyer Charles Lambert d’Outrepoint, who had written the impassioned plea for unity and continued resistance against Joseph’s reforms to the Estates in the spring of 1787, again demonstrated his rhetorical abilities by writing one of the most controversial pamphlets of the time. D’Outrepoint wrote “QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR? OU AVIS ESSENTIEL D’UN BELGE A SES CONCITOYENS,” probably sometime in December 1789, given its content.<sup>34</sup> A Monsieur P.J.B. de P\*\*\*\*. C\*\*\*\*. issued a favorable reply from Brussels, titled “LETTRE D’UN PHILANTROPE, A L’AUTEUR DE L’OUVRAGE INTITULE: QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR? OU AVIS ESSENTIEL D’UN BELGE A SES

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<sup>31</sup> “RÉFLEXIONS,” 24.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 28, 30.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>34</sup> Its full title is: “QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR? OU AVIS ESSENTIEL D’UN BELGE A SES CONCITOYENS; Dans lequel on examine si quelqu’un, dans l’état actuel des choses, a le droit d’exercer l’autorité souveraine dans la Belgique, et où l’on indique ce qu’il faudroit faire pour y entretenir la paix et l’union, et faire le Bonheur de ces belles contrées.” In English: “WHAT WILL WE BECOME? OR ESSENTIAL NOTICE OF A BELGIAN TO HIS FELLOW CITIZENS, In which he examines whether someone, in the current state of things, has the right to exercise sovereign authority in Belgium, and where it is indicated what would be necessary to do in order to maintain peace and union, and the Happiness of these beautiful lands.”

CONCITOYENS” on 2 January 1790. Archival notes indicate that its author was actually the Doctor Vandeveld. Not long after, on the fifteenth, *Pro Aris et Focis*’ strategist Jean-Baptiste Verlooy anonymously issued the pamphlet “Projet Raisonné d’Union des Provinces-Belgiques.”<sup>35</sup> Contemporaneous to these democratic polemics by Verlooy and d’Outrepoint was Vonck’s major explanatory pamphlet, largely distributed unsigned, “CONSIDERATIONS IMPARTIALES SUR LA POSITION ACTUELLE DU BRABANT.”<sup>36</sup> Dated 1790, the pamphlet indicated no month or day, though it is safe to assume from its content that Vonck wrote and distributed it in or around January, as it comments on the legality of the Estates seizing sovereignty and offers a plan for a new government.

Verlooy additionally attempted to stem the conservative tide as the provincial Estates agreed to convoke the Estates General to form the United States of Belgium. Not long after the patriot army chased the imperial troops from the provinces, he wrote “LES AUTEURS SECRETS DE LA RÉVOLUTION PRÉSENTE.” The pamphlet, distributed anonymously, aimed to inform the general public that he and Vonck had

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<sup>35</sup> Both Janet Polasky and the official KBR catalogue attribute Verlooy as the pamphlet’s primary author.

<sup>36</sup> Historians like Polasky, Tassier, Pirenne, Roegiers, and Illing, usually characterize D’Outrepoint’s pamphlet as a variation of the general “Vonckist” or democratic agenda, though more radical than Vonck’s itself. Its full title is : “CONSIDERATIONS IMPARTIALES SUR LA POSITION ACTUELLE DU BRABANT, OU L’ON EXAMINE 1.° Si les États actuels du Brabant y représentent légalement le Peuple Brabançon, à l’effet de le gouverner comme Souverains? 2.° S’il seroit compatible avec les regles de la justice & avec l’avantage du Brabant, que les États actuels de cette Province en exerçassent la Souveraineté? 3.° comment on pourroit organiser en Brabant une nouvelle forme de représentation, qui, sans s’écarter de l’esprit de l’ancienne, seroit néanmoins conforme aux regles de la justice, & à ce qu’on exige le bien-être du Pays? 4.° Quelle seroit la meilleure forme de Gouvernement, que les Représentans légaux de la Nation pourroient établir relativement au régime intérieur du Brabant?” In English : “CONSIDERATIONS IMPARTIALES SUR LA POSITION ACTUELLE DU BRABANT, OU L’ON EXAMINE 1.° If the current Estates of Brabant legitimately represent the Brabantine People, to the effect of governing it as Sovereigns? 2.° If it would be compatible with the rules of justice & with advantage to Brabant, that the current Estates of that Province exercise Sovereignty there? 3.° How we could organize a new form of representation in Brabant, which, without destroying the spirit of the old, would nevertheless conform to the rules of justice, & to that which necessitates the well-being of the Country? 4.° What would be the best form of Government, that the legal Representatives of the Nation could establish relative to the internal regime of Brabant?”

begun the meetings that led to *Pro Aris et Focis*'s creation, eventually enlisting Torfs, Weemaels, d'Aubremez, Fisco, Kint, and Hardi (he did not specifically name other members). Their goal, he insisted, had been "the deliverance of all the Provinces."<sup>37</sup> What was more, Verlooy delineated a clear difference, to *Pro Aris et Focis*'s advantage, between their efforts and the earlier resistance to Joseph. The initial legal resistance of 1787 and 1788 had been a spontaneous product of "fate & opportunity seized by the Belgian spirit always jealous of its liberty, which had brought down arbitrary power."<sup>38</sup> The "second revolution," which had resulted in successful Belgian independence, was a concerted effort, "well thought out, well conducted, against precautions, cunning & the constantly menacing arms of despotism."<sup>39</sup> Verlooy and his friends had effectively collaborated to attain a clear goal and in so doing had created "everywhere a spirit of partisanship [in the sense of belonging to a larger movement], which never ceased to be energetic in every respect."<sup>40</sup> This characterization not only extolled *Pro Aris et Focis*'s positive role, it also credited the society with producing a sense of belonging throughout the provinces. Essentially, Verlooy was assigning the group credit for the national patriotism and pride that the collective revolution diffused into the provinces. The leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* had reinforced their calls for reform with practical measures, just as the Dutch Patriots a few years earlier had seen to "the creation of patriotic societies for discussing reforms to be undertaken and explaining to the people the revolution underway [and] political journals for diffusing the right

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<sup>37</sup> "LES AUTEURS SECRETS DE LA REVOLUTION PRESENTE," in *Vonckisme*, Fonds Van Hulthem, KBR, 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

principles and to take part in events.”<sup>41</sup> Verlooy’s claims were not entirely without merit, as members of the secret society strongly felt the populace could (and should) be the driving force behind the Austrian government’s overthrow, starkly disagreeing with Van der Noot’s inclination to invite foreign powers in and eventually transfer sovereignty to a new monarch.

Verlooy’s colleagues, however, were unhappy with his public announcement of their involvement. A published response from the lawyer De Brauwier (sometimes written De Brouwer) denied his involvement while equally condemning the author for having written “LES AUTEURS SECRETS” in the first place.<sup>42</sup> Vonck issued a comparable condemnation. He declared himself “obliged” to announce that not “only had he not contributed anything to the creation, nor to the Publication of the piece; but that he disapprove[d] of it in all respects.”<sup>43</sup> While the acknowledged leader of the democratic movement said he was “happy enough” to have participated in the Revolution, Vonck asserted he never wanted any reward, reiterating that he felt “internal satisfaction, at having cooperated in an admirable action, & he would be disappointed, if the inconsiderate zeal of his friends had managed to take from any of the acclaimed Defenders of the Fatherland, the smallest part of the glory that they had acquired through their talent and their inexhaustible work.”<sup>44</sup> Vonck’s reluctance to be acknowledged as an integral part of the revolution defies belief in many ways;

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<sup>41</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 50.

<sup>42</sup> “DECLARATION de l’Acovat DE BRAUWER au Public,” in *Vonckisme*, Fonds Van Hulthem, KBR, 3.

<sup>43</sup> “AVIS DE L’AVOCAT VONCK AU PUBLIC,” in *Révolution*, Fonds Van Hulthem, KBR, 2. The actual rebuttal is undated, at least in the version that survives in the Brussels Royal Library archives, but Tassier dates it to 3 January 1790. Tassier (1930), 91, footnote 1.

<sup>44</sup> Tassier, in a footnote, declares that, in truth, Vonck had been behind the pamphlet to begin with but had felt the need to denounce it once he saw its effect and realized it would create factions by undermining Van der Noot’s ability to lead effectively. [Tassier (1930), 91, footnote 1, toward the end] Vonck’s manuscript, a short history of the revolution written in 1792, is no longer readily available in the archives so this is difficult to verify. “AVIS DE L’AVOCAT VONCK AU PUBLIC.”

such lack of ambition or keenness to be recognized seems to go against human nature. He was absent, for example, from the triumphant march into Brussels, though Pirenne, Polasky, Tassier, and other Belgian historians contend this was an orchestrated effort on Van der Noot's part to exclude members of *Pro Aris et Focis* in favor of his own coterie. Jan C.A. De Clerck's biography, and many of the entries in the volume of *Études sur le XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle* dedicated to Jean-François Vonck generally concur that the man displayed an unusual amount of humility, especially for a politically-minded revolutionary.<sup>45</sup> Some posit this was purely a reflection of his character, while others attribute it to his fragile health. In his own, later writings, Vonck described his role in the revolution in narrative fashion, portraying himself as the center of much of the activity, but this does not clarify his mixed messages regarding publicity in 1789 and 1790. For, despite his denouncement of the "Auteurs Secrets" pamphlet, he signed the 15 March "Projet d'adresse a présenter a l'illustre assemblée des etats de brabant," along with Verlooy and four other reformers. Overall, Vonck and De Brauwer's later involvement in the *Société Patriotique* and their signatures on pamphlets addressed to the Estates and Congress later in the year somewhat dulled the effect of this January indignation.

In his December 1789 pamphlet, Charles d'Outrepoint not only commented on the state of the provinces after achieving independence, but offered a concrete path forward, contesting the Estates' rights to claim sovereignty and create the United States of Belgium of their own accord. He did this by asking three basic questions about Belgian identity at the end of 1789: What had the Belgians been?

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<sup>45</sup> See De Clerck, *Jean-François Vonck* and Roland Mortier and Hervé Hasquin, eds., *Jean-François Vonck (1743-1792), Etudes sur le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Volume XXIV (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1996).

What were they currently? What must they do to give all the Belgian provinces “a constitution which will tie them tightly together, and establish a political consistency?”<sup>46</sup> In response, d’Outrepoint dutifully grounded his arguments in the past, describing a historically “gentle, calm, and cool” people full of courage, zeal, and energy, ready to take on whatever task fate might send them.<sup>47</sup> Their happiness had been universal, despite several minor disturbances such as Philip II’s tyrannical conduct, largely because the inaugural pact had been kept intact until Austrian rule. Specifically, d’Outrepoint blamed Maria Theresa for a slow slide into despotism, a gradual eroding of Belgian rights and privileges that her son then escalated exponentially.<sup>48</sup> Happily, the provinces had succeeded in dethroning the misguided despot, an event which d’Outrepoint framed as a lesson for other monarchs. While in 1787 d’Outrepoint had expressed hope that Joseph was poorly guided or misinformed, he now squarely placed blame for the conflict on Joseph’s personal conduct.<sup>49</sup> This about-face was unsurprising, given Joseph’s annulment of the constitutions in June 1789 and d’Outrepoint’s support for *Pro Aris et Focis*. Just as the resistance had developed into open revolution, and just as a pan-provincial national conscious was emerging, d’Outrepoint’s ideas morphed according to events.

Then, in a move that would make him a target for more conservative revolutionaries, d’Outrepoint suggested the past and its traditions could not offer real solutions for the United States of Belgium. He differentiated between Joseph’s

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<sup>46</sup> D’Outrepoint, “QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR? OU AVIS ESSENTIEL D’UN BELGE A SES CONCITOYENS; Dans lequel on examine si quelqu’un, dans l’état actuel des choses, a le droit d’exercer l’autorité souveraine dans la Belgique, et où l’on indique ce qu’il faudroit faire pour y entretenir la paix et l’union, et faire le Bonheur de ces belles contrées,” in *Belgica* vol. 2, KU Leuven Maurits Sabbebibliotheek, 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> This would prove one of his more controversial moves, as several pamphlets objected to d’Outrepoint’s indictment of the late Queen.

<sup>49</sup> D’Outrepoint, “QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?,” 7-8.



personal responsibility for the revolution and the direction the country ought to take going forward. While some would come to see Joseph as an outlier, creating space for monarchy in theory, d'Outrepont insisted that the very makeup of Belgian political society had to be changed. The constitution—the *Joyeuse Entrée*, the many provincial traditions, customs, and treaties cobbled together over the centuries—was monarchical and embraced feudal values outdated by 1789, and as such needed to be completely overhauled. In this, d'Outrepont, whether consciously or not (there is no evidence to suggest it was purposeful) echoed the Dutch Patriots' arguments from the 1781-1787 rebellion. Many of the Dutch Patriots' justifications for revolt, and a major impetus for the patriot movement in general, stemmed from the idea that the stadhouderian system of government had caused the decline of the United Provinces—especially their naval defeats at the hands of Great Britain in the 1770s and 1780s—and thus reforms were overdue.<sup>50</sup> While the Belgian lawyer was not blaming the current declines on the provincial administrations, he was warning that conservative actions after independence would adversely affect the provinces' happiness and well-being.

International concerns played a role in d'Outrepont's logic. Other European powers could hardly be expected to recognize Belgian independence from Austria if there were no clear central power that legitimately incorporated Joseph's former sovereignty; to retain a monarchical constitution without a monarch would undercut the validity of Belgian sovereignty. Like the *Patriote Belge*, d'Outrepont used the French National Assembly as an example, though this time as one to heed rather than avoid. Were the Estates General to ask Paris for official recognition, he posited, the

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<sup>50</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 55.

French would be forced to refuse, given that the contemporary government in Brussels did not possess any mandate from the Belgian people, whatever mandate the Estates had held prior to independence as void as Joseph's. D'Outrepoint hypothesized that the French Assembly would say, "Belgian sovereignty belong[ed] to the people of Belgium . . . show us that they had confided either to the estates, or to others, by any act, the exercise of this sovereignty?" The lawyer surmised that there was no good answer to this hypothetical challenge from another government unless the Belgians formed a national assembly. Indeed, such an assembly was "necessary, indispensable" if the Belgians desired any kind of political stability, and certainly if they wanted to command respect or legality in the realm of international relations. Without doubt, if political instability due to ambiguity about who could legitimately wield power and sovereignty in the provinces persisted, their enemies "would profit with dexterity, and [Belgian] defeat would be inevitable."<sup>51</sup> Though he never mentioned the provinces' northern neighbors nor called for radical reforms like direct elections or the equality of all citizens, he was tapping into ideas advanced by the Dutch Patriots, whom Jourdan declares had "updated in a continental European context the notions of self-government, actual representation, citizen militias and republican liberty."<sup>52</sup>

The Dutch Patriots, as Jourdan argues well, had been influenced by ideas the American revolutionaries had used in their struggle against King and Parliament. Unsurprisingly, d'Outrepoint's arguments regarding this assembly also closely resembled the political philosophies that matured in Britain's thirteen mainland colonies before, during, and after the American Revolution. Regarding sovereignty

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<sup>51</sup> D'Outrepoint, "QU' ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?," 22.

<sup>52</sup> Jourdan, "The Netherlands in the constellation of the eighteenth-century Western revolutions," 214.

and political legitimacy, historians such as Gordon Wood and Edmund S. Morgan have convincingly shown the evolution in the colonies-cum-states through which the populace reached a point where *only* a government created by special convention, not by the legislature that would then take part therein, was considered legitimate. Massachusetts and its state constitution are often used as the strongest example to illustrate this point: in 1778 the towns of Massachusetts rejected a constitution crafted by the General Court—the state’s legislative body—largely because it had not been drafted by a special, unbiased convention; the constitution successfully adopted in 1780 was the product of such a convention and, as such, generally accepted as more legitimate. There is no evidence that d’Outrepoint was specifically referencing American political thought in his pamphlet—just as there is nothing that shows indicates direct influence from the Dutch Patriots—but the logic is strikingly similar.<sup>53</sup>

D’Outrepoint was not wholly disappointed in the Estates, however, as they could be the very body to deliver the panacea of a national assembly. Since the Estates had been the legitimate representatives of the people under the old system, they could “convoke the nation” by calling for—but not, d’Outrepoint stressed, compelling—a national convention and stipulating how it would operate.<sup>54</sup> In a footnote, he conceded that if not the Estates General, either the provincial councils or the patriotic committees could call for such an assembly. This footnote would only fuel conservative paranoia over the patriotic committees, and proved a powerful motivator for many of d’Outrepoint’s critics. Fundamentally, however, d’Outrepoint’s

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* and Gordon S. Wood *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1969).

<sup>54</sup> D’Outrepoint, “QU’ ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?,” 13.

views were not radical. He demonstrated how tradition and innovation could come together to secure the provinces. Though he admitted he preferred a system lacking the hierarchical structure that divided the population into three estates whose political incarnations purported to represent the views of the nation as a whole, d'Outrepoint stipulated that ultimately the decision was up to the nation. If majority sentiment at the national convention favored the old order distinctions, then by all means they ought to be upheld.

D'Outrepoint used most of the second half of his pamphlet to outline his vision for the new Belgian government, which, significantly, would largely replace provincial government, erasing centuries of political division and independence among the provinces. His program had one important caveat: on page fifteen, he bluntly wrote that debating whether the program he was about to outline was “the best possible” was irrelevant since any convention would come to its own conclusion and create the system it saw as best suited to the country’s needs. Then, rather redundantly, he spent seven pages outlining a system in which the provinces would lose their traditional borders to new “districts” laid out by the central government.<sup>55</sup> D'Outrepoint excluded women and domestics entirely from his conception, and all deputies had to be either native to or resident of a Belgian province for a minimum of 10 years. Finally, the national assembly would sit in Brussels, with public sessions.

In justifying a national assembly, d'Outrepoint insisted that, if retained, the old constitutions would perpetuate provincial divisions, which he found unacceptable in 1789. Here he championed a new national identity that overrode provincial

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<sup>55</sup> D'Outrepoint had not criticized Joseph’s reforms in 1787, in favor of attacking his methods, and this may partially have been because he agreed with those reforms: this “districts” plan is remarkably similar to Joseph’s planned imperial circles.

patriotisms. “If each province conserved its particular constitution, we would thus see ourselves as divided as before,” he wrote, “and it is but child’s play to reconquer us, because our country is open on all sides.”<sup>56</sup> Here, in fact, d’Outrepont married his constitutional theory with a legitimate, realistic fear of military defeat and occupation. Surprisingly, much of the other pamphlet literature took a more romantic view of things, boasting of the patriot army’s bravery, which would never allow the provinces to be overrun. Into the autumn, even Canon Van Eupen continued the refrain of a well-trained, robust armed force headed by General Schoenfeld in his letters to the Chevalier de Roode in London; in reality, desertion, poor training, and woeful equipment, which would lead to almost no resistance when Imperial troops returned in November, plagued the Belgian forces. D’Outrepont’s blunt statement of fact, while seemingly overly negative, indicated a willingness to engage with reality that many of the pamphleteers failed to recognize.

Still, “QU’ ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?” did not seek to spread seeds of despair. Rather than painting a gloomy picture of division and inevitable failure at the hands of meddling neighbors, d’Outrepont offered a vision of hope, grounded in unity. “It is only the UNION of all our provinces, founded on the unity of their constitution, that could be the effective protectress of our liberty,” he assured his compatriots.<sup>57</sup> Guaranteed prosperity lay in strong unification, bolstered by a consolidated constitution emphasizing the existing feelings of common identity within the provinces. Though he occasionally referenced Brabant’s Estates and that province’s constitution and relative power, d’Outrepont saturated his text with references to the *Belges*. The Breda committee’s *Manifeste du Peuple Brabançon* issued on 24

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<sup>56</sup> D’Outrepont, “QU’ ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?,” 8.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Capitalization original.

October 1789, he asserted, was the declaration of independence for all “*les provinces belges*,” not merely the seat of Brussels.<sup>58</sup> His procedure for a national assembly gave no indication of any power left to the provincial Estates; centralized unity was the key to d’Outrepoint’s plan.

Vonck’s pamphlet, on the other hand, was Brabant-centric (its very title referenced only that province) and thus neglected to make any strong argument for provincial unity, notwithstanding a quick word on the Congress at the end. However, he felt that any serious impasse among the branches or within the Estates could be referred to the national Congress at Brussels, “established to direct common interests of the Provinces.”<sup>59</sup> The national body would equally manage national militias, both in their capacity to defend the country’s towns and villages and to keep the peace. Thus, Vonck emphasized the usefulness of the central government as a “political system through which those states organised their relations with each other.”<sup>60</sup> Though his focus was not the Belgian unity d’Outrepoint emphasized, Vonck grounded his criticism of the Estates and his plan for the Belgian future in the national government of the United States of Belgium.

The goal had changed over the course of two years. Joseph’s annulment of the constitutions had pushed resistance for political redress into revolt for full independence. D’Outrepoint recognized this need for change when he (erroneously) evoked the October 24 *manifeste*. As soon as the Belgians dethroned Joseph, the Estates system ceased to function, as their consultative role lost its validity: without Joseph issuing reforms, what did they need to consult on? For d’Outrepoint, as with

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>59</sup> Vonck, “CONSIDERATIONS IMPARTIALES,” 25.

<sup>60</sup> Breuille, “The Response to Napoleon and German Nationalism,” 276.

many of the democratic pamphleteers, the provinces had reverted to a version of Rousseau's natural state (though he did not reference the Genevan *lumière* directly), with the country “*sans constitution*” entirely.<sup>61</sup> He equated the Estates with the steward of a large house whose master had died—they did not suddenly own the house or exert sovereignty over it but rather were to keep it intact until such time as a new master could be found. As far as d'Outrepoint was concerned, after December 1789, no one had any legal power, “neither over the Belgians, nor *chez les Belges*; sovereignty, the entire mass of all powers resid[ed] in the nation, and no other being on Earth had the ability to exercise it except the nation herself.”<sup>62</sup> It was up to the *Belges* to take their fate into their own hands.

Like d'Outrepoint and Vonck, Jan-Baptist Verlooy and many of Vonck's other close allies from *Pro Aris et Focis*, portrayed the Estates as stepping illegally into the power vacuum created by Joseph's deposition. On 15 January, just as the Estates General were finalizing the United States of Belgium behind closed doors, Verlooy issued the anonymous pamphlet “*Projet Raisonné d'Union des Provinces-Belgiques*.”<sup>63</sup> In fact, it was a kind of manifesto for the *Société Patriotique* and garnered significant public support.<sup>64</sup> From his first sentence, Verlooy challenged the Estates' power to command any executive sovereignty in the provinces, whether the individual provincial estates or the Estates General. The provinces had always enjoyed Montesquieu's separation of powers with a Prince, the Estates, and tribunals sharing sovereign power; with the first gone, a “space of anarchy” had arisen but,

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<sup>61</sup> D'Outrepoint, “QU'ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?,” 10.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>63</sup> Both Janet Polasky and the official KBR catalogue attribute Verlooy as the pamphlet's primary author.

<sup>64</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 140-142.

just as d’Outrepoint had argued, this power did not simply devolve to one of the other existing branches or a particular “class of Citizens.”<sup>65</sup> The only entity with the power to correct the “mutilated constitution” was the people, and they needed to be more directly consulted.

For d’Outrepoint and Verlooy, there was no provincial division when it came to the concepts of sovereignty and nation—these crossed provincial borders to encompass a whole Belgian territory. As such, the central government would derive its power from a new Belgium, having secured sovereignty from the people as a whole and wielding it in the name of Brabantines as well as Flemish, Hainuyers as well as Namurois. By speaking in the name of the people of the various provinces, the central government would also help to create a national feeling; uniting the people would help overcome obstacles to broader revolutionary goals, just as Dutch Patriots had argued only a few years earlier.<sup>66</sup> This national, Belgian emphasis stood in contrast to Vonck’s Brabant-centric pamphlet and its reflection of the strong provincialism that remained throughout the provinces. Put together, the two views displayed Vonck, Verlooy, d’Outrepoint, and other pamphlet writers’ “faith in the existence of a nation,” an “ensemble at once united and separate,” similar to sentiments found in Dutch patriotic rhetoric of the 1780s.<sup>67</sup>

To be sure, Vonck was not the only Brabantine pamphleteer to scale the broader “sovereignty lies with the Nation or the People” argument down to the provincial level. “NÉCESSITÉ D’UNE ASSEMBLÉE PROVINCIALE DU BRABANT, PAR UN CITOYEN,” an anonymous pamphlet written in Brussels on 10 February, asserted

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<sup>65</sup> “Projet Raisoné d’Union des Provinces-Belgiques,” in *Révolution belge 1788-1789 – Pièces diverses*, 14, KBR, 1, 2.

<sup>66</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 12.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.



much the same thing, adapting the national assembly argument for the United States of Belgium to the smaller arena of Brabant, and specifically addressing how the province's congressional deputies should be chosen. Thus, both the anonymous author and Vonck used national political ideas, "expressed in elite, enlightenment terms rather than in popular or romantic ones" to "focus on a particular state," and thereby meld regional and national loyalty.<sup>68</sup> The anonymous pamphleteer began by unequivocally stating that the *Joyeuse Entrée* should not be touched, arguing that those agitating for reform did not have license to change the Estates or alter their privileges; however, he acknowledged that sovereignty had reverted back to the "Nation," which specifically prohibited the three orders from augmenting their power or exercising any of this sovereignty.<sup>69</sup> Proposing a plan he felt was "simpler than that of M. Vonck," this author saw the Congress in Brussels as Brabant's solution.<sup>70</sup> Above all, the pamphlet focused on the deputies to be sent to the unified government in Brussels, emphasizing the importance of inter-provincial cooperation and conservation of the union. While no province should have the ability to meddle in another's internal affairs, it was paramount that all operate on the same principles, and only a well-maintained Congress could ensure this. The suggested provincial assembly would choose the Brabantine deputies to the Congress, putting the process in the hands of the People and thus creating a concrete outlet for the exercise of their sovereignty without changing anything regarding the *Joyeuse Entrée* or administrative system of the Estates, Provincial Council, or tribunals. Democratic in its promotion of direct election of Congressmen, "NÉCESSITÉ" remained conservative

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<sup>68</sup> Breuille, "The Response to Napoleon and German Nationalism," 271.

<sup>69</sup> "NÉCESSITÉ D'UNE ASSEMBLÉE PROVINCIALE DU BRABANT, PAR UN CITOYEN," Brussels, 10 February 1790, in *Réforme de la constit.*, Fonds Van Hulthem, KBR, 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

in its insistence that no aspect of the *Joyeuse Entrée* be modified. Political divisions of democrats and conservatives were not always neat in the provinces.

The arguments in “NÉCESSITÉ”, that sovereignty was the people’s ultimate possession, could equally be found in “QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?” In his very last paragraph, D’Outrepoint powerfully restated his argument one final, succinct time:

“Sovereignty belongs to the nation”:

He who used to enjoy it has lost its exercise, and this exercise, the nation has not [yet] confided to anyone. It is by a *national convention* that she must reappropriate these powers: let us hasten to seize the only way there is to render the exercise of supreme authority legitimate.<sup>71</sup>

The crux of D’Outrepoint’s argument was not in the specifics of his plan. He seemed flexible in its implementation, willing to accept changes so long as they were in keeping with the will of the nation, to be gauged through a national assembly with a relatively broad electorate. While his very prominent pamphlet became the target of several vitriolic responses (to be discussed below), it also garnered positive rejoinders.

In his pamphlet “LETTRE D’UN PHILANTROPE, A L’AUTEUR DE L’OUVRAGE INTITULE: QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR? OU AVIS ESSENTIEL D’UN BELGE A SES CONCITOYENS,” Dr. Vandeveldel largely agreed with d’Outrepoint, whose original pamphlet the doctor had read “with as much attention as pleasure.”<sup>72</sup> He concurred that the Estates were only stewards of sovereignty, and that they could hold Joseph’s former powers no more than a servant could possess his dead master’s house.

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<sup>71</sup> D’Outrepoint, “QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?,” 23.

<sup>72</sup> “LETTRE D’UN PHILANTROPE, A L’AUTEUR DE L’OUVRAGE INTITULE: QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR? OU AVIS ESSENTIEL D’UN BELGE A SES CONCITOYENS. 1790,” in *Varia sur la révolution brabançonne*, KU Leuven Maurits Sabbebibliotheek, 1.

Vandevelde fervently agreed that a “national convention” was necessary and that, “it [was] indispensable that all the belgian provinces merge into a single national mass, that it [were] only by their intimate union, founded on the unity of *their constitution*, which could effectively protect [their] liberty.”<sup>73</sup> Similar to the arguments published in the American *Federalist Papers* during the debates over whether to adopt the Constitution of 1787, Vandevelde reasoned that democracy, while desirable as a system of government, was impractical for all but the smallest societies. A representative government, in which a small number spoke and made decisions for the country as a whole was best, though he was uncomfortable with the idea of electors. The doctor, it seemed, was willing to be more radical in his conception of democracy, and condemned the extra layer between the representatives and represented; however, he could accept these middlemen because of his “confidence in [d’Outrepoint’s] *lumières*.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Vandevelde pointed out that both the English constitution and that of the thirteen United States of America (which had by then adopted the 1787 Constitution) used electors, which softened his stance; still, he insisted on doubling the number proposed in d’Outrepoint’s plan so as to prevent abuse of power and give as loud a voice as possible to as much of the population as possible.

Vandevelde was not the only pamphleteer to invoke the United States of America as the prime example for the Belgian Provinces to follow, just as Belgians were not the only revolutionaries to do so; Dutch Patriots, as well, had looked to the United States and also the Swiss for examples of political innovations.<sup>75</sup> Gérard

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 7. Original emphasis.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 8; 12.

<sup>75</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 58, 60.

Matthieu Jean Poringo, a close collaborator of Vonck and Verlooy's, wrote a pamphlet that pushed for a maximally direct election system by extolling the virtues of the American federal and state systems of representation in his 1790 pamphlet "LES REPRÉSENTANS LÉGITIMES DU PEUPLE."<sup>76</sup> Poringo must have written the pamphlet after mid-March, as he concluded with an ardent defense of the right to assemble and to send addresses to one's government, speaking directly to the Estates' condemnation of the *Société Patriotique*.

The *Belges*, though "faithful and attached to their ancient constitutions, guided, not by the *spirit of innovation*, but by eternal and unchanging justice," had been forced to depose their monarchs just as had the Americans.<sup>77</sup> They were not "*self-interested innovators*," as Van Eupen and Van der Noot had described the members of the *Société Patriotique*.<sup>78</sup> They were acting instead out of necessity, having been driven to changes in government when their monarchs proved themselves unworthy. Poringo moved from state to state, listing examples of the ways the Americans had chosen to represent their people in government, all with an emphasis on popular sovereignty and actual representation, as opposed to the more British notion of virtual representation that was also the basis for the Belgian Estates' argument that they wield Joseph's former sovereignty. Poringo concluded that the Americans' "*ancient constitutions*, mixed with the most attractive English laws,

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<sup>76</sup> Outside Poringo's pamphlet discussed here, other pamphlets also advocated following the American example. One notable example is "Triple Parallèle de la révolution des sept provinces unies en 1579, sous Philippe II, Roi d'Espagne, de la RÉVOLUTION DES TREIZE ÉTATS UNIS en 1776, sous George III, Roi de la Grande-Bretagne, & de la RÉVOLUTION DES ONZE ÉTATS UNIS en 1790, sous Joseph II, Empereur d'Allemagne, Roie de Hongrie & de Bohême. PAR L'AUTEUR des TRÈS-FORTES PROBABILITÉS sur la destin de la République des Provinces Belgiques Unies. EN BRABANT, et se trouve à BRUXELLES, Chez G. Huyghe, Imp.-Libraire, Marché aux Fromages. 1790," in *Révolution belge 1788-1789*, KBR, 13.

<sup>77</sup> Gérard Matthieu Jean Poringo, "LES REPRESENTANS LEGITIMES DU PEUPLE, PAR MONSIEUR PORINGO. 1790." In *Réform de la constit.*, Fonds Van Hulthem, KBR, no. 28, 1.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

were a *chef d'oeuvre* of legislation.”<sup>79</sup> After the American War for Independence, these constitutions had of course been modified, but what made the current systems truly unique, and strong, was the fact that none had been made “without the people freely assembling [and], after mature deliberation, having chosen, named, and authorized their own officials.”<sup>80</sup> Poringo was careful in calling for popular participation in government in order to maintain a consistent link to the past. Being Belgian meant prizing tradition and custom overall. Thus, it made strategic sense to construct a scenario in which the reforms one wanted were not the products of suspicious innovation but rather examples from long-held, highly regarded conventions.

Still, Poringo did not completely mitigate his argument. Where Vonck used the language of limited monarchy and aristocracy, Poringo did not disguise his intentions. The Americans, who certainly “knew the price of liberty,” in adapting their administrations post-revolution, “had only conserved from their *ancient constitutions*, which they cherished, that which [was] compatible with the principles of *democracy*.”<sup>81</sup> He implicitly attacked the Estates and Congress, condemning those representatives who would “by a *sordid self interest*, encroach upon the right to continue their functions, under pretext of privilege” and thus render “the entire nation ... enslaved.”<sup>82</sup> Without doubt, the legislature could make no moves until the “good *people assembled*” had had their say.<sup>83</sup> Here again, parallels can be found with Dutch Patriot pamphlets, which extolled the virtues of written constitutions that

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. Original emphasis.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Original emphasis.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 19. Original emphasis.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 20. Original emphasis.

upheld the rights, as well as responsibilities, of the people in creating government.<sup>84</sup>

The Estates and Congress ought to remember, Poringo's pamphlet insisted, that sovereignty rested with the people; even the old constitutions, which were so treasured and vital to Belgian identity, enshrined this fact.

The unity of the American states was their most prominent feature for Dr. Vandeveld, who also agreed most strongly with d'Outrepoint's call for national unity. In fact, the doctor went further in his description of Belgianness than the lawyer ever had in "QU' ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?" Vandeveld agreed with d'Outrepoint that unity was necessary, evoking the importance of Belgian "*national majesty*."<sup>85</sup> Such language already indicated support for pan-provincial identity, but Vandeveld magnified the issue. He expressed his sincere wishes that d'Outrepoint's plan would be put into effect as quickly as possible, followed by an impassioned, powerful plea.

Can Belgians educated, by their past wrongs, about those who still derive power illegitimately exercised, shortly be convinced that to deliver themselves forever from the chains that their courage has just broken, it is indispensable that Brabant, Flemish, Hennuiers, Limbourgeois, Luxembourgers, Tournaisiens, Gelderlandes, Namurians, Malinois, they form but one people, but one and indivisible national mass, *as soon as their internal and external security will have been sufficiently provided for*; and that the interest-become-general, blends, *in the unity of a common constitution*, the particular interests of all provinces!<sup>86</sup>

Vandeveld explicitly wished for a national convention to create a central government that would ultimately overrule provincial powers. In fact, this outcome was not just preferable, but wholly necessary for the new nation to survive. His

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<sup>84</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 55-56.

<sup>85</sup> "LETTRE D'UN PHILANTROPE," 17.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Original emphasis.

sentiment was echoed, implicitly and explicitly, by most of the Vonckist pamphleteers. Most, however, kept to the safer strategy of framing their arguments within the legal context of minor constitutional changes.

While Poringo and Vandevelde used the American example to call for unity, Verlooy stayed within Europe's borders. The Dutch model, he declared at the outset of his pamphlet, would do the Belgians little good. When they had formed the United Provinces two centuries earlier, the Northern Netherlanders had simply shifted the sovereignty of their deposed prince to another and eventually their Estates General, something which the Belgians could not in good conscience imitate two centuries later. In the South, Verlooy insisted, the Estates had no legal right to take the deposed monarch's sovereignty given that political conceptions of representation had changed since the sixteenth century. True, the Estates had represented the people, but always as a third of the constitutional system. As such, they were only partially representative and could not suddenly assume the role of full representatives for the entire nation with no other power to check them. Verlooy refuted romantic conservative notions that the modern Estates were the valiant voice of the people who had helped shape the constitution. These were not the avatars of the men who had stood up to medieval tyrannies under the Frankish kings.<sup>87</sup> These were usurpers, men who had formed only a part of the driving force behind revolution and who now sought to hungrily grab power that was not theirs.

Thus, Verlooy argued for a radical change to the system, but urged his compatriots to ignore the French example. He painted their southern neighbors as barbaric anarchists who seized and redistributed property, not unlike what the *Belge*

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<sup>87</sup> "Projet Raisoné," 5-6.

*Patriote* wrote in his pamphlet. Verlooy counseled avoiding distractions such as prescribing “useless laws” like the “rights of man,” and to focus solely on “the union of the Provinces.”<sup>88</sup> This was not the time for minutiae, as d’Outrepoint had also pointed out (but then quickly undermined by outlining a meticulously detailed administrative plan). This was a grand and critical moment for the Belgians: they were about to “choose a state ... to fix [their] genre of existence. [They would be] an absolute Republic.”<sup>89</sup> Again agreeing with d’Outrepoint and Vandeveldel, Verlooy insisted that, as political union was vital to the success of their endeavor, the inhabitants of the provinces needed to band together. He told his audience, “The happiness of our generation present & future, the national character, virtues & vices, the grandeur or abjection, of individuals, glory or dishonor of the Nation will depend on you.”<sup>90</sup> This formulation implied something beyond the plea for political unity crafted by a bourgeois electorate and invoked a more mass-movement style of broad nationalism. Just as his projections for *Pro Aris et Focis* hoped to harness patriotic feelings of the urban and rural masses, Verlooy wanted the population to bind the provinces together in independence. The Estates could not veneer a national state over the provincial borders. In conceiving of a Belgian nationalism in the eighteenth century, Verlooy was a lone voice advocating a mass movement like those that would come to characterize nineteenth-century nationalist movements; yet he was not so removed from some of the rhetoric of the Dutch Patriots, specifically their calls for increased public participation in politics, such as a *Règlement* of the government designed by patriots in Utrecht in April 1784 for a public committee to

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



oversee the magistrates and elections.<sup>91</sup> Independent statehood was not a light matter that could be easily solved by an existing system absorbing the vacant sovereignty left by a deposed monarch. If the people could see this moment for what it was, if they could harness their power and believe in their own abilities, they could create anything. In a fit of dramatic idealism, Verlooy burst out, “Be magnanimous: dare to believe yourselves capable of a Roman grandeur, & you will have it!”<sup>92</sup>

Overall, Verlooy advocated a moderated imitation of the United Provinces, reining in his most democratic appeals to the mass population and maintaining a more conservative political union. Moderated because, as he saw it, “without some reforms, all three Estates tend too much toward aristocracy.”<sup>93</sup> What remained, then, were the larger questions of form: where would the assembly of deputies meet? How many would there be per province? Of one thing Verlooy was sure. Whatever operation was put in place would have to be prepared to both create a union and draft a viable Constitution at the same time. These necessarily went hand-in-hand, indicating that Verlooy felt union could not be achieved without rejigging the system, as some pamphlets purported. Keeping to the old system, or failing to reform the Estates or somehow consolidate power in a central government, would obfuscate

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<sup>91</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 51. She discusses various examples of such calls for public participation throughout her section “Projets de réformes patriotes,” pp. 51-60.

<sup>92</sup> Here Verlooy expressed a passion and, yes, even an arrogance, almost unheard of in today’s Belgian national attitude. Such zeal may seem comical today, and is exemplary of eighteenth-century flare for the dramatic, but it underscores a genuine moment in Belgian history. Today, Belgian historians are reluctant to depict their history after the Dutch Revolt of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as anything particularly grand or interesting outside the confines of their own country. There is little doubt that this Brabantine lawyer saw himself as part of something much larger than a struggle against an errant monarch; this struggle, this moment of constitution-making was an exciting part of the Age of Revolution in which men could define their own destinies and the Southern Netherlands could form a strong national identity that would last. “Projet Raisonnable,” 10.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

national integrity by entrenching provincial divisions at this “most critical & most interesting moment in [the Belgians’] political age.”<sup>94</sup>

Conservative pamphleteers answered these impassioned democratic writings with similar zeal. In March 1790 they especially refuted d’Outrepoint’s “QU’ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?” and Vonck’s “CONSIDERATIONS IMPARTIALES,” perhaps because of their authors’ visible role in the democratic movement. The conservative lawyer Henri Van der Hoop, who stylized himself as an *avocat du peuple* in his byline, took on the “CONSIDERATIONS IMPARTIALES” and the “PROJET D’ADRESSE” the *Société Patriotique* had sent to Congress on 15 March simultaneously. Pragmatically titled “REFUTATION DES CONSIDÉRATIONS IMPARTIALES ET DU PROJET D’ADRESSE AUX ÉTATS AVEC UNE EXPOSITION DU DANGER DE CES BROCHURES,” Van der Hoop’s pamphlet was addressed to Brussels’ “true citizens.”<sup>95</sup> As such, like the anonymous author of “NÉCESSITÉ,” the *avocat du peuple* defined citizens deserving of inclusion in the community of Belgians as those loyal to the Estates and constitutions as they stood. He excluded the Vonckists, who still professed deep patriortism, because their willingness to adapt the constitution seemed to him, and to other conservative writers, to be traitorous. His emphasis was similar to the “more traditional” tone of Utrecht’s 1784 *Règlement*, which focused on “restauring and upholding the rights of [cities] and citizens, their privileges and customs,” though the difference between the Dutch Patriots and the conservative Belgian revolutionaries is evident in that even the Utrecht *Règlement* pushed for reforms to the treaties and charters overall.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>95</sup> H.J. Van der Hoop, “REFUTATION DES CONSIDÉRATIONS IMPARTIALES ET DU PROJET D’ADRESSE AUX ÉTATS AVEC UNE EXPOSITION DU DANGER DE CES BROCHURES; Par H.J. Vander Hoop, Avocat du Peuple. AU VRAI CITOYENS. A BRUXELLES. 1790.” KU Leuven Tabularium.

<sup>96</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 51.

Van der Hoop's chief criticism of the two pamphlets, which he also accused of contradicting each other, was that they "contain[ed] the germ of discord sustained by the most patent, most crude falsities."<sup>97</sup> As he saw it, the Constitution did not need to be changed in any way, for multiple reasons. First, it was fundamentally republican in nature, Hoop argued, in that it separated powers. "Far from living under a *simple & limited Monarchy*," the *Belges* "had always & originally inhabited *Republics*," at least since they had begun to adopt "mixed" forms of government which "conserved a republican *foundation* under a monarchical *form*."<sup>98</sup> As such, Van der Hoop saw no reason to change the constitution solely because the sovereign had changed. If the constitution had always been republican, it was perfectly suited to continue governing the provinces in their independent state. After all, the lawyer reasoned, if some other provision in the constitution suddenly became moot (as had, for example, feudal conditions), the entire system would not need to be rearranged.<sup>99</sup> This use of history echoed the Estatist arguments in the 1787-88 grievances, as well as the Flemish *manifeste* which highlighted how the Estates themselves, over the centuries, were the constant cause of the province's prosperity and happiness.

As a parallel to the idea that the Vonckists were not good Belgians due to their challenging of the standing constitutions, a Belgian identity, for Van der Hoop, was not contingent on independence, though this did not diminish the value of that independence nor his support for it. Van der Hoop's reasoning justified a Belgian national consciousness regardless of the status of their state. If some part of the Constitution became moot, there was no need for panic, so long as the rest of its

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<sup>97</sup> Van der Hoop, "REFUTATION," 1.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

clauses were followed. For the conservative author, and many of the other pamphleteers who refuted the Vonckists, following tradition and refraining from innovation were key components to being Belgian.

While Van der Hoop's disagreement with democratic ideas is not unexpected, his use of language similar to Vonck and d'Outrepoint regarding the people and their representatives is striking. Throughout his pamphlet, though he focused on the political administration of Brabant, Van der Hoop continued to frame his arguments in terms of the entire United States of Belgium, created for the *Belges*—the same nomenclature d'Outrepoint had used in referring to his compatriots. Though he disagreed with Vonck's assertion that more towns in the *Plat-Pays* ought to be given representation in the Estates, Van der Hoop continuously referred to the deputies in Brussels as "*représentans de la Nation*." Again, this was because they had traditionally been seen as such. Another pamphlet, published by C. Van Assche in Brussels and The Hague, manifestly supported the Estates, asserting that since ancient times, when the Belgians had enjoyed a republican constitution during the Roman period, the intermediary corps had truly held sovereignty. No laws were passed without their consent, no sovereign coined provincial monies, and so it was logical, legal, and even expected that the Estates take the sovereign reins<sup>100</sup> Over a century before, the revolt against Philip II had cemented the Estates as the "*représentans de la Nation*," and that history could not simply be erased.<sup>101</sup> They

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<sup>100</sup> "Qu'etoit-ce qu'un duc de Brabant? Ou Essai Historique avec les preuves Sur la Souveraineté de cette Province pour parvenir à l'examen des Questions suivantes: 1.° Quels étoient les pouvoirs d'un Duc de Brabant. 2.° Si les Etats de Brabant *du tems des Ducs* ne représentoient point la Nation quant à l'exercice de la Souveraineté? 3.° Pourquoi les Etats *actuels* de Brabant se présentent-ils moins légalement le Peuple Brabançon, à l'effet d'exercer le pouvoir Souverain?," A LA HAYE, et se trouve à Bruxelles, chez C. Van Assche, Librairie, au Rivage. KU Leuven Tabularium - 1st edition; 1788.

<sup>101</sup> "Qu'etoit-ce qu'un duc de Brabant?," 20.

were the Montesquieuian intermediary bodies that spoke to the sovereign as the voice of the people and protected their privileges, thereby maintaining overall prosperity. Upholding the Estates, regardless of the position of the monarch, was important to preserve the integrity of a *nation belge*.

Ultimately, Van der Hoop disputed the notion that the People needed to reiterate any mandate in order for their representatives to continue to fulfill their roles, speaking to the broader complaints raised in the democratic pamphlets. He reminded the democratic pamphleteers, and readers in general, that it was impractical to compare the Belgian provinces to either the United States of America or France. The former was “far away from all external enemies,” while comparisons seemed to ignore “the disorder that the germ of innovation had thrown into the latter.”<sup>102</sup> Van der Hoop was not alone in this view; a pamphlet published as the extract from a letter out of Ghent condemned the chaos solicited by innovative pamphlets intent on “introducing [among the Belgians] the disunion and disorder of France.” The author assured his fellow citizens there was no need to pay any heed to the “servile imitation of [their] neighbor’s system.”<sup>103</sup>

For Van der Hoop, comparisons to the other revolutions amounted to a desire to be something other than Belgian, reinforcing his persistent defense of the Estates. He was struck by the way that these other pamphleteers seemed to constantly complain and look to foreign examples without first examining themselves. The Belgians were happy, and had been happy under their Estates for centuries before

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<sup>102</sup> Van der Hoop, “REFUTATION,” 22.

<sup>103</sup> “EXTRAIT d’une Lettre de Gand, du 6 Mars 1790,” 248-254.

Joseph II and his tyranny, so why change the constitution of a society that had already achieved its ends?<sup>104</sup>

It follows thus that once a People has given its consent to a form of Constitution; and by *this Form* it attains the goal of every State, *which is to be more or less happy*; this same People, despite its *inalienable Sovereignty*, can no more revoke its consent or mandate to change the *Form of Constitution* that serves the *means* to arrive at *the proposed end*, & this is what distinguishes *Liberty* from *Licentiousness* in establishing boundaries to unbridled wills.<sup>105</sup>

Van der Hoop was not challenging the notion that the People held sovereignty or that their government should represent them. In fact, he fully subscribed to the view that government existed to facilitate the general good of an entire society. This Belgian merely saw his society as happy enough within the existing system. With a final flourish, he rather smugly added that the democratic plans would never work, as expanding membership in the Estates, whether by towns or broader noble and ecclesiastic inclusion, would create such a diversity of interests and opinions that nothing would ever be accomplished.

In a similar vein, two pamphlets, one anonymous and one written by a pensionary for the Flemish Estates, specifically took exception to d'Outrepoint's writing. "Ce Que Nous Allons Devenir?" appeared unsigned and undated.<sup>106</sup> Joseph De Baste, one of the pensionaries to the Flemish Estates, titled his undated pamphlet, "APPERÇU SUR LE VÉRITABLE ÉTAT DES PROVINCES BELGIQUES, PAR UN CITOYEN, EN

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<sup>104</sup> Simon Schama uses a great example of this regarding reactions to the French revolution's expansion along the Rhineland: "The citizens of Aachen, at any rate, had the wit (or the innocence) to reply apologetically [to the French army's manifesto that accompanied General Custine's 'progress of pillage and extortion down the left bank of the Rhine'] that, alas, they had no tyrant from whom to be liberated since their city had been free of lordship since the year 1185." Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands 1780-1813* (London: Collins, 1977), 8.

<sup>105</sup> Van der Hoop, "REFUTATION," 24. Original emphasis.

<sup>106</sup> Its full title was "Ce Que Nous Allons Devenir? Des Belges unis & paisibles qui déposent toute leur confiance dans l'assemblée des Etats-unis, leurs Représentans."

RÉPONSE A LA BROCHURE: QU'ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?" Both attacked d'Outrepoint personally, with the anonymous author styling "QU'ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?" as "absurd," and De Bast calling it "the lamentable cries of a poor castaway."<sup>107</sup> The anonymous author kept his remarks short, lambasting d'Outrepoint at every turn, and warning his audience not to take anything the Brussels lawyer had said seriously. Ultimately, like Van der Hoop, the anonymous pamphleteer maintained that the *Belges* just needed to heed their United Estates in order to maintain happiness. No one, neither the Estates General nor the Congress, needed to change the Constitution. D'Outrepoint, the vitriolic writer proclaimed, was actually trying to create a system whereby he and his colleagues would usurp powers of governance from the rightful sovereigns in the Estates. The illegalities d'Outrepoint, Verlooy, and many of their supporters so vehemently endorsed were false, meant to trick the people into giving up their real sovereignty. Ironically, and evincing the strength of Belgian feeling, the anonymous author's solution was ultimately the same as d'Outrepoint's: peace among all the citizens would come with unity. For the anonymous conservative, this union was embodied by obedience to the Estates General who "would continue to cement liberty," being unable to destroy that which they themselves had helped create.<sup>108</sup> By contrast, what would d'Outrepoint and his supporters become? "*The execration of the Belgian people.*"<sup>109</sup> Such vitriol against the democrats could have been a product of Van der Noot's concerted efforts in December 1789 to keep Vonck, his supporters,

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<sup>107</sup> "Ce Que Nous Allons Devenir? Des Belges unis & paisibles qui déposent toute leur confiance dans l'assemblée des Etats-unis, leurs Représentans," No name, no date. KU Leuven Tabularium, 3; M.J. De Baste, "APPERÇU SUR LE VÉRITABLE ÉTAT DES PROVINCES BELGIQUES, PAR UN CITOYEN, EN RÉPONSE A LA BROCHURE: QU'ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?" Gent: l'Imprimerie de Bernard Poelman, in *Révolution Brabançonne*, vol. 2, Ghent University Library, 3.

<sup>108</sup> "Ce Que Nous Allons Devenir?" 1, 3.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Emphasis original.

and their contributions to the revolution hidden. The inherent support for conservatism these authors attributed to their new Belgian identity may have been more a case of who was able to garner support fastest. Regardless, after the creation of the United States of Belgium, loyalty to the Estates in the revolution proved paramount for the conservative pamphleteers.

The Flemish pensionary was less histrionic in his tone as he invoked the strength of Belgian unity. Naturally, as an employee, De Baste strongly defended the provincial Estates. He stressed the success of the new central government, extolling the liberty it brought, and the political stability the *Belges* had created in “establishing among our Provinces a Confederation strict & solid, which, concentrat[ed] our forces in uniting our hearts, our aims, & our riches.”<sup>110</sup> Still, he objected to d’Outrepoint’s suggestion that the individual provinces unravel their constitutions (which would, incidentally, also cause De Baste to lose his job). The Swiss and the Dutch were prime examples of countries which had successfully maintained federations that incorporated provincial identities. Compromise did not diminish De Baste’s Belgian zeal, just as it did not make a citizen of Bern less Swiss. Union among the provinces “reunited all the hearts of true Belgians,” and their sovereignty and liberty would be well guarded by their old system and the new central government.<sup>111</sup> The United States of Belgium’s Congress could help “coordinate a range of elite interests,” which included “powers to be accorded to provincial representative institutions,” so that the tension between provincial and national political identity could be used to the conservatives’ advantage, rallying support necessary for political union but flexible enough to allow for continued

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<sup>110</sup> “APPERÇU SUR LE VÉRITABLE ÉTAT DES PROVINCES BELGIQUES,” 4.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 29.



provincial loyalty and privilege.<sup>112</sup> De Baste's pamphlet was a direct embodiment of the tension between provincial and national identities prevalent in the provinces during the revolution, as authors attempted to reconcile continued provincial attachment with the growing Belgian identity.

Like Van der Hoop, De Baste wanted no new innovations; he hurled the insult "*Novateur*" at the author of "QU'ALLONS-NOUS DEVENIR?"<sup>113</sup> Despite his own comparisons to the Swiss and Dutch, he saw no plausible reason to compare the Belgians to the United States of America.<sup>114</sup> Emulating the new country across the Atlantic was apparently a step too far. Were the former British colonies "happier & more flourishing" than the Belgian Provinces? De Baste did not seem to think so, though he gave few concrete reasons for this argument. The Americans' new systems had cost them much, he declared; why open the Belgian provinces to unrest and anarchy by interfering with a system that worked?<sup>115</sup> Just as the anonymous author of "Ce Que Nous Allons Devenir?" had done, De Baste used D'Outrepoint's goal of national happiness against him. The provinces were already united and happy, as Van der Hoop had pointed out—they did not need a new constitution to make them so. "Belgium," asserted the Flemish pensionary, "the age-old asylum of integrity, will never cease to conserve Union, true Liberty, & public Happiness."<sup>116</sup>

Though he disagreed entirely with how the country should be run and how the sovereignty held by the nation ought to be wielded—the current Estates were

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<sup>112</sup> Breuille, "The Response to Napoleon and German Nationalism," 274 and 268.

<sup>113</sup> "APPERÇU SUR LE VÉRITABLE ÉTAT DES PROVINCES BELGIQUES," 20.

<sup>114</sup> It is somewhat ironic that the Dutch themselves were being influenced by the American revolutionaries and politicians. See Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, as well as her article "The Netherlands in the constellation of the eighteenth-century Western revolutions."

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

doing a perfectly good job—the conservative De Baste expressed national sentiments fundamentally identical to those of d’Outrepoint, Verlooy, Poringo, Vonck, and other democrats. His provincialism was understandable given his employment, but it also illustrated the reality that, as Anthony Smith puts it, “human beings are perfectly happy with multiple identities.”<sup>117</sup> That De Baste simultaneously spoke of Belgium and the Estates indicated his acceptance of the overarching central government. Ultimately, there is little question that for De Baste, the provincial divisions within the United States of Belgium in no way made their inhabitants less *belge*.

#### CONCLUSION

What it meant to be Belgian in the provinces was in flux between 1789 and 1790. Revolutionaries and activists did not fall into easily defined political categories. Everywhere there were “Patriots”; those who supported the Estates and those who did not, those who called for a national assembly and those who decried it—all saw themselves as champions of a political system best suited to preserve Belgian liberty. This liberty was an indicator of national integrity, newly earned but already treasured. Over the course of the resistance and armed revolt the inhabitants of the Southern Netherlands had come to see themselves as more than just provincial citizens—they had come to value the collectivity of the provinces and express a pan-provincial patriotism. Though a majority of the pamphlet writers actively professed a distaste for the influence of other revolutionaries, they were in this way similar to the Dutch Patriots, whose writings showed “the undeniable influence of the United

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<sup>117</sup> Anthony D. Smith, “A Europe of Nations – or the Nation of Europe?” *Journal of Peace Research* 30 no.2 (May 1993): 133.

States in which national and provincial heritage mixed harmoniously.”<sup>118</sup> While not a full-blown nationalism in the nineteenth-century sense, political collectivity and pan-provincial patriotism created an attachment to a Belgian nation, though how to define such a nation was still fluid.

What connects all of these pamphlets, letters, and other revolutionary writing is a sense of Belgianness that goes beyond simple patriotic “love of country.” Each author infused his text with dramatic pleas to be heard, believing that the nation could only be saved if his advice were followed, and each claimed that the common good and well-being were his unequivocal goals. Whether or not genuine, there was universal insistence that any success would be reached by upholding a Belgian spirit, rooted in preserving the past while crafting a new future. Such grounding in the past paralleled what Lerner sees as the conclusion of the Swiss political transformation of the long eighteenth century, embodied in the 1848 constitution, which “paid homage to Swiss traditions” in order to legitimate a new federal state “acceptable to a majority of the inhabitants.”<sup>119</sup> Dutch Patriots, too, had grounded their arguments in the past in order to prove their legitimacy, though in the context of their revolution they needed to legitimize sweeping reforms to the system of government rather than conserving the old order.<sup>120</sup> Though the Belgian spirit the revolutionaries wanted to uphold was generally ill-defined, and its origin disputed, these disparate authors all felt that it existed *and* that it was vital to the lasting success of their revolution.

The flexibility of a national definition undermined the revolution’s success. Perhaps the Vonckists’ insistent challenges to the Estates caused too much chaos,

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<sup>118</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 60.

<sup>119</sup> Lerner, *Laboratory of Liberty*, 25.

<sup>120</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 53-55, 58.

and Van der Noot's strong reaction in fomenting a campaign of terror against the democrats destabilized what unity there was too much. Moreover, pockets of rural royalism remained, though the conservative government in Brussels and in the provinces actively repressed this. In Flanders, towards the end of May 1790, a royalist peasant revolt shook the Estates' confidence, though they successfully crushed the uprising.<sup>121</sup> The conservative refusal to call a national assembly and strengthen the power of the central government over that of the provinces did leave the state weak on the international stage. Britain, for example, informed the Belgian agent de Roode in London that the Crown and Parliament could never recognize a state without a clear, powerful executive.<sup>122</sup> The pamphlets of spring 1790, though all professed a love of the new Belgium and acknowledged a national consciousness, reveal a level of in-fighting that was ultimately too detrimental to the national cause to be overcome.

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<sup>121</sup> Dhondt, "La Cabale des misérables' de 1790," 130.

<sup>122</sup> De Roode to Mons Van Herÿbergen, 8 December 1789, in *Correspondance de Van Eupen, secrétaire d'Etat du Congrès avec diverses personnes*, AGR, Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beligues Unis, 191, 84.



## CHAPTER 6: *ESPERANCES FALLACIEUSES*: THE END OF THE UNITED STATES OF BELGIUM

“It is setbacks and contradictions that awaken nations; it is war, it is the fear of losing everything, that teaches people that there is a good that interests them all, when they must all contribute to defend it, and that is our case.” – *Letter from Congress to provincial Estates, 6 August 1790*

“We are thus still in fear and hope.”- *Report from one of Tournai’s deputies to the Estates General for the Consistoires de Tournai, 25 November 1790*

### INTRODUCTION

In November 1789, Joseph II had sent Count Philip de Cobenzl to the Austrian Netherlands as plenipotentiary commissioner, tasked with settling a peace. A close personal friend to Joseph, Cobenzl was also friendly with Chancellor Kaunitz in his role as vice-chancellor. The Count fled when Brussels was evacuated in December and from Luxembourg he penned letters to each of the provincial Estates on 28 February 1790. His missives announced “the sad news of the death of [Joseph II], whose great qualities and ardent desire to create the happiness of his subjects will never be erased from the memories of good people.”<sup>1</sup> Cobenzl took the opportunity to offer his advice as to what the Belgians should do next. This did not come from any official policy, he assured the members of the Estates, but rather from the “keen interest [he] had always taken in the well-being of the *Belges* and from the tender affection [he] had for [their] nation since his youth.”<sup>2</sup> The Count strongly counseled the Estates to recall their troops still skirmishing with imperial forces; to lift the siege of Antwerp’s citadel and supply the soldiers inside; to stop all other preparations for war; to free all prisoners taken; to suppress publication and distribution of all “libelous” and “seditious” writings; and to send deputies to

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<sup>1</sup> Cobenzl to the Estates of the different provinces, Luxembourg, 28 February 1790, in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 124.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

Luxembourg to discuss “the ways to promptly reestablish order and tranquility, the homage due to Leopold, our new king and sovereign, and the provisions for his inauguration.”<sup>3</sup> Together, Cobenzl and the provincial Estates would return the Belgian provinces to a state of ideal happiness for their inhabitants and for the satisfaction of their new sovereign.

Just before the end of 1790, the Belgians still had not followed Cobenzl’s advice, and it would soon become apparent that this was to their great detriment. Over the course of the year, the new Emperor, Leopold II, would entreat his subjects to return to his fatherly care, asking the Belgian nation to return to his Empire, as a unit, to be guided by their exemplary constitution. In March, Leopold announced a generous offer, which was soon replaced by a more traditional olive branch of general amnesty and a return to the status quo. By October, his terms were much more conservative, with several exceptions added to the amnesty and little further incentive aside from preventing all-out war.

The Triple Alliance played its part in trying to negotiate a peace. As Britain and the United Provinces had been guarantors for the well-being of the provinces maintained in the Treaty of Utrecht and other formal agreements after the War of Austrian Succession, they were already invested in the situation between Vienna and its rebellious Low Country provinces. The very treaty that had transferred the Belgian provinces from Spanish to Austrian power formally sanctioned the idea of a balance of power that had originated in the Westphalian Era. The 1713 Treaty of Utrecht codified attempts to uphold a “*repos de l’Europe* by maintaining a multi-polar

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 125.

world of autonomous sovereign entities.”<sup>4</sup> No one power could become dominant in this system, and the major actors needed to take care to ensure the balance was not upset. Concern for this stability ultimately underpinned most of Britain, the Netherlands, and Prussia’s diplomatic decisions regarding the Belgian revolutionaries, and colored the international dimension of the Belgian revolution quite strongly. The Belgian Provinces were an important component to the equilibrium of Western Europe. They had been given to the Austrian Habsburgs as a way to break up the larger Habsburg Empire while also keeping a buffer zone against the French. London and The Hague endeavored to protect the rights and privileges of the Belgian provinces, urging Austria to agree to constitutional continuity and protections. Prussia’s position was less historic, though its interests were traditionally contrary to those of Vienna. Creation of the Triple Alliance bound the maritime powers to Frederick William II, though some Belgian politicians clung to optimistic hope for a French alliance with Prussia, an alliance that could eventually embrace a Belgian state, opposing both Austria and the wills of Britain and the Dutch.<sup>5</sup>

In reality, the Triple Alliance maintained strong relations, having secretly agreed among themselves in January 1790 to intervene in the provinces only at the Emperor’s invitation, to allow no other foreign power to become involved, and to maintain a united front in any opinion *vis-à-vis* the “*affaires belgiques*.” Their secret treaty equally stipulated that they would seek the maintenance of Belgian privileges, especially in so far as these would prevent another deterioration of relations with Vienna, and that they would consider whether to recognize Belgian statehood at such

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<sup>4</sup> McBride, “The nation in the age of revolution,” 255-256.

<sup>5</sup> See the end of this chapter.



a time as the provinces declared independence and crafted a new constitution. This last stipulation was a strong indicator that the Triple Alliance powers, at the very least, recognized a coherent unity of the provinces and could contemplate their existence as a nation, even as an independent state, but only under the achievement of specific conditions which, as it would turn out, never came to pass.<sup>6</sup>

How foreigners define a nation—as well as how it defines itself as compared with outsiders—is instrumental in the creation of nationalist feeling.<sup>7</sup> At the most basic level, a nation must to some degree be recognized by foreigners in order to exist at all. Foreign influence and outside perceptions are important in shaping the way a nation sees itself, not least in validating its very existence as such. The fact that, as the United States of Belgium were attempting to form a new nation on the European stage, their former sovereigns and other major European powers recognized a cultural and political collectivity—a nation—within the provinces gave the nascent Belgian national consciousness more legitimacy. Throughout their negotiations, the European powers referenced the Belgians, the Belgian provinces, and even *La Belgique*, lending credence to a consistent acknowledgement of a separate, self-contained Belgian nation.

The Belgian central government in Congress and the Estates General refused all foreign efforts to broker a peace, remaining inextricably obstinate and naïve in the face of mounting bad news. While Vonckists and other democrats, mostly in exile in

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<sup>6</sup> In their correspondence, Van Eupen and De Roode discuss British concerns that the provinces fulfill certain obligations, including creating a strong executive power over the course of 1790. See especially letters from December 1789, 23 and 27 April 1790, and October 1790 in *Correspondance de Van Eupen, secrétaire d'Etat du Congrès avec diverses personnes*, AGR, *Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beliques Unis* 191

<sup>7</sup> Hirschi, *Origins of Nationalism*. See especially section 2, “Equality and multipolarity,” of Chapter 3, “Foundations of a new nationalism theory,” pp. 38-40.

France, warmed to Leopold and saw the advantages negotiations could bring, the Estates and Congress, as a body, remained convinced of their righteousness, and of their right to exist as an independent state. Though some individual members, notably the deputies sent to Brussels by Tournai, objected to such obstreperousness and urged their province to somehow take matters into its own hands, the central bodies continued to vote in favor of independence, rebuffing Leopold and the Triple Alliance's offers and preparing for war against imperial troops.

Ultimately, all three parties acknowledged Belgian unity. Leopold, in his declarations, called on his Belgian subjects to return to the fold of his domain, speaking to them as a collective rather than as citizens of Brabant, Hainaut, or Flanders—a call that he could have issued as sovereign to each separate province. The Triple Alliance equally called on the *Belges* to negotiate with their rightful sovereign; and, in promising their constitutions and privileges would remain intact, Britain, Prussia, and the United Provinces tacitly approved the political characteristics the Belgians saw as indicative of their irrevocable nationhood. Their charters and customs were more than simple traditions, as they had morphed into the political elements of early nationalism, “linked to demands for political self-government and communal regeneration in the name of ‘the nation.’”<sup>8</sup> Such strong attachment to self-government through established institutions is a clear example of Eric Hobsbawm’s “proto-nationalist” elements of “former statehood and the concept of a political ‘historical nation’.”<sup>9</sup> The maritime powers, in recognizing the importance of these self-governing institutions and the integrity of the Belgian provinces, lent legitimacy to the burgeoning nationalism they embodied.

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<sup>8</sup> Zimmer, *Nationalism in Europe*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> As explained by Zimmer, *Nationalism in Europe*, 25.

For the Belgians, the story of the revolution's denouement was more complex, though simultaneously, just as with their domestic squabbling, all factions maintained their notion of a national identity in the face of international pressures to return to Austrian rule. As their revolution disintegrated around them, they remained true to their collective nationalism in responding to the changing wills of the Triple Alliance. As Van Eupen and members of the Estates were fashioning United States of Belgium, the Belgians had been negotiating for international recognition. J.J. Torfs had been sent as envoy to Paris, Van der Noot corresponded with Lafayette, and both he and Van Eupen wrote often to officials of the Triple Alliance. There were also royalists in the provinces, though they seem to have kept quiet over the course of 1790.<sup>10</sup> Some of the revolutionaries, notably the democratic Vonckists in exile in France, recognized the value of negotiating and returning to the Empire. The Comte de la Marck especially saw the direction things would take, and counseled those around Jan Frans Vonck in Lille to obtain a seat at the negotiating table as soon as possible. What they hoped to achieve was the continued existence of a Belgian nation within the broader scope of the Empire, essentially consolidating the provincial unity accelerated by the revolution into a stronger single identity within the larger whole. Some even hoped they would be able to extract some of their democratic constitutional reforms from the much more yielding, constitutionalist Leopold.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See previous chapter. Peter Illing posits that most of them probably joined the Vonckists until November 1790, when they welcomed back the Austrians.

<sup>11</sup> In his history of the Habsburg Empire, C.A. Macartney writes of Leopold: "Perhaps alone of all the Habsburgs who ever reigned, he was a genuine constitutionalist." C.A. Macartney, *The Habsburg Empire 1790-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969,1971), 134.

On the other hand, the Congress and Estates General continued to ignore hints of changing tides in favor of the most optimistic reports. At no point did they disavow the nation. Rather, they insisted even more on its importance, invoking the character of the Belgians in refusing to give up their independence and bow to Austrian will, and neatly illustrating Zimmer's belief that "late eighteenth-century patriots, with their preoccupation with 'national character', offer the first elaborate manifestation of a nationalist discourse that combined cultural and political concerns."<sup>12</sup> In focusing on the nation and its importance, obstinately refusing to go beyond the patriotic cry of "independence or death," the Estates and conservative central government believed that they were upholding the nation and its will, strengthening the Belgian state and its position amid Europe's other powers. Not until Austrian troops retook the provinces, and the conservative revolutionaries had no base from which to parlay, would they see their mistake.

#### AUSTRIAN RHETORIC AND GENEROSITY

Outside recognition of a people as collectively distinct becomes more complex when that collective falls within an empire. Empires are naturally made up of disparate groups, brought together under the care of a single sovereign. The Southern Netherlands had been recognized as a separate entity from the moment they were incorporated into the Austrian Habsburg holdings, as indicated by Maria Theresa's famous comment to Joseph that nothing needed changing in the "only happy province."<sup>13</sup> Both monarchs had referred to the "*Provinces Beligues*"—though infrequently—speaking to the collectivity of the provinces as well as the

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<sup>12</sup> Zimmer, *Nationalism in Europe*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 1.

singular identity of their inhabitants. Most superficially, the term was a quick and easy way to refer to the provinces collectively, but it betrayed another, more nuanced utility.

While the Habsburg family's use of *Provinces Beligues* did not create a Belgian nationality, nor did its use equate to the recognition of an independent people, it was an important element in the unintentional fostering of a Belgian consciousness. Labels and names are important, as the way something is identified conveys meaning about how it is perceived. Most often, the Habsburgs referred to the Southern Netherlands as just that—the *Pays-Bas*—when they meant to indicate the provinces as a whole. This made sense given the traditional autonomy of the provinces and their transfer to the Austrians as a unit.<sup>14</sup> That they would sometimes, though seldomly, refer to the *Provinces Beligues* added an element of cultural identity in line with the kind of consciousness being solidified by the Belgians themselves during the revolution. By 1790, especially during the summer and fall, Austrian diplomats, the Chancellor Prince Kaunitz, and the new Emperor Leopold referred more frequently to the *peuple Belge* in the Southern Netherlands, though importantly this did not signify recognition of any right to rebel and leave the Empire.

In a rejoinder to a Dutch communiqué suggesting parameters for the negotiations between Vienna and Brussels in June 1790, Chancellor Kaunitz outlined in no uncertain terms how the Emperor intended to approach his Belgian subjects. First and foremost, there was no doubt that these were “rebels” with whom Vienna

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 1.

could never negotiate “*puissance à puissance*.”<sup>15</sup> Secondly, it seemed the Belgians were so obstinate they would leave the Emperor no choice but to use arms against them. As such, the Emperor wanted his commander “le *maréchal* Bender not to cease to take any advantages over the rebels that circumstances might permit.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the Dutch suggestions seemed to favor prolonging the negotiations, something which Vienna was disinclined to encourage. Finally, Kaunitz rather waspishly pointed out that rebels who could so easily accept peace and have their constitutions and tranquility “under the guarantee of the maritime powers and perfect amnesty for the past [entirely assured], do not need an armistice.”<sup>17</sup> The Estates General of the United Provinces responded in mid-July that their only intention was a peaceful resolution to the Belgian troubles. Of course, they had never meant to suggest that Leopold negotiate with the Belgians as powers on equal footing. They were only trying to create a base from which a more general peace could be built.

Bridging the tumultuous transition between Joseph II and Leopold II were the Governors-General to the provinces, their sister Maria Christina and her husband Albert. These two were arguably the members of the Habsburg family most closely tied to the provinces. They had received and replied to most of the *remonstrances* and *représentations* sent in the first years of the resistance. Usually, these were sent by one of the provincial Estates, and the Governors responded with reference to only that province and its grievances. Sometimes they would mention the “*Peuple*” or the “*Nation*,” meaning either the population of the individual province they were addressing or the collective, apoliticized population of the provinces in general.

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<sup>15</sup> “Réponse de la cour de Vienne au mémoire qui précède,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 274.

<sup>16</sup> Footnote to “Mémoire remis au prince de Kaunitz, par le baron de Haesten, ministre de Hollande à la cour de Vienne: juin 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 270.

<sup>17</sup> “Réponse de la cour de Vienne au mémoire qui précède,” 274.

However, they occasionally referred to “*sujets Belghiques*” or “*provinces Belghiques*,” terms that are significant for their use of an extraneous adjective. They were, after all, titularly the *Gouverneurs-Généraux* to the *Pays-Bas* as a unit—they could simply have mentioned their or the Emperor’s *sujets* without ambiguity. Without overstating the case—the main motivation for such appellations was no doubt convenience—the Governors-General were admitting to the Belghinness of their Low Country subjects, even if they wanted nothing more than their continued cooperation within the Empire. However, such unofficial acknowledgement of a nation could not ensure goodwill between the provinces and the Governors-General after 1789. According to Cobenzl, who did not anticipate concessions but had at least expected responses, the Estates of Hainaut officially resolved in their assembly to not even open a letter Maria Christina and Albert sent to the provinces on 10 January 1790.<sup>18</sup> The creation of the United States of Belgium had solidified independence and the provinces’ determination to continue without a monarch.

With Joseph’s death, however, came new opportunity, as the next Emperor could change tack and try to negotiate afresh. Within ten days of his brother’s death, Leopold issued a declaration to the provinces in the hope of reintegrating them within the Empire.<sup>19</sup> While there was nothing to suggest that Leopold recognized a fully-fledged, independent nation in his writing, this was further confirmation that even those who governed the provinces saw their unity as integral to their identity. While Britain and the United Provinces could speak of “Belghians,” they were loath to recognize any form of legitimate political power. The new Emperor seemed perhaps

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<sup>18</sup> Cobenzl writing to Kaunitz 20 January, as discussed in footnote 3 to “Governors-General to the Estates of Brabant,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 112.

<sup>19</sup> Polasky characterizes Leopold’s actions as a “major drive to regain the provinces.” *Revolution*, 154.

more willing to admit Belgian political agency, so long as it was part of and contributed to his Empire. Leopold sent his declaration through the Governors-General, who forwarded it to Cobenzl and the various Estates with accompanying letters.

The declaration, dated 2 March 1790 and written in a paternal tone, offered more than a return to the days before Leopold's brother, but rather to the peace and tranquility of their mother, whom the Belgians professed to love and respect so much.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, Leopold first and foremost denied any involvement "neither directly, nor indirectly," in Joseph's projects.<sup>21</sup> Quite the opposite was true, he assured his Belgian audience. He had "constantly disapproved" of many of the measures, and especially of the direct infractions of the *Joyeuse Entrée* and the other codified provincial prerogatives. In an attempt to elicit goodwill through flattery, Leopold followed the list of all his brother's innovations to which he objected with an avowal that "he [Leopold] considered and has considered the *Pays-Bas* as one of the most respectable and most interesting parts of the provinces of the House of Austria his entire life."<sup>22</sup> As proof, he further insisted that he regarded the Belgian constitution as a model for his other holdings, something he claimed to have told his mother in 1779.

Primarily, of course, the new Emperor was entreating the provinces to return to his sovereignty, which he fundamentally saw, and had to see, as a birthright. He was their legitimate sovereign; to not act as such would be a discredit not only to

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<sup>20</sup> Outside D'Outrepoint's "*Qu'allons-nous devenir?*" few authors condemned Maria Theresa's reign. Most mentions of the Emperor's mother were instead overly positive, condemning Joseph for letting down his benevolent and wise mother who had helped the provinces flourish by following their own devices.

<sup>21</sup> "Déclaration du Roi Léopold, mentionné dans la lettre qui précède," in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 130.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.



himself but to “his children and successors.”<sup>23</sup> Leopold’s sole desire, according to his declaration’s preamble, was “to reunite sincerely and to act in concert with the respectable *États des Pays-Bas*.”<sup>24</sup> His use of language here is interesting. Leopold acknowledged the Southern Netherlands’ collective identity without denying their plurality, yet he equally remained ambiguous about their political status. Leopold’s appellation was most likely a reference to the provincial Estates. Yet the new Emperor’s remark about a single constitution for the provinces and his use of the singular indefinite article when referring to them within the Empire denotes a collectivity inappropriate to a host of provincial governments all equally, individually important. Leopold thus tacitly admitted that, to a degree, the Belgian people did possess a political voice, and that it spoke as one, not as Brabanters and Hainuyers separately.

With this willingness to concede Belgian political agency and identity, Leopold offered a series of profound proposals. In his March declaration, the new emperor laid out a plan based on an enumerated series of fundamental assumptions, which assured his audience he would make no governmental changes. Since the sovereign was “recognized and established by [the people], he must and can only reign by law, and conforming to the fundamental constitutions of the country.”<sup>25</sup> These “principles and maxims” were exactly what the Belgians had agitated to protect, and it was clear that Leopold’s declaration sought to win the revolutionaries over by articulating the theories of government they had championed in the run-up to armed revolt. What was more, Leopold buttressed these political presuppositions

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

with a concrete program of action. In return for their acceptance of his sovereignty, Leopold was willing to offer “full confirmation of the *Joyeuse Entrée* and of all the particular privileges of each province.” Moreover, and most importantly he would grant them “a general amnesty, complete and plenary, for all the past, promising that no one could be found, harassed or molested in any fashion, directly, or indirectly, for any of the past affairs.”<sup>26</sup> Though not unprecedented, and in some ways a prerequisite in negotiating peace, such a blanket amnesty—combined with a complete reversal of all his brother’s progressive policies—was a fairly radical offer from the new Emperor.

Amnesty was not Leopold’s sole concession. Indeed, his declaration gave the Belgians two pages of compromises. Among other things, these emphasized his support and respect for the Estates in several arenas, including with regard to the military stationed in the provinces, and their right to consent to a number of new measures. The new Emperor also placed ecclesiastical power firmly back in the hands of Belgian bishops, encapsulated in a national synod and abandonment of the controversial general seminary.<sup>27</sup> He also reinforced provisions guaranteeing certain key positions would be filled by “native” Belgians and cemented the Estates’ role in nominating viable candidates. This answered Belgian grievances against Joseph II directly, but it also touched upon an intriguing element of a growing national consciousness. The French Revolution is often seen as the origin of nationalism in that its participants, especially the more radical Jacobins “embarked on a crusade whose aim was the separation of true citizens from foreigners whose loyalty to the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Interestingly, an imperial agent at The Hague commented that some who heard the declaration there “criticized the word *amnesty*” in favor of “*pardon*” (“*oubli*”), implying a less legal meaning of generally treating the revolt as “water under the bridge.”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 133-4.

revolutionary cause they doubted.”<sup>28</sup> Nineteenth-century nationalism is generally seen as engaging in alienation of foreigner “thems” in the creation of a strong national “us.” Though this kind of political, nationalistic reasoning was not the driving factor behind the calls for “natives” to make up the government’s bureaucracy in the provinces, this continued recognition of Belgians and non-Belgians reinforced the national consciousness growing throughout the revolution.

Leopold even gave up several traditional royal prerogatives. For example, the Estates General, were this declaration to be accepted, would no longer need permission to convoke, and provincial councils could take the advice of their Estates before publishing any new law. In the case of a disagreement, “the king [would] remain without force and suspended until the affair came before the Estates General.”<sup>29</sup> No doubt, multiple provisions in the declaration were crafted specifically in response to the revolution. Giving the Estates so much control over implementation of new laws dovetailed with a provision that the Estates General could oppose offensive proposals as many times as they wished, and another which stipulated *représentations* and complaints could be sent directly to Leopold “without being obliged to wait for permission from the government, and without passing through the channel of ministers, nor even the governors-general.”<sup>30</sup> In explicitly recognizing the methods employed in the 1787 resistance, Leopold revalidated legal resistance to the sovereign, firmly reestablishing a contractual relationship between ruler and ruled. In so doing, he no doubt hoped to create an atmosphere in which

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<sup>28</sup> Scales and Zimmer, “Introduction,” 23. For a more detailed explanation, see Michael Rapport’s *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France*.

<sup>29</sup> “Déclaration du Roi Léopold,” 134.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

revolution would never again be justified; if approved channels of communication had not been only written into the contract between the Emperor and the Southern Netherlands but openly acknowledged and encouraged, Joseph would never have had an open rebellion on his hands.

The March declaration was generally ill-received in the provinces, as they were focused, on the one hand, on their independence experiment and, on the other hand, were embroiled in the democratic-conservative clashes augmented by the unrest in the army. There was some support for the declaration and its generosity, but, given the merciless atmosphere created by the Estates' arrests of all those perceived to be too democratic or to be royalists of any stripe, it did not go far. An anonymous pamphlet entitled "*L'Amie du Prince et de la Nation*" exemplified the situation, as it was intended to garner support for Leopold's offer but could not risk publication until 1791. The editor's note to its public edition described the timidity of the author, and how he ultimately only disseminated limited copies.<sup>31</sup> In the early twentieth century, Gachard expressed astonishment at the concessions in the Emperor's proposal, though in them he also saw more clearly why many in the provinces deemed the plan insincere when they received it. Numerous pamphlets written at the time mentioned the offer, but went into little detail, expressing a fair amount of distrust and disregard for the Emperor's proposal. Leopold, Gachard felt, "stripped [the royal power] of all its prerogatives"—what society could genuinely believe a monarch would willingly give up so much?<sup>32</sup> Eventually even Leopold recognized the radical nature of what he had offered; in early May he rescinded the

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<sup>31</sup> "Note de l'Editeur," to "*L'Ami du Prince et de la Nation, ou Dissertation sur neuf Principes fondamentaux communs aux Constitutions des différentes Provinces Belgiques. Ouvrage traduit du Flamand. 1791,*" in *Varia sur la revolution Brabançonne*, KU Leuven, Maurits Sabbebiblioteek, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Commentary in footnote 1 of "*Déclaration du Roi Léopold,*" 135.

declaration in favor of a straightforward re-establishment of the old constitutions in each province.<sup>33</sup>

Leopold's change of mind, however, was not entirely made clear to the Belgians. On 14 October, the Emperor sent a new declaration to the provinces to clarify what exactly they could expect from their sovereign when they returned to his domain. Unlike the rescinded March declaration, this time the Emperor was much less generous. Leopold maintained his hereditary right to the provinces, as he had earlier, but he muted his condemnation of his brother's policies as he solicited the people's love and respect. For one thing, the new Emperor now employed the Congress of Reichenbach and the show of support he had received from the Triple Alliance. The other powers were guarantors of the provinces' position, and had signed agreements that they be returned to his empire, and Leopold used this to strengthen his argument to the Belgians that they were his subjects. The theoretical need for outside recognition of a nation cut two ways. If outside perception could shape a nation in the positive when foreigners accepted a given people's identity, it could similarly contribute to the rejection of a unifying national identity. On the one hand, Leopold legitimated the Belgian people as an entity and acknowledged other foreign recognition of their position; on the other hand, in referencing the guaranteeing powers' support for his ownership of the provinces, Leopold nullified their independent existence.

Though he still espoused the basic principle that a sovereign garners his power from the genuine love and happiness of his people, the tone of this second declaration was much more direct than the first concession. Leopold promised to

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<sup>33</sup> Footnote 1 of "Déclaration du Roi Léopold," 135.

uphold the traditional inaugural oaths, “to respectfully govern each of [his] Belgian provinces under the direction of their constitutions, charters and privileges that were in effect during the reign of the late H.M. the Empress Maria Theresa.”<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, Leopold included a clause that, after the troubles had settled down and his inauguration had been planned, he would take any demands or requests into serious consideration, in concert with the Estates, so long as they did not explicitly go against the constitutions. Such language encouraged the sidelined Vonckists who saw an opportunity for negotiation in Leopold that had not seemed possible with Joseph.<sup>35</sup>

Prince Kaunitz, still chancellor in Vienna, updated the imperial agents and kept the maritime powers abreast of Leopold’s ideas. Kaunitz emphasized to his agents that solving the Belgian question was a European problem, not just an imperial one. In early June, writing to the Baron de Buol, diplomat and *chargé d’affaires* at The Hague, the Chancellor reminded him that “the return of the Belgian provinces to the authority of their legitimate sovereign . . . must interest all the powers of Europe today, and especially the neighbors of the Low Countries, given the extreme danger of an example as disastrous for public repose.”<sup>36</sup> Austria would do all it could to rein in the chaos of the revolution if it successfully regained the provinces. In April, the Baron de Feltz, sent to Holland as envoy by Cobenzl in

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<sup>34</sup> “Déclaration de l’empereur Léopold, contenant ses intentions par rapport aux provinces belgiques: 14 octobre 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 379.

<sup>35</sup> For a good discussion on the various democratic responses to Leopold’s ascension and attitude, see Polasky, *Revolution*, 176-179.

<sup>36</sup> “Substance de deux dépêche adressées, de Vienne, le 13 juin 1790, par le prince de Kaunitz, chancelier de cour et d’état, au baron de Buol, chargé d’affaires à La Haye, pour lui servir de direction dans ses insinuations verbales,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 269.

February 1790, encouragingly reported that Britain and the Dutch Republic were “far from wanting to recognize the independence” of the United States of Belgium.

To the powers of the Triple Alliance, the Emperor made clear that the Belgians could look forward to a return to the status quo before the troubles; Leopold would fulfill treaty obligations in upholding the provincial constitutions and privileges. British and Dutch diplomats especially insisted on these commitments. During and after the negotiations at Reichenbach concerning the provinces, Leopold’s diplomats and Kaunitz repeatedly agreed with the maritime powers that the Emperor would accord the Belgians “a general amnesty, as well as . . . several other concessions which would not essentially alter the constitution such as it had been at the beginning of the past regime.”<sup>37</sup> In return, the allied powers agreed to refrain from recognizing Belgian independence, though they would continue to give vague assurances to the “insurgents.”<sup>38</sup>

The October declaration was chiefly meant to persuade the Belgians to voluntarily and peacefully return to the Austrian empire. Aside from the amnesty and general provisions Leopold outlined in the document, he “formally and separately invited the Estates of the different provinces” to discuss his offer and recognize his sovereignty. He urged them to disregard their “unconstitutional and illegal union” and return to his protection, which he assured his subjects they would receive in case

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<sup>37</sup> “Observations des plénipotentiaires autrichiens sur la déclaration qui précède,” in Gachard, *Documens*, 283.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, “Rapport adressé à l’archiduchesse Marie-Christine et au duc Albert, par le baron de Feltz, sur un entretien qu’il a eu avec l’ambassadeur d’Angleterre à la Haye,” in Gachard, *Documens*, 259-266; “Rapport du varon de Feltz au gouverneurs-généraux, leur rendant compte de ce qu’il a appris sur les dispositions de l’Angleterre: 14 avril 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens*, 267-268; and “Resultat des communications diplomatiques faites au Congrès renforcé, approuvé par cette assemblée, pour être rendu public, le 28 août 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 306-309, especially footnote p.308.

of any molestation from the other provinces.<sup>39</sup> As added incentive, he reminded his subjects that he had sent an army thirty thousand strong towards them, though it had the strictest orders to maintain decorum and propriety if the Belgians met his firm deadline of acquiescence by the 21st of November. With an assertive reminder that any who persisted in rebelling would receive no amnesty, and specifics regarding his agents at The Hague, Leopold signed his declaration. It was now up to the Belgians to respond, whether directly or through the maritime powers.

#### EUROPEAN DIPLOMACY

Further afield, the Triple Alliance was heartened by Leopold's actions. The Dutch, British, and Prussian governments had been keeping a close eye on developments in the provinces, each with their own motivations. The Dutch especially had been involved, as their Grand Pensionary, Van de Spiegel, had counseled Van der Noot in his initial exile from the provinces in 1788.<sup>40</sup> As the Belgians declared independence and made arrangements to discuss the creation of a new central government, the Alliance signed their loose treaty in Berlin on 10 January 1790, in which they mutually agreed not to meddle unnecessarily in affairs concerning the Southern Netherlands.<sup>41</sup> They equally agreed that in the event that the Belgians did become independent, with no further glimmer of reconciliation with Austria, and formed a new state, the Alliance members would confer anew as to whether the circumstances merited their recognition of this state.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "Déclaration de l'empereur Léopold . . . 14 octobre 1790," 382.

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>41</sup> According to Gachard, the treaty "was never officially published." Footnote, Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 253.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.



Such provisions characterized the negotiations not only at the July Congress of Reichenbach and later diplomacy at The Hague in the fall, but colored the European powers' attitude toward the provinces as power transitioned to the new Emperor. In a report at the end of March to Maria Christina and Albert, the imperial agent the Baron de Feltz expressed the necessity of keeping the provincial traditions intact. He had had a meeting with the new British minister, Lord Auckland, who had insisted, "in the most energetic terms, in disregarding the other allied powers, that the unchangeable system of the King and minister of [Britain] was that the Low Countries had to remain under the domination of the house of Austria, but with the complete conservation of their constitution and their privileges, in such a way that the sovereign can never deploy a force there capable of worrying the neighboring powers."<sup>43</sup> The topic came up several more times during their interview, so that de Feltz reiterated Britain's stipulation that the constitutions be upheld multiple times to the Archduchess and Duke.<sup>44</sup>

While the Prussians gave the Belgians far-reaching support and promises of concrete aid, the British held them at arm's length, and the Dutch vacillated between shows of support and evasive posturing. Together, the three powers lobbied, as Auckland had in his meeting with the Baron de Feltz, for the provinces' traditions and constitutions as well as their national integrity. Though the act of referring to the *Belgians* as such does not in itself create a national state, the fact that Dutch, Prussian, and British diplomats consistently upheld the unified identity of a Belgian

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<sup>43</sup> "Rapport adressé à l'archiduchesse Marie-Christine et au duc Albert, par le baron de Feltz, sur un entretien qu'il a eu avec l'ambassadeur d'Angleterre à la Haye," in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 261.

<sup>44</sup> This was largely due to self-interestedness on the part of the British, who did not want to see a more democratic or republican state act as the barrier "between the different continental states in that part of Europe." "Rapport adressé à l'archiduchesse," in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 262.

people indicated a basic acknowledgement of their existence as such. As with the Habsburgs' willingness to see a Belgian people in the provinces, the foreign recognition of this—and of their right to keep their own constitutions and, by extension, to maintain some form of self-governance—could only reinforce the growing perception within the provinces that they were a people apart, worthy of a state of their own. That the Triple Alliance unwaveringly insisted on Austrian recognition of the provincial privileges and charters was a further demonstration of this identity. An independent Belgium was not what the Triple Alliance powers wanted by any means, as their refusal to formally recognize the United States of Belgium showed, but their acceptance helped, and certainly could not damage, national sentiments growing in the provinces.

When the European powers gathered in Reichenbach, a small town not far from where Prussia's Frederick William II had his headquarters, the situation in Belgium was far from the only item on the agenda. Representatives from Prussia, Poland, the Austrian Empire, Britain, and the United Provinces were there to settle several issues, chiefly the continuing conflict with Turkey in the East and the growing tension between Austria and Prussia. Negotiations began in June, and on the 26th and 27th of July 1790, the parties finally issued declarations that stipulated peace between the Austrians and Ottomans and various concessions between Leopold and Frederick William, including that Austria could neither overtly nor clandestinely support any Russian campaign against the Ottomans. Among these, Britain and the United Provinces guaranteed a declaration approving the Belgian provinces' return to the Austrian Empire with the proviso that their constitutions and privileges be restored and upheld by Leopold.

The imperial response was mostly positive, though Chancellor Kaunitz emphasized the need to rein in the provinces and their unrealistic independence scheme. Austria had ceded no ground regarding the troops marching toward the Low Countries. In a *dépêche* to his diplomats at The Hague and London, Kaunitz explained that the Emperor was compelled to use arms against his rebel subjects in order to buttress diplomatic means, especially considering Belgian obstinacy thus far. In fact, the Austrian diplomat reminded his fellow powers through his agents that “the general spirit of insubordination” was sweeping through Europe at an alarming pace, making it “more dangerous than ever to relax the fundamental principles of government.”<sup>45</sup>

In their negotiations, the European powers maintained the integrity of the Belgian provinces as a whole. The powers referred to the provinces mostly as the Low Countries, with the Austrian plenipotentiary minister, Count Hertzberg, adding the adjective “Austrian.” The guarantee signed by the Dutch and British ministers, however, referred to the “*déclaration pour les Belges*” and stipulated that they gave Leopold full support in regaining the provinces.<sup>46</sup> It was interesting that they used the term *Belges* rather than a more political appellation such as the *Provinces Beligues*, indicating an acknowledgement of the Belgians as a definitive people. The unity of those who lived in the various provinces that made up the southern Low Countries

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<sup>45</sup> “Extrait d’un *dépêche* du prince de Kaunitz, chancelier de cour et d’état, au comte de Reweizky, ambassadeur de la cour de Vienne à Londres, et au baron de Buol, chargé d’affaires de la même cour à La Haye,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 288.

<sup>46</sup> “Déclaration du comte de Hertzberg, remise aux plénipotentiaires autrichiens le 27 juillet 1790,” “Observations des plénipotentiaires autrichiens sur la déclaration qui précède,” and “Acte de garantie éventuelle des deux puissances maritimes: 27 juillet 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 282-285.

was an important component to a Belgian identity that upstaged, or competed with, provincial identities.

Over the course of their negotiations, the Triple Alliance ministers had tried, or had at least paid lip service, to support the *nation belge* as best they could, and it was clear from their language that they conceived of the provinces as an important, cohesive entity. In their earlier communiqués, the ministers spoke of the Low Countries as much as the Belgian provinces, but in their letter to de Mercy on November twentieth the ministers expressed concern for the *Belges* and the *nation belge* only. This shift from political to more ephemeral cultural concerns speaks to the dual nature of the national identity blossoming in the Belgian provinces at the time. Nationalism can be separate from a nation and both encapsulate the political as much as the cultural aspects of society. Nationalism studies has fostered debate over the political nature of the nation and nationalism, and there is sound theory behind the idea of a nation without a state. A nation can be a group of people brought together culturally and politically and they need not necessarily belong to an independent, self-contained political entity.<sup>47</sup> The Triple Alliance, while unwilling—and in many ways unable—to recognize an independent Belgian state, could recognize the Belgian people as such, and this was an important development in the broader context of a Belgian national consciousness.

Such support for a Belgian identity continued throughout the negotiations between the maritime powers, Vienna, and the Belgians themselves later in the year. In September 1790, the Triple Alliance powers—Britain and the United Provinces were most active—began dialoguing more closely with the Belgian Congress and its

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<sup>47</sup> See thesis introduction for full discussion.

plenipotentiary ministers in an effort to secure the armistice that they knew would eventually lead to Austrian repossession of the provinces. Though the European powers were rather disingenuous with the revolutionaries—as late as mid-November they had some Belgian Congressmen believing they could obtain Leopold’s original March provisos, which he had since significantly pared down<sup>48</sup>—as the fall progressed, they were obliged to disclose more and more about the reality of the situation as the Belgians refused to concede, due in part to the false hopes they continued to nurture for Leopold’s most generous concessions or even full recognition of their independence.

By the end of October, with the 21 November deadline nearing and the Emperor’s new declaration arriving in the provinces, the mediating powers expressed shock at the Belgians’ refusal to accept Austrian terms. In an official declaration jointly sent to the Belgian minister at The Hague, Britain, Prussia, and the United Provinces pleaded with the provinces to follow their advice. The ministers were pained to see the Belgians distrust them, vowing that they had nothing but Belgian interests at heart. All that was needed, they insisted, was a restoration of the old constitutions, which the Triple Alliance used as the primary argument for returning to Austrian sovereignty. They pointed out that the traditional system, upon which the Congress insisted so vehemently, naturally led the provinces back to a monarchy. The declaration warned the Belgians that this was their third and final recommendation, as there were only three weeks left before the Emperor’s deadline. In the event that the Belgians did not act quickly enough, the ministers informed

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<sup>48</sup> Referenced in “Extraits des rapports adressés par les députés du Hainaut à leurs commettans, sur les délibérations des États-Généraux du 14 au 17 novembre 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 394.

them bluntly, “those who, by their obstinacy, would be the cause of misfortunes to which the nation would unfailingly become the victim, would be responsible.”<sup>49</sup> Essentially, the mediators could do nothing but wash their hands of the situation and watch the Belgians undermine their own nation’s welfare.

As November ended and time ran out, the Triple Alliance ministers were at their wits’ end, both with the Belgians and then with Leopold’s agent the Comte de Mercy. On the twentieth, the ministers sent the Congressional deputies at The Hague a candid note of exasperation, informing them that time had expired and they could no longer guarantee the Belgians’ security. The Belgians had no choice, the ministers reminded them, but to accept Leopold’s offer or suffer the full wrath of his troops at their gates. Simultaneously, they sent an urgent letter to de Mercy asking for a little more time, since the Congress was finally beginning to cooperate somewhat, having sent deputies to The Hague. While they understood his and his sovereign’s frustration, they were confident the *Belges* were finally being persuaded.<sup>50</sup> In the end, the Belgians waited too long. Though the ministers at The Hague berated the Comte de Mercy for his inflexibility, ultimately they could do little but watch the imperial troops invade.

#### BELGIAN REACTIONS: INACTION, OBSTINACY, AND DEFEAT

Among the Belgians, reactions to Leopold’s offers were mixed. The government had no intention of giving up its power and sovereignty, certainly not

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<sup>49</sup> “Déclaration des ministres de leurs majestés les rois de la Grande-Bretagne et de Prusse, et de leurs hautes puissances les États-Généraux des Provinces-Unies, remise à M. Van Leempoel, à La Haye, le 31 octobre 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 384-385.

<sup>50</sup> “Note remise au comte de Mercy-Argenteau par les ministres des trois cours médiatrices: 20 novembre 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 405-408.

once it had experienced independence and seen the potential of a Belgian state in Europe. The Congress and Estates General, as well as the individual provincial governments, issued public responses to the negotiations at Reichenbach and, in the fall, to some of the negotiations at The Hague, from which they also published excerpts. Their internal communiqués, combined with some of the correspondence between the likes of Pierre Van Eupen and the Belgian envoys abroad, illustrated much of the turmoil within the central government in Brussels. Conversely, the democrats had little public exposure after they fled in exile in March, but the principal players' correspondence revealed a general disdain for the Congress, which led to a willingness to hear Leopold's offers. The "*L'Ami du Prince et de la Nation*" pamphlet, exemplifying clandestine royalist feelings in the provinces, berated democrats and conservatives alike for the chaos they had caused and beseeched the nation to return to the fatherly care of the Habsburgs, who would let them flourish as a *Peuple Belge* within the protection of the empire once more.<sup>51</sup> All three of these groups consistently invoked the nation, and its well being, in their considerations, displaying the all-important patriotism prevalent in the eighteenth century.

Given the atmosphere in the provinces, many of the democratic reformers—those "Vonckists" of various stripes—began to warm to the return of a monarch, specifically one like Leopold who had shown himself willing to negotiate and listen. The intransigence of Van der Noot and the traditionalists had dimmed hopes that the Belgians could responsibly rule themselves. While a few democrats were heartened by some developments within the United States of Belgium, particularly in Flanders,

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<sup>51</sup> "*L'Ami du Prince et de la Nation, ou Disseration sur neuf Principes fondamentaux communs aux Constitutions des différentes Provinces Beligiques. Ouvrage traduit du Flamand. 1791,*" in *Varia sur la revolution Brabançonne*, KU Leuven, Maurits Sabbebiblioteek, 2.

many others “were resigned to their fate” and felt “Leopold was the best remaining alternative” to traditionalist rule.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the Comte de la Marck had used almost these exact words in a letter to Vonck from Paris at the end of May.

The split among revolutionaries, and the ill feeling and distrust that came to characterize the relationship between Van der Noot’s followers and those who supported Vonck, was evident in the Prince D’Aremberg, Comte de la Marck’s letters to Vonck in the spring of 1790. An early participant in the resistance to Joseph’s reforms, the Comte had fled to Paris when armed rebellion began—choosing to transfer his household to the French capital rather than join the committees in Breda—and, initially, had offered his services to Van der Noot.<sup>53</sup> By 31 May 1790, his allegiance had clearly changed, as he wrote to Vonck in favor of reconciliation with Austria. Though the efforts of Van der Noot’s patriot forces did some justice to the name of “our brave General Van der Mersch,” given the prospect of a war between Austria and Prussia, De la Marck strongly felt that for the Belgians “there remain[ed] no other hope except to prepare an advantageous negotiation with King Leopold.”<sup>54</sup> He hoped that under the more pluralistic regime Leopold seemed partial to, the Belgians could maintain their national identity and traditions as they wished, perhaps even with some of the reforms for representation Vonck had advocated earlier in the year. Leopold would eventually disappoint the democrats in 1791, after Austria restored its authority in the provinces, but in the spring and summer of 1790, they were willing to see what he could offer the nation they had worked so hard to create and protect. The rift with Brussels was such that Vonck’s

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<sup>52</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 179.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Letter to Vonck from Le S. D’Aremberg C.t de la Marck, dated 31 May 1790 in AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belghiques Unis, 218/2.



colleagues publicly declared their preference for Leopold over the Vandernootists in power, but they accomplished little otherwise.<sup>55</sup>

Earlier, on 24 May, De la Marck had sent Vonck a letter from Paris requesting information about whether he thought majority feeling in the provinces swung towards reconciliation with the Emperor, especially given that a “shameful and odious government” still dominated the provinces. If so, De la Marck counseled, Vonck would need to send notice as soon as possible so that he could proceed with appropriate negotiations and maneuvers *vis-à-vis* the French. The letter warned, though, that if the Belgians accepted Leopold and returned to the Habsburgs, they ought to expect absolutely no help from the French.<sup>56</sup> More importantly, perhaps, the Comte insisted that Vonck be proactive, and do all he could to make sure that Van der Noot and Van Eupen would not be the only invitees to any negotiations. De la Marck offered his own services, volunteering to travel to Lille so that they could put their heads together to find the most suitable approach.<sup>57</sup>

Such support for the monarchy understandably pleased officials in Vienna, some of whom advocated working with democrats in order to more smoothly return the provinces to Austrian rule. Maria Christina, conversely, encouraged her brother to avoid entanglements with any of the revolutionaries, fearing they “would lead Leopold down the road towards a National Assembly.”<sup>58</sup> As evidenced by his October declaration, there was perhaps some truth to his, since the Emperor seemed willing to discuss some conservative reforms. Still, Leopold’s attitude had stiffened

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<sup>55</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 176-178.

<sup>56</sup> Letter to Vonck dated 24 May 1790, signed Le S.D’A.C.d.L.M. in AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belghes Unis, 218/2.

<sup>57</sup> Letter to Vonck dated 1 June 1790, signed le P. D’Aremberg C.t de la Marck in AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belghes Unis, 218/2.

<sup>58</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 179.

toward the Belgian provinces as the year wore on and his diplomatic situation regarding the other European powers improved.

Within the provinces, and certainly within Brussels, the Vonckist position created an anxious atmosphere. There were rumors that some democrats had gone to Berlin or even Vienna to negotiate directly for a return to Austrian rule. On 16 June, the Congress published its position in the debate about how to engage with Leopold. In a short declaration signed by Van Eupen for Van der Noot, the central Belgian government asserted unequivocally that the rumors of a negotiation with Leopold were nothing but the whisperings of the “ill intentioned.”<sup>59</sup> The Congressional members affirmed that they were “still firm in [their] principles, & more absolutely attached than ever to love of the Fatherland, to independence and to liberty,” and so wanted to assure the public that any such rumors were “false and calumnious, delivered by seditious traitors to the Fatherland.”<sup>60</sup> Essentially, Van der Noot and Van Eupen used the opportunity to consolidate their campaign to discredit the democrats and brand them unpatriotic while simultaneously intimidating royalist sympathizers. That the democrats wanted to return to Austria and undo the success of the revolution was the perfect rope with which to hang them. No true patriot would want to sell the nation, newly independent, back to its former tyrant.

In fact, some posited that true patriotism meant refraining from alliances with any foreign monarch whomsoever. An anonymous pamphlet published in Brussels in 1790 examined the concept of negotiating with foreign powers and whether the Belgians, in their new state, should attempt to do so. The author used thirty-one

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<sup>59</sup> “DECLARATION DU CONGRES SOUVERAIN,” 16 Juin 1790 in KBR *Révolution belge 1788-1789 – Pièces diverses*, 15.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

pages to investigate the nature of negotiations, the nature of the revolution and the provinces post-Joseph, and the utility of the various countries with whom they could negotiate. Ultimately, “*Nos Alliances*” came to the conclusion that separate treaties with each of the European powers—as opposed to one or two large treaties with leagues like the Triple Alliance—were most beneficial, but only in so much as they guaranteed sanctity of the Belgian borders and allowed trade. The Belgians had no need of pacts of mutual military allegiances. They would be, the pamphlet insisted, naturally “Allied by your services & by your virtues to all honest Peoples of the Earth whom you treasure.”<sup>61</sup> Though perhaps overly naïve, the author of “*Nos Alliances*” reinforced the strength the Belgians had come to see in themselves and the notion of a balance of power in contemporary European politics. In so doing it paralleled notions found in one of several Dutch Patriot projects, the *Leids Ontwerp*, which pled for “‘national’ reforms . . . in order to restore the Republic’s prosperity and its role among the nations.”<sup>62</sup> So long as equilibrium existed, the Belgians in the United States of Belgium, as an autonomous sovereign state with no expansionist designs to upset the status quo, could continue peacefully. Weakening the Austrian Empire was in all of Europe’s interest, and so the author felt the Belgians had nothing to fear from their neighbors so long as they remained domestically peaceful.

If the Vonckists saw negotiation as the path to securing a Belgian national space, albeit within a larger empire, and published pamphlets to that effect, the Estates and Congress saw the European negotiations as the moment to unite the provincial and central governments. In order to consolidate their power and succeed

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<sup>61</sup> “*Nos Alliances. Questions.*” Brussels: L’Imprimerie Patriotique, 1790, held at the University of Ghent library, 233 A159, 12. Punctuation original.

<sup>62</sup> Jourdan, *La Révolution batave*, 55.

in maintaining independence, Congress held several special sessions. In August, they met to discuss what they knew of the outcome in Reichenbach. In September, Congress asked for special delegates from the provinces to discuss the negotiations opening at The Hague. In mid-October they called another special session concerning the armistice proposed by the Triple Alliance, and a final session in the first two weeks of November was called to consider how to answer the Triple Alliance's October declaration in favor of Leopold's latest offer.

In their invitations to the August session, Congress drew the Estates' attention to the need for unity. "The nation, whose energy seems to dissipate, needs to be animated by attitudes that make it feel the force of its strength."<sup>63</sup> The outcome of the session meant to animate the nation was a call to arms for public distribution. Agreed on 28 August, the pamphlet called on the Belgians to unite more than ever, "as much in outer force as in inner strength."<sup>64</sup> This was not merely an internal concern. De Roode was constantly telling Van Eupen in his letters from London that the British court needed evidence of a stronger executive and national control in the country. Here Congress called for just that, so that their concern was not only morale within the provinces and their national patriotism, but equally the portrayal of such zeal to the rest of Europe.

Each of the special sessions, and the normal congressional sessions, as well as those of the Belgian Estates-General, accepted no compromise with the Austrians and insisted on nothing but complete independence and international recognition. In a letter to De Roode in the spring, the canon Van Eupen had stated unequivocally,

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<sup>63</sup> "Lettre du Congrès aux États des provinces, les réquérant d'envoyer des députés extraordinaires pour assister à une assemblée fixée au 23 août: 19 août 1790," in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 302.

<sup>64</sup> "Résultat des communications diplomatiques faites au Congrès renforcé, approuvé par cette assemblée, pour être rendu public, le 28 août 1790," in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 309.

“Whatever the case may be we will be free or we will be nothing more.”<sup>65</sup> It would appear that for the members of Congress in power, the idea of a nation without a state was no longer acceptable. The Belgians had declared independence and established a government; they deserved a state. Accordingly, at each turn, the Belgians answered the ministers at The Hague with defiance. In September, Congress sent a letter to the Triple Alliance representatives that they would prefer to remain in a state of stalemate regarding Austria and her military so long as the possibility to secure their religion and customs existed, rather than negotiating an armistice with the power that had caused their troubles.

Brussels refused to yield any ground, even to negotiate a ceasefire, despite advice to the contrary. In early October, the commanders Schoenfeld and Koehler (for the Belgian and imperial troops, respectively) strongly endorsed an armistice between the armies so that further negotiations between the provinces, Austria, and the Triple Alliance could continue. A ceasefire could be “nothing but favorable to the well-being” of the provinces, so long as its conditions were such that both sides maintained their current status.<sup>66</sup> Van der Noot and Van Eupen dismissed any compromise, however, and carried the Congress and Estates General with them. Here there was a crack in the unity that otherwise characterized the provincial representatives: in reports back to their provinces, the representatives from Tournai consistently felt the central government was acting contrary to the nation’s best

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<sup>65</sup> Van Eupen to de Roode, 6 April 1790, in *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d’Etat des Etats Belges-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belges Unis 189.

<sup>66</sup> “Avis des généraux Schoenfeld et Koehler, sur la suspension d’armes proposée par les ministres médiateurs,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 358-9, and “L’avis de Messieurs Les Généraux,” in *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d’Etat des Etats Belges-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Belges Unis 189.

interests. They reported that the plenipotentiary minister in The Hague, Dr. Van Leempoel, who had to deal directly with the Triple Alliance and imperial ministers, equally thought compromise was best. The majority of Congress, however, was drunk with patriotism and “flattered themselves of a great probability for a fast approaching change in the political system of Europe,” which would save them from even the possibility of Austrian domination.<sup>67</sup>

On 3 October, the Congress in Brussels sent a letter, which was subsequently published by a local printer, to two deputies in the *Quartier Général de l’Armée Belgique*. In it, the assembly expressed surprise at hearing that there were (once again) those in the Army who sought to “spread discouragement” in the ranks through rumors that Congress was negotiating with the “*Roi d’Hongrie*.”<sup>68</sup> With the anniversary of independence only three weeks away, the Congress intended to maintain its power. In fact, preparations for independence celebrations, to be held on the 24th of October, a year to the day of the issuance of the *Manifeste du Peuple Brabançon*, were well underway. The Congress would jointly celebrate with the Estates General as well as the war department with a mass and a *Te Deum*, presided over by the Bishop of Malines, at the Church of St. Gudule in Brussels, “for all the good turns reported that the Belgian nation ha[d] felt from the divine providence, during [their] révolution.”<sup>69</sup> The deputies had invited the Estates of Brabant as well as the provincial *conseil* and the city magistrate. The other provinces were invited

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<sup>67</sup> See, for example, “Rapport fait, le 25 octobre 1790, aux Consistoires, représentant le peuple de la ville et cité de Tournai et de ses banlieues, par les députés qui avaient assisté, en leur nom, à l’assemblée extraordinaire du Congrès tenue le 17 octobre,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 369.

<sup>68</sup> “A Messieurs le Comte de Baillet Gesves & Delrio Députés des Etats Belges Unis au Quartier Général de l’Armée Belgique,” Bruxelles, chez A.J.D. De Braeckenier, 3 Oct 1790, in KBR *Révolution Belges 1788-1789*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> “Lettre du Congrès, pour la célébration de l’anniversaire de l’indépendance: 9 octobre 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens*, 246.

and encouraged to celebrate the day as well, with all the pomp and circumstance they would normally summon for such an occasion.

On the heels of the independence celebrations, Leopold's October Declaration elicited a strong reaction from the Provinces. Written on the 14th, it did not reach the provinces until at least the first of November, though the mediating powers' ministers had already alerted them to the 21 November deadline. In Tournai, a crowd reportedly burned a copy in the main square at the foot of a liberty tree.<sup>70</sup> An anonymous author penned vitriolic responses in pamphlets from both the *Peuple Belgique* and the more narrow community of *Brabançons* within two weeks of each other. Aside from reinforcing the dual loyalties present at the community and national level, these pamphlets argued that Leopold had no right to the provinces. His brother had forever lost the Habsburgs' hereditary privileges in the provinces and Leopold overstepped his bounds in the extreme in presuming to call himself their sovereign.<sup>71</sup> The Belgians had no need for Leopold's meddling, the author said, as they had declared themselves independent. These ideas echoed those of the author of "*Nos Alliances*," who had cautioned against leaning too heavily on foreign support.

Utilizing the "chosen people" trope that often accompanies expressions of national identity and power, the response to Leopold's declaration reminded readers

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<sup>70</sup> Gachard, *Documens*, 377.

<sup>71</sup> "RÉPONSE DU PEUPLE BELGIQUE au soi-disant MANIFESTE ou DÉCLARATION de de l'empereur & roi, leopold ii, se disant *Duc de Brabant, de Limbourg, de Luxembourg, de Gueldre, &c. &c.* a la liberté. 1790." Bruxelles, 6 Novembre 1790. Signed J.J.M.T. KBR "Révolution Belge 1788-1789 - Pièces Diverses," 38, and "Reponse des brabançons au soit-disant manifeste de l'empereur et roi Leopold II, *Se qualifiant ridiculement de duc de Brabant.* Par l'auteur de la Réponse du Peuple belgique au même manifeste, en date du 6 *Novembre* 1790. A Bruxelles. 1790." 19 Novembre 1790, signed J.J.M.T. ...volontaire agrégé au Grant Serment, in *Révolution Belge 1788-1789 - Pièces Diverses*, KBR 39.

that God, too, had seen fit to help them in their cause.<sup>72</sup> Both versions of the pamphlet also maligned the Vonckists, accusing them of traitorously working with Leopold while the true Belgians fought to keep their independence. Like so many other conservatives, for the anonymous author being Belgian meant upholding all the traditions and old administrations of the provinces. Vonckiste calls to amend the constitutions or change the form of government in any way must necessarily exclude them from the national community. Ultimately, the pamphlets were a call to arms, not unlike the Congressional letters to the Estates that summer which had tried to “unite all the sentiments, all the fires and all the forces of the nation, to affirm her liberty and her happiness.”<sup>73</sup> The conservative Belgians would accept nothing but liberty or death: Pierre Van Eupen repeated the phrase in his letters to the Chevalier De Roode in London and the pamphleteer who condemned Leopold’s October declaration printed the phrase in all capital letters.

Not all representatives in the United States of Belgium were content with such an extreme stance, however. The Tournai representatives to Congress’s special session in October wrote to their constituents that they ought to be careful not to seem too extreme or obdurate to the Triple Alliance, which was inevitable if “*les Belges* [had] nothing in their mouths but the word[s] *indépendance ou mourir*, constantly refusing every conciliatory term adopted by the four powers.”<sup>74</sup> In fact, Tournai’s representatives had had doubts about how Congress and the Estates

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<sup>72</sup> Anthony Smith is particularly good on this in his article, “Culture, community and territory: the politics of ethnicity and nationalism,” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 72 no.3 Ethnicity and International Relations (July 1996): 452-453.

<sup>73</sup> “Lettre du Congrès aux États des provinces, les requérant d’envoyer des députés extraordinaires pour assister à une assemblée fixée au 23 août: 19 août 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 302.

<sup>74</sup> “Rapport fait, le 25 octobre 1790, aux Consistoires, représentant le peuple de la ville et cité de Tournai et de ses banlieues, par les députés qui avaient assisté, en leur nom, à l’assemblée extraordinaire du Congrès tenue le 17 octobre,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 371.



General were handling the situation since September, but they could not persuade the rest of the body to negotiate with the Austrians and accept the Triple Alliance's advice. Even on the ninth of November, they reported back to their Consistoires, "the number of provinces for war surpasses the other."<sup>75</sup> On the eleventh, Congress planted three new liberty trees, defiantly clinging to the symbolism of revolution against tyranny.

In the end, the situation in the provinces deteriorated quickly from the perspective of the traditionalists and conservatives, many of whom had been part of the initial resistance to Joseph II's policies. Since the Imperial forces were now at full strength, there was little the Belgians could do militarily; even if they had been united, it is unlikely they would have been able to fend off Leopold's forces marching with the tacit support of the Triple Alliance. Congress proved unable to muster new forces and the commander at Namur continued to send discouraging reports. Popular uprising like that organized by *Pro Aris et Focis* during the initial armed revolt failed to materialize, despite Van Eupen's constant promises to Congress and its envoys.<sup>76</sup> Van der Noot himself even went to Namur to inspire the national army, but met with little success.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> "Extraits des rapports adressés aux quatre Consistoires, représentant le peuple de la ville et cité de Tournai et de ses banlieues, par M. Levasseur, leur député ordinaire aux États-Généraux: 9, 11, et 12 novembre 1790," in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 389.

<sup>76</sup> For example, Van Eupen to Van der Noot, 19 September 1790, in *Correspondance de Van Eupen, secrétaire d'Etat du Congrès avec diverses personnes*, AGR, *Etats Beligiques Unis/Verenigde Nederlandse Staten* 191, and Van Eupen to De Roode, 10 September 1790, 26 October 1790, in *Lettres du Chanoine Van Eupen, Secrétaire d'Etat des Etats Beligiques-Unis au Chevalier de Roode, envoyé à Londres* AGR *Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beligiques Unis* 189.

<sup>77</sup> Polasky credited this to a realization that the democratic, grass-roots tactics were more effective. "Even to Van der Noot, [by the fall it was clear] that it had been the democrats who had supplied the tactical genius in 1789." Polasky, *Revolution*, 181. See letter to Van der Noot from Van Eupen, 11 and 19 September 1790 in *Correspondance de Van Eupen, secrétaire d'Etat du Congrès avec diverses personnes*, AGR, *Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beligiques Unis* 191, 37 and 40; and footnote by Gachard to "Rapport fait aux quatre Consistoires, représentant le peuple de la ville et cité de Tournai

In any event, the reality of the situation was clear: Leopold wanted the provinces back and had successfully negotiated ratification for such with the United Provinces, Prussia, and Britain. The Estates General vacillated, unwilling to show weakness or relinquish their independence, until the last moment had passed. Leopold's deadline of 20 November—after which date he would send in his troops—came and went before the Brussels government gave an official response. On 21 November, they proposed installing “Leopold's second son as hereditary grand duke of Belgium.”<sup>78</sup> Unimpressed, Leopold's representative at The Hague rejected the idea outright. On the 24th, the Emperor's troops invaded.

According to Gachard's account, the populace of Namur gathered strength, raiding the military arsenal for leftover arms and harassing the invading forces on the outskirts of town. The Estates of Namur were not convinced such resistance would accomplish much other than futile, and copious, bloodshed. With the support of their provincial corporate leaders, the assembly officially recognized the Emperor as sovereign. Schoenfeld ordered the Belgian army to evacuate, convinced his forces “would not hold two hours,” especially as his troops had begun already to disband. The next day Imperial troops replaced the patriot forces.<sup>79</sup>

The government in Brussels tried to maintain an air of bravado. A letter sent from the Congress to the Estates of Brabant on 27 November informed the latter of Namur's “treason,” damning the southern province to an “eternal shame [that would] cover it in the face of all nations.”<sup>80</sup> The members of Congress solemnly declared

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et de ses benlieues, par les députés qu'ils avaient envoyés au Congrès extraordinaire du 24 septembre,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 344.

<sup>78</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 181.

<sup>79</sup> Footnote to “Lettre du Congrès aux États de Brabant, concernant la capitulation de la province de Namur: 27 novembre 1790,” in Gachard, *Documens Politiques*, 251.

<sup>80</sup> “Lettre du Congrès aux États de Brabant, concernant la capitulation de la province de Namur,” 251.

that, deploring such action, they would work only for the highest good of the nation and were prepared to be “the first victims” of the effort to save the nation’s confidence.<sup>81</sup> Equally, they told the Brabantine Estates that they would keep the other provinces informed of their situation, and the respective Estates could then inform the people. The other Estates, however, were not impressed that this first letter went only to the Brabantine body. The next day, having heard the news from Namur, the Estates of Hainaut indignantly ordered their representatives in Brussels to formally complain of the blatant Brabant-centrism exhibited by the Congress, fueled by what appeared to be undue influence over the central body from the Brabant Estates. They further demanded that all future deliberations take place in the Estates General, which ought to be moved to Ghent so as to diminish such Brabantine prejudice.<sup>82</sup> Provincialism seemed to be triumphing over the recently born national spirit.

As it turned out, there was little time to quibble about provincial biases and the relationship between the central and regional governments. The representatives met in the Estates General for a final time that same day and most promptly fled to the United Provinces.<sup>83</sup> From Antwerp, where he stopped for a day or two on his way to The Hague, Canon Van Eupen sent a letter to the Estates General on 2 December. He had learned, he wrote, that his leaving had precipitated some sinister rumors and had created a negative impression. Some, he indignantly scrawled, went so far as to suggest he had sold the nation for his own good, saving himself by fleeing to the United Provinces. The opposite was true, he assured them, and he would gladly do anything they asked of him. He even offered to procure several more cannons

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>82</sup> Footnote to “Lettre du Congrès aux États de Brabant, concernant la capitulation de la province de Namur,” 252.

<sup>83</sup> Polasky, *Revolution*, 182.

through England, if the deputies so desired.<sup>84</sup> In a much more personal letter to Van der Noot written the day before, Van Eupen asked his friend what he wanted him to do, reassuring the conservative leader that they were guilty of no crime and had done nothing wrong. Indeed, if he were asked, the Canon would not hesitate to return to Brussels or anywhere “where [he] could be useful to an ungrateful country.”<sup>85</sup> Pierre Van Eupen, at least, though he protested innocence and maintained the patriotic veil before the Estates General, was not impressed by the actions of his fellow Belgians. In any case, by 3 December 1790, the Austrians once more occupied the Belgian capital.

#### CONCLUSION

The Belgian independence experiment of 1790 came to a painful end for three reasons: the European powers wanted the provinces returned to the seeming stability of Austrian rule in the face of the increasingly unnerving French revolution, the new Austrian Emperor ended war with Turkey and could focus more directly on regaining his western territories, and the Belgian revolutionaries refused practical advice while fighting too fiercely among themselves. Patriotic zeal is a powerful motivator, but in bickering amongst themselves and refusing to acknowledge reality, the politicians in Brussels doomed their project to failure. While the imperial troops reoccupied the provinces and most members of the United States of Belgium’s government fled, there was one lasting legacy: the conception of a Belgian nation

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<sup>84</sup> Letter to Estates General, 2 Xbre 1790 in *Correspondance de Van Eupen, secrétaire d’Etat du Congrès avec diverses personnes*, AGR, *Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beliques Unis* 191, “Correspondance de Pierre Van Eupen, Secrétaire d’Etat du Congrès Belgique (1787-1793),” 49.

<sup>85</sup> Letter to Van der Noot, 1 Xbre 1790, in *Correspondance de Van Eupen, secrétaire d’Etat du Congrès avec diverses personnes* AGR, *Verenigde Nederlandse Staten/Etats Beliques Unis* 191, “Correspondance de Pierre Van Eupen, Secrétaire d’Etat du Congrès Belgique (1787-1793),” 47.

made up of people from all the provinces.<sup>86</sup> Austria and the European powers even acknowledged this cohesive cultural nation, though without sanctioning any independent political elements. In the confusion that would characterize the next three years, with French and imperial troops vying for possession of the southern Low Countries, one thing was clear. *A peuple belge* lived in *La Belgique*.

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<sup>86</sup> All but Luxembourg.

## CONCLUSION

Most histories of Belgium begin at 1830, the moment of the creation of the modern independent state, often at the expense of the discussion of anything that came before. Though rightfully focused on the immediate events that precipitated the successful 1830 revolution, Jacques Logie's *1830: De la régionalisation à l'indépendance* makes no mention of 1789, even in his introductory material. Carl Strikwerda has no reference to the first revolution in his study of nineteenth-century political division. Indeed, he condenses the entire history of politics in Belgium before 1830 to two paragraphs, moving from Austrian rule to French annexation in a single sentence before briefly telling his reader, "The country owed its existence as a state only to several accidents of history."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in a 1980 article investigating the reasons for political discord in Belgium in the 1970s, Alain Genot and David Lowe include but one sentence on the state of the country before Napoleon's reign: "Until Belgium obtained independence from the Dutch, who had controlled the territory from the end of the Napoleonic period in 1815 up to 1830, the lands on which the new kingdom was founded had been in the hands of the Spanish and Austrian Empires before succumbing to the French Revolution."<sup>2</sup> For Xavier Mabille, who published *Histoire politique de la Belgique* in 1997, 1789 at least helps inform the moment of modern independence. Yet, the years from 1780 to 1830 for him represent but a "period of transition between the end of the Ancien Régime and the creation of an independent constitutional State."<sup>3</sup> Though he gives a superficial

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<sup>1</sup> Strikwerda, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Genot and David Lowe, "Belgium: a state divided," *The World Today* 36, no.6 (June 1980), 219.

<sup>3</sup> Mabille, *Histoire politique de la Belgique: Facteurs et acteurs de changement*, 3rd ed. (Brussels: CRISP, 1997), 11.

summary of the revolution and outlines its major political players, he focuses on it as a first expression of opposition politics. Mabilie frames the revolution and the 1790 independence experiment as a stepping-stone, incomplete without the industrial revolution that would come later and make possible the 1830 success.

Ultimately, it is not a surprise that 1830 gets the lion's share of the attention in histories of Belgium. It is the moment that the modern nation-state was created. Sébastien Dubois, in his 2005 study of the "invention of Belgium," sees the culmination of a Belgian identity in the independent state created from the 1830 revolt. For him, before the nineteenth century even the name *Belges* is an identity superimposed on the lower classes by a bourgeois elite.<sup>4</sup> The 1830 revolution fits rather neatly into the nineteenth-century paradigm of a people claiming independence from a dominating foreign power, precipitated by popular mass demonstrations of patriotism. In his preface to Logie's study of 1830, Jean Stengers praises the book's nods to "classic" histories of the period, as it supports the succinct proposition that in 1830 Belgians "wanted no more of the 'domination' of the Dutch."<sup>5</sup> Strikwerda summarizes the entire episode even more concisely: "Discontent with the autocratic and Protestant aspects of Dutch rule led to the successful Belgian revolution of 1830."<sup>6</sup> Yet, the 1830 revolution owed much to the earlier revolt against Joseph II as it had engendered a political unity among the provinces that fostered a Belgian identity, more than a simple recognition that they could find strength in banding together. Van der Noot, Vonck, Verlooy, Van Eupen, and their colleagues did not resist Joseph's measures so that a later generation could create a

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<sup>4</sup> Dubois, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Stengers, Preface to *1830: De la régionalisation à l'indépendance*, by Jacques Logie (Paris: Duculot, 1980), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Strikwerda, 27.

Belgian nation-state, but their revolution laid important foundations of Belgianness that would help foment unrest and uprising against the Dutch.

The failed Belgian revolution of 1787-1790 succeeded in fostering a national consciousness. The old provincial identities remained, but they were now accompanied by a distinct feeling of being “Belgian,” of being a distinct people limited to the geography of the Southern Netherlandish provinces.<sup>7</sup> Yet, they neither formed a modern nation nor did they definitively foment an inclusive nineteenth-century style nationalism. In fact, though the elites examined in this dissertation exhibited a clear national consciousness, and the patriot army raised by *Pro Aris et Focis*’ efforts indicated a certain level of popular adherence to such an idea, it is difficult to know just how widely or deeply a national vision actually penetrated in the eighteenth century. Especially given the limitations of historians’ knowledge about reception of the pamphlets published throughout the period, it is hard to judge the extent to which the public embraced Vonck, Verlooy, d’Outrepoint, Van der Hoop or Vandevelde’s invocations of a *peuple belge*. John Breuilly’s “pragmatic distinction at the level of sentiments between elite and popular,” is apt, as the Belgian consciousness examined here is largely displayed in elite discourse and “it is difficult to establish direct connections between nationalist intellectuals . . . and either popular sentiment or politics.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, it is clear that an idea of Belgianness had emerged—it was the subject of many pamphlets and heated debate—and that it endured alongside provincial identities.

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<sup>7</sup> Luxembourg, as it remained under Austrian rule throughout the independence experiment, complicates the narrative somewhat. Ultimately, historians of that country find that Luxembourgers felt themselves Belgian until the Napoleonic era. See Péporté, Kmec, Majerus, & Margue, *Inventing Luxembourg*, 149-150.

<sup>8</sup> Breuilly, “The Response to Napoleon and German Nationalism,” 259.



Though persistent provincial identities contributed to the failure of the United States of Belgium, there is little reason to insist that those overshadowed attempts at an overriding national consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Anthony Smith confirms the complexity of human self-identification in his 1993 article concerning nations and nationalism in Europe. He points out that “it is quite possible for individuals to possess more than one identity, and affiliate themselves with more than one community. . . . [F]or the most part, human beings are perfectly happy with multiple identities, including being a member of an *ethnie* or nation, and of a wider European community.”<sup>10</sup> The eighteenth-century Belgian pamphlet writers seemed comfortable with their status as both Belgian and Brabantine, Flemish, Hainuyer, or whichever province they came from. The army led by Jean Van der Mersch against the imperial troops in the fall of 1789 was not a “Brabantine” or “Flemish” army, but a Belgian one. The representatives in the Congress represented the nation as a whole, voting on decisions that affected all as well as their individual provinces.

Ultimately, 1830 and 1789 were qualitatively different revolutions. The armed uprising fomented by *Pro Aris et Focis* and led by the Breda Committee, though it precipitated an independence fueled by sincere convictions that the Belgians deserved to govern themselves, was not a version of mass nationalism that called for a people to rise up in a bid for patriotic independence. The independence *manifestes* discussed in chapter four emphasized the contractual nature of their government and how their sovereign’s dereliction of duty had pushed them to independence; they were not cries for a sovereign state precipitated by nationalistic

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<sup>9</sup> This connects back to Abigail Green’s essay “Political Institutions and Nationhood in Germany, 1750-1914.”

<sup>10</sup> Anthony D. Smith, “A Europe of Nations – or the Nation of Europe?,” 133.

feeling of being governed by a foreign ruler. Indeed, Ernest Gellner's classic supposition—that the worst offense to a nationalist is “if the rulers of the political unit belong to a nation other than that of . . . the ruled”—was not a motivating factor in the eighteenth-century Belgian revolution.<sup>11</sup> The Southern Netherlands had been a part of many different empires for centuries without such a conflict. The Belgian revolutionaries did not seem to think of either the Spanish or the subsequent Austrians as “foreigners.” In his investigations of the origins of Belgianness, Jean Stengers finds little to support the nineteenth-century claims that Belgians had long lived under foreign oppression. In comparing rhetoric from 1787—the moment of revolt against Joseph II—and 1827—the eve of revolt against the Dutch government—Stengers finds that within forty years something had shifted drastically enough for a new national myth to take hold.<sup>12</sup>

The two revolutions were fought for fundamentally different reasons. In the 1789 Belgian revolution, Stengers finds “cries and protests against the tyranny of Joseph II, but never a single cry denouncing a foreign power, a foreign tyranny.”<sup>13</sup> Under the Spanish and the Austrians, the Belgians had “conserved [their] independence wholly,” characterized by their customs, form of government, rights, privileges, constitution, and name. The Belgians did not need to see Joseph II as foreign in order for their revolution to have national undertones. Nationalism was not

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<sup>11</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1983), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Erik Ringmar, in a general investigation of nationalism, describes such a change in more general terms. The most potent reconstruction came over the course of the nineteenth century, when “the liberal demand for popular rule was soon translated into a nationalist demand for self-determination.” The growth of nationalism alongside the development and expansion of democracy—and the two became closely linked, if more in theory than in practice—eventually meant that “rule by the people came to be interpreted as ‘rule by *our* people,’ that is, rule by people *who are like us*, people of our nationality.” Judging by Stengers’ findings, the transition occurred in Belgium in the forty years between the revolutions. Erik Ringmar, “Nationalism: the idiocy of intimacy,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 49 no. 4 (Dec 1998): 534-5.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Stengers, “Le mythe des dominations étrangères dans l’historiographie belge,” 384.

their sole motivation and a modern nation-state not their primary goal. The political Belgian identity that pervaded elite, intellectual writings that came out of the revolution was a product of the unity the Estates cultivated as part of their fight against reforms.

In contrast, a young professor writing in 1827 in Brugge, too young to know the furor of the 1780s, wrote that he and his compatriots had never known national freedom.<sup>14</sup> The revolt against the Dutch occurred precisely because of this difference in national sentiment—the Belgians felt themselves quite apart from their northern neighbors by the 1810s. Stengers plucks a wonderfully illustrative quote from an 1816 pamphlet in which a Belgian addresses himself to the Dutch:

If for the past two centuries our country has not had like yours its separate existence from all other power, we have nevertheless conserved our independence wholly, our name, our customs, our form of government, our constitution, our rights and our privileges.<sup>15</sup>

The transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is obvious. On the one hand, the quotation reinforces the Belgians' ability to feel completely themselves, free and independent, under Austrian and Spanish rule. On the other, the overall argument moved in the direction of finding the Dutch "foreign," too different from the Belgians to justify the continued cohabitation of the two in the same country. With rebellion and independence over a decade away, the 1816 pamphlet already anticipated the differences that would tear William I's Netherlands apart. As Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny have noted, "Culture is more often not what people share, but what they choose to fight over."<sup>16</sup> Belgians had felt themselves

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<sup>14</sup> Discussed in Jean Stengers, "Le mythe des dominations étrangères dans l'historiographie belge," 382-383.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 392.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Oliver Zimmer, "Competing Memories of the Nation," 196.

distinct in 1787-1790, but in a way that was more elusive and still tied to their traditional, provincial privileges. The revolutionaries had taken exception to Joseph II's management of his empire. The reasons for the 1830 revolt included social conditions, the growing nineteenth-century nationalism movement, and questions of language, cultural elements that had become worth fighting over in the decades since the fall of the *ancien régime*. Importantly, the nineteenth-century revolt grew out of a feeling that the Belgians had little voice within a country largely run from Amsterdam.

This thesis denies deterministic paradigms of nationhood that require a nation to progress over time, experiencing specific stages in a certain order. Yet, the revolutionaries who successfully created Belgium in 1830 used the national consciousness cultivated in the eighteenth century to their advantage. As Stengers provocatively points out, the 1830 Belgian Revolution for independence took place precisely because there was already a national Belgian identity, cultivated by the political writings of revolutionary leaders and pamphlet writers. By definition 1830 was not the moment of national birth—"it is because they already had a clear national conscience that the Belgians rose up against the Dutch."<sup>17</sup> For Jean Stengers, 1789 marked the moment that national consciousness solidified.<sup>18</sup> This thesis has traced that consciousness through the elite arena slightly further back to the moment the provinces contested Joseph II's reforms in 1787. The eighteenth-century Belgian resistance and subsequent armed revolution together mark the moment when a Belgian national consciousness blossomed thanks to the efforts of *Pro Aris et Focis*

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Stengers, "La déconstruction de l'État-nation: Le cas Belge," 36.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

and the effects of political unity among the provinces. Without the 1780s and 1790s there could have been no 1830.

Yet this is not to put a teleological spin on the revolutions. Though the nineteenth-century revolutionaries took advantage of an extant national feeling, 1789 was not a kind of trial run for the later movement. Vonckists and Vandernootists were not preparing the way for a later nationalistic movement. They had come to see unity as power over the course of their resistance to Joseph, and their commitment to the *Etats Beligues Unis*, though flawed, was genuine. The *nation belgique* of 1789-1790 is not a Hobsbawmian “proto-nationalism” or an embryonic “ethnie” waiting for industrialization and mass politics to help it grow. Writers like Caspar Hirschi are right to try to redefine nations and nationalisms because these pre-nineteenth century movements deserve to be evaluated on their own terms. This thesis has done so with the Belgian case, showing that the national identity that emerged out of resistance and rebellion to Joseph II was legitimate, ill-defined but sincere.

Today, Belgium continues to wrestle with chronic crises of central government. Doubts about a Belgian nation exist, not because Belgium is an artificial construct but because of nineteenth and twentieth century problems and the current climate. As Janet Polasky’s 2006 essay asserts, Belgians are currently reconceptualizing their past to fit their contemporary politics, though the two have much less in common than Belgians would often like to think. As she quotes Jean Stengers, “Those who doubt the viability or even the existence of a Belgian nation

project their doubts into the past.”<sup>19</sup> The linguistic divides that underlie most, if not all, of the major divides in Belgium today were of no concern to the eighteenth-century revolutionaries. They came about, ironically, because the 1830 constitution enshrined linguistic freedom. In being given the freedom to express themselves in whichever language they chose, Belgians, Polasky’s article argues, have become, over the course of almost two centuries, too focused on language as a major component of their identity. “Remarkably,” she writes, “few Belgians today acknowledge any shared national past. They do not remember a time when ‘Belgian’ was their family name.”<sup>20</sup> Rather, Walloon and Flemish have arguably become the new “national identities” in the country. Conversely, in the midst of revolution against Joseph II, pamphleteers might not have agreed on how to define the emerging *Peuple Belgique*, but they certainly agreed it existed.

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<sup>19</sup> Polasky, “Liberal Nationalism and Modern Regional Identity,” 86.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



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“Etats de Flandres, révolution brabançonne”

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