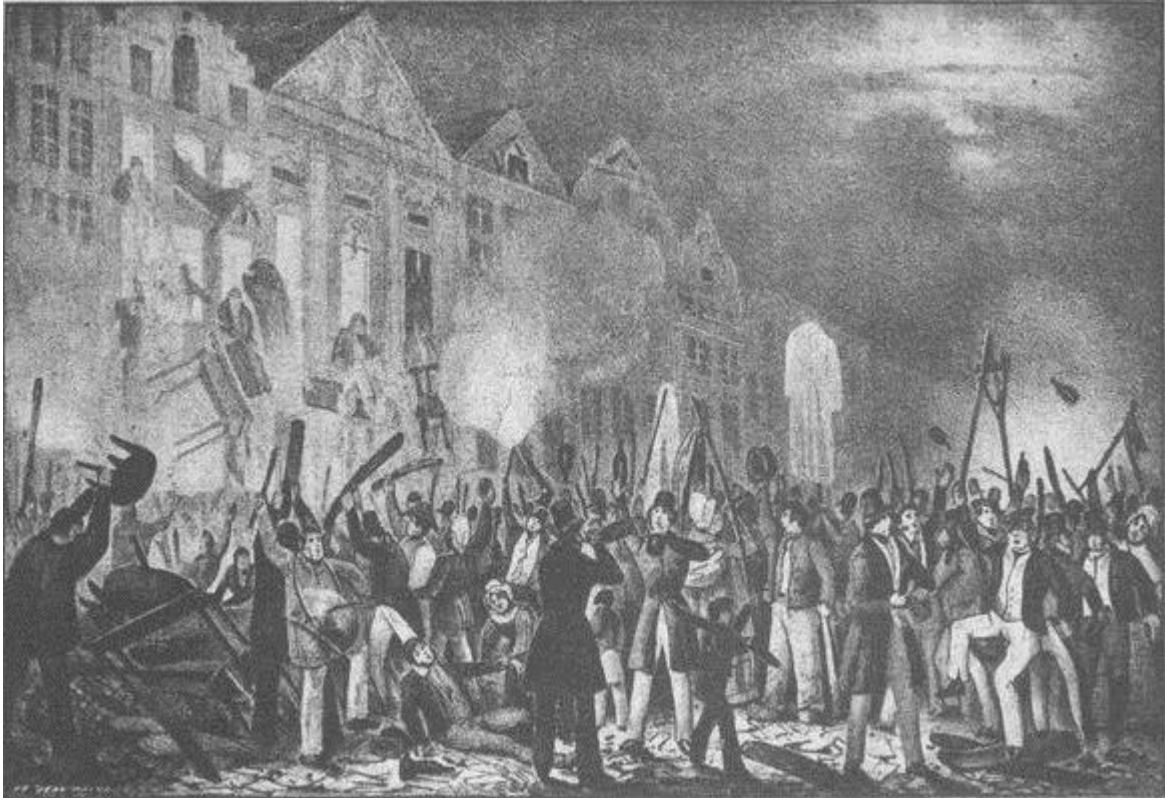


# The Belgian Coincidence

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*What launched the 1830 Belgian Independence Revolution?*



**Image A. Pillaging of the houses of the rich during the Brussels Riot.**

**Tim Wencker, 3645304**

**Lars Behrisch, OZS-III: *Revolutions in Comparison***

**02-06-2013**

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## Introduction

On the evening of 25 August 1830, the *Muntschouwburg* theatre in Brussels hosted an opera to honour the 58<sup>th</sup> birthday of the King of the United Netherlands, William I. The people of Brussels came in great numbers to enjoy *La Muette de Portici*, a patriotic French opera. Mythically, during an passage about the '*Amour sacré de la patrie*' disturbances broke out in the theatre, which in turn caused a series of events that became to be known as the 'Belgian Revolution' and eventually lead to the birth of a new independent Belgian nation. Since it is unlikely that an opera can cause a revolution, clearly some underlying causes had been present in the United Netherlands that led to Belgian separatism.

This was far from historically inevitable however. First of all, the sixteen preceding years of Orange rule had brought substantial material benefit for large parts of the southern population. William's economic policies brought prosperity to the southern industries, while access to Dutch colonial markets and major infrastructure projects had brought wealth for many. Secondly, the United Netherlands offered careers in public functions to important southern groups and enabled the majority of the population to communicate with official institutes in their native tongue. Southern nobles were treated respectfully by the new royal family and were numerous present at court. Thirdly, while religious differences might have created suspicion between catholic clergymen and their king, the reduced influence of the church in southern society was appreciated by many others. Finally, the south had no tradition of national independence, but rather one of regional autonomy. Thus, in 1829 it still would have seemed unthinkable to imagine a national, a *Belgian* Revolution just one year later. Resistance against the centralisation of power was a common phenomenon in Restoration Europe, and most certainly did not inevitably lead to separatism.

When summed up, the southern provinces of the United Netherlands seem to have accepted their fate and benefitted fairly well from Orange rule. Surely, not everyone could have been content with the new status quo, but nowhere in post-Napoleonic Europe was that the case. King William I sincerely intended to reign in accordance with both northern and southern interests. The Austrian Netherlands seemed pretty well off under their new Orange rulers, while the northern provinces benefitted from increased national markets and their renewed international influence. Not surprisingly, King William I enjoyed substantial support from important parts of the southern population.

A lot has been written on the subject overtime. Some authors have emphasized the structural contradictions between the northern and southern provinces. The incorporation of the southern provinces, with their own unique identities, economy and their catholic faith into a protestant-dominated monarchy with an own existing centuries-old national tradition is often described as a failed experiment.<sup>1</sup> Other authors create a national 'Belgian' identity in the south that supposedly had been present ever since the failed Brabant Revolt of 1790 and inevitably would lead to another

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<sup>1</sup> For some examples see: P. Rietbergen and T. Verschaffel, *Broedertwist: België en Nederland en de erfenis van 1830*, (Zwolle, 2005) and: J.L Zanden and A. van Riel. *Nederland 1780-1914: Staat instituties en economische ontwikkeling*, (Meppel, 2000)

national revolution.<sup>2</sup> These views of the United Netherlands have, not surprisingly, first been vocalized by the radical Belgian revolutionaries themselves.<sup>3</sup> Nationalist outlooks have prevailed with some modern Dutch and Belgian historians and politicians as well, downgrading the Belgian Revolt to an '*accident of history*' in order to argue for Greater-Netherlandism or Flemish-separatist movements.<sup>4</sup> Finally, recent works of Flemish historians *Els Witte* and *Jeroen Janssens* have shown that while substantial structural differences between the northern and the southern provinces existed, those differences are not enough to explain why the Belgian Revolt eventually broke out. They emphasize short-term causes that lead to the outbreak of the Brussels riot.<sup>5</sup>

It is my aim in this paper to show that the Belgian Revolt was an escalation of the Brussels Riot, which in turn was caused by several short-term grievances and certain coincidences. While I can't deny that structural differences between north and south caused long-term grievances, I aim to show that coincidences and short-term developments rather played a key role at crucial moments. The sequence of events made an escalation of a local riot possible, making the Belgian Revolt a '*coincidence of history*'.

In order to do this, I've structured this paper into two chapters. In the first, I will examine the United Kingdom of the Netherlands between 1815 and 1828, to analyze the effect that structural contradictions between north and south could have had on the outbreak and outcome of the Belgian Revolt. Secondly, I will pay attention to the outbreak and escalation of the Brussels Riot, where the role of historical coincidences and short-term developments will be examined. In addition, the process of Belgian nation-building shortly after the outbreak of the Revolt will be examined to see whether the south was an 'unified' opposite of the north.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Stengers, *Les racines de la Belgique jusqu'à la Révolution de 1830*, (Brussels, 2000) and L. Wils, '*De twee Belgische revoluties*', in: K. Deprez, L. Vos, *Nationalisme in België. Identiteiten in beweging, 1780-2000*, (Antwerp, 1999)

<sup>3</sup> M. Nothomb, *Essai historique et politique sur la révolution belge*, (Brussel, 1833)

<sup>4</sup> For some examples see: W. Somers, *Het Belgische Ongeluk - Waarom Vlaanderen niets te vieren heeft*, (Brussels, 2005) and G. Knuvelde, *Het Rampjaar 1830*, (Hilversum, 1930)

<sup>5</sup> See: E. Witte, *De Constructie van België: 1828-1847*, (Leuven, 2006) and J. Janssens, *De Helden van 1830, Feiten & Mythes*, (Ghent, 2005)

## Chapter I:

### United Kingdom of the Netherlands 1815-1828: Similarities: Union intime et complete?

The 'return' of Orange was marked by the arrival of the Prince of Orange, William VI, on the beach of Scheveningen on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, 1813. As the only surviving son of the deceased *Stadhouder* William V, William was seen as the only suitable candidate to restore Dutch sovereignty, albeit on the conditions of the Congress of Vienna. One of these conditions was that the former Republic of the Seven United Provinces was to become a monarchy under the house of Orange. A second condition was that the new-born monarchy should be subject to a constitution, which at least in theory limited the executive powers of the king. King William I was an ambitious man, who single-handedly convinced the Congress of Vienna that the annexation of the Austrian Netherlands into his new realm was the only way of creating the desired buffer-state that could contain future French expansionism.<sup>6</sup> The return of Napoleon from Elba and the battle of Waterloo did the rest; the European powers agreed to William's proposal, and he ascended the throne of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815 in Brussels.

In the Eight Articles of London the conditions for the enlargement of William's kingdom were determined. The newly added southern provinces were supposed to consent to a slightly modified version of the established 1813 northern constitution. Most importantly though, the Eight Articles urged William to create '*une union intime et complète*', with equal treatment of the northern and southern provinces. Was this a feasible assignment though? The former Republic and the former Austrian Netherlands differed enormously. North and south had gone their own separate ways after the 1566 Dutch Revolt, resulting in different political, economical and cultural traditions. Had the northern and southern provinces become complete opposites in 1815 or did similarities remain?

#### I.1 Religion

As stated before, the southern provinces were to be submitted to the established 1813 northern constitution. Some slight modifications were made, but the differences between the 1813 and the 1815 constitutions were marginal. In order to appeal the southern elites, a Council of Notables was called, where southern consent for the northern constitution was to be acquired. However, the southern notables rejected the constitution: the principle of religious pluralism in the constitution was simply a bridge too far for many of them. King William I, determined to rule under his own conditions, simply added all absentee voters and religious-motivated votes against the constitution to the votes in approval of the constitution. This '*Hollandse Rekenkunde*' made the southern notables 'approve' of a constitution that a majority of them actually rejected.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the introduction of Orange rule in the south wasn't met with just cheers.

Moreover, the constitutional quarrel shows a major, structural difference between north and

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<sup>6</sup> P. de Rooy, *Republiek van Rivaliteiten: Nederland sinds 1813*, (Amsterdam, 2007), p.15-21

<sup>7</sup> P. Rietbergen and T. Verschaffel, *Broedertwist*, p. 8-10

south. Whereas the northern population was predominately Calvinist, the southerners were almost exclusively Catholic. King William I used the constitutional principle of religious tolerance to push for religious pluralism under state control. He argued that religious affairs were in fact public affairs, which legitimated him to reform ecclesiastical institutions through his own authority.<sup>8</sup> The church was to be subject to the state in the entire kingdom, a principle obviously reflected in William's ecclesiastical reforms. First of all, William continued Napoleonic policy by furthering the sale of church lands, which gained him substantial support from a wealthy group of southerners who had already bought church lands under French rule or who were still willing to buy additional church lands. Secondly, William regarded the catholic clergymen as backward fanatics who he wished to replace them by a more enlightened clergy. In order to do this, the lower clergy were to be educated by the state in the so-called *Collegium Philosophicum*, turning pastors into state-employees, with state salaries. In addition, bishops were to be appointed by the king himself. Thus, the entire clergy was to be educated, appointed and supervised by the state. Finally, education was to be regulated by the state from here on. Traditionally, education in the south was exclusively in the hands of the catholic parishes. William regarded the southern educational system as backward and incompetent. He placed catholic colleges under state supervision and founded *Rijkscholen* for public education, emphasizing science instead of religious and moral education.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, William's ecclesiastical reforms were met with a lot of resistance from his new catholic subjects. The submission of the church to royal interference was in sharp contrast with the church-dominated society that many southerners still remembered from the pre-revolutionary era. Bishops and other higher clergymen swore allegiance to Rome only, and refused to accept the new status quo. Lower clergymen deeply resented the royal interference in 'their' education and the attempts to create *enlightened Catholicism*. They often shared their grievances and suspicions of the 'protestant King' with their parishes and as a result, according to Witte, a certain xenophobia against protestants, government officials and northerners in general existed in many rural communities in the south.<sup>10</sup> Despite their shared grievances however, there was no organized opposition to the ecclesiastical reforms. According to de Rooy religious life for many Catholics was centered around their local pastor, who might have made them suspicious of state interference in religious matters, but certainly wasn't able to organize large-scaled political protest.<sup>11</sup>

Despite their tradition of religious pluralism, intolerance against Catholics existed in the north as well. Fearful of the numerical Catholic majority in the new-born kingdom, northern city and provincial governments withheld political offices from Catholics. Remarkably, William interfered with the protestant churches as well, creating the *Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk*, a national fusion of all the existing protestant churches under William's conditions. In contrary to the Catholic clergymen in the south, the northern *predikanten* appreciated their employment by the state; there was no interference in the religious doctrines by local governments anymore, while a state salary ensured more security than the local financial support they received previously. As a result, the resentment of royal intervention in religious affairs that was wide-spread in the south by pastors was far less present in the north.<sup>12</sup>

Religion clearly was a structural and significant contradiction between north and south. The

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<sup>8</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p. 36

<sup>9</sup> Idem, p.36-37

<sup>10</sup> Idem, p. 37-38

<sup>11</sup> P. de Rooy, *Republiek van Rivaliteiten*, p. 27

<sup>12</sup> P. de Rooy, *Republiek van Rivaliteiten*, p.25-29

interference in Catholic affairs by a protestant King certainly contributed to resentment of Orange rule, especially in rural areas. However, the continuation of the sale of church land gained William substantial support among certain groups in the south as well. Old liberals who could still remember the church-dominated society of the *Ancien Regime* appreciated many of William's reforms.<sup>13</sup> Organized opposition against William's ecclesiastical reforms didn't exist on an interregional level before 1828 and when it did eventually evolve William I simply gave in to their demands, as we shall see in Chapter II. Thus, the religious contradiction between north and south was resented, especially in rural communities, but it was not an initial mobilizing factor for the outbreak of the Revolt.

## I.II Economy

Another clear structural difference between the northern and southern provinces can be found in their economies. When we go beyond the enormous economical diversity on the local or even provincial level, two significantly different economic blocs appear. North and south had economies that required economic policies that obviously contradicted each other. The north had acquired its wealth largely from international trade, and although relative economical decline had been going on ever since the late seventeenth century, international trade still was the major source of income there in the early nineteenth century. The southern provinces on the other hand depended upon agriculture and textile- and iron-industries.<sup>14</sup>

North and south therefore had entirely different traditions of taxation. The north traditionally had very little import and export duties, since they hindered the primary source of income: international trade. Instead, the north had a long tradition of high tax burdens that concentrated on excises on foodstuffs and luxury goods. The southern provinces on the other hand traditionally had a more protectionist taxation system. To restrain fierce foreign competition, the southern provinces had high import duties on agricultural and industrial goods.<sup>15</sup>

It proved a difficult challenge for William to balance taxation in a way that suited both northern and southern economical interests. He tried to merge both traditions anyhow, with import duties on textiles reaching levels between 40% and 150% to benefit Flemish textile industries<sup>16</sup> and the introduction of the northern *gemaalbelasting* and slaughter taxes on a national level. The result of his attempt to balance northern and southern taxation interests was generally resented in the north as well as the south. William failed to create a taxation system that fitted either economical bloc reasonably.<sup>17</sup>

The need for more public revenue was urgent when William returned to the Netherlands in 1813. Public debt had reached disastrous levels, and as the Batavian Republic under Louis Napoleon didn't even acquire enough public revenue to pay interest over the public debt, *tiercing* was adopted. This policy simply stated that only a third of all financiers to whom the government owed money were to receive their interest. When William took over governance from the French, he had no choice but to maintain this very unpopular measure. As a result, all confidence in the creditability of the realm was lost, and it proved very difficult to acquire new loans, which in turn required more revenue from taxing. This financial noose was expanded to the southern provinces in 1815,

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<sup>13</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p. 37

<sup>14</sup> J.L. van Zanden en A. van Riel, *Nederland 1780-1914*, p. 115-116

<sup>15</sup> Idem p.116

<sup>16</sup> The much smaller but still significant textile industry in the northern region of Twente must have profited from this import duty as well.

<sup>17</sup> J.L. van Zanden and A. van Riel, *Nederland 1780-1914*, p. 115-121

burdening them with a public debt that was 43 times as high as their own. In addition, many of the financiers who owned government bonds were rich Holland merchants, so that when interest over the public debt was actually paid, the money usually flowed to this group of rich merchants. As a result, millions of guilders annually streamed from south to north to pay for interest alone.<sup>18</sup> The public debt and the high amount of (unfavourable) taxes that was introduced to pay for (part of) the interest caused resentment in the entire realm, but was specifically used by the revolutionaries later on to show the unequal treatment between north and south.

Government expenditure was another field of inequality in the hindsight of the revolutionaries. In the closing months of 1830, radical revolutionaries accused the King of having exploited Belgium as a colony, a colony that was even better exploited than Java.<sup>19</sup> Figures of the government expenditure indeed show that while the southern provinces were good for 50% of public revenue, they received only 20% of public expenses. Government investments concentrated upon infrastructural projects, which in turn were fairly equally divided between north and south and often established new waterway-connections between northern and southern provinces.<sup>20</sup> Besides the official public budget, several royal funds existed, such as the *Amortisatiesyndicaat* and the *Fonds voor de Nationale Nijverheid*. Whereas official government spending was at least in theory subject to parliamentary consent, these funds were entirely administered by William himself. Exact figures about the revenue and expenditure of the royal funds weren't publicly published, so their effect on public opinion is hard to measure. What is known though is that William used these funds to loan substantial amounts to the southern industry, which he deemed vital for the national economy. Private credit in the southern provinces wasn't so easily acquirable as in Holland, making the royal funds very essential for the development of mining and textile and iron industries. As a result, William acquired substantial support from southern industrials and entrepreneurs, since he provided them with low-interest loans and infrastructural connections.<sup>21</sup>

Although the northern and southern provinces had entirely different economic blocs with different interests, common interest was found in the relation with the Dutch colonies. For the north the colonies were the source for a great deal of their commercial goods while for the south the colonies proved to be a great new duty-free market for their agricultural and industrious products. The southern economy depended upon a large national market, which had been provided by the Habsburg and French empires earlier on and was now provided by both the northern provinces and their colonies. Raw materials from the colonies as well proved to be useful for southern industry, while the northern merchants could profit from transporting and trading these goods. Colonial trade thus proved to be the major common ground between northern and southern economies.<sup>22</sup>

When summed up the economical differences between north and south are substantial. Van Zanden sees the economical contradiction as the major cause for scission between north and south, while authors like Kossmann and Witte emphasize that the realm as a whole was far wealthier in 1830 than in 1815.<sup>23</sup> Southern provinces did obviously profit from the northern colonial possessions, the enlarged domestic market, the credit provided by royal funds and the ever improving infrastructure. As we shall see, the economical situation in southern cities played an important role

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<sup>18</sup> Idem, p. 128

<sup>19</sup> M. Nothomb, *Essai politique et historique sur la Révolution Belge*, p. 7

<sup>20</sup> J.L. van Zanden and A. van Riel, *Nederland 1780-1914*, p. 128

<sup>21</sup> Idem, p. 131-136 and E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p. 20-25

<sup>22</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.20-23

<sup>23</sup> J.L. van Zanden and A. van Riel, *Nederland 1780-1914*, p.134 and E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen 1780-1980: Twee eeuwen Nederland en België, Deel I 1780-1914*, (Amsterdam, 1976), p.99-103



in the outbreak of the Revolt. However, structural economical contradictions were not the immediate boosters for revolution. The swift economic deterioration was not the result of north-south differences.

### I.III Politics and national identity

On the 21st of september 1815 William I was coronated as king of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in Brussels according to ancient Burgundian rituals. William was trying to present himself as a 'father' for his new southern subjects and deliberately came to Brussels for the coronation and chose southern traditions to legitimize Orange monarchy in the south as well.<sup>24</sup> The lessons from the revolutionary era were clear to William though, as he sincerely tried to legitimate his royal power. In theory, the constitution limited royal power by instituting a bicameral system, embodied by the Estates-General. The members of the *Tweede Kamer* consisted of 55 northerners and 55 southerners, symbolizing the political equality of both the new and old provinces.<sup>25</sup> This was in spite of the demographical inequality of north and south, and caused some resentment among the southern representatives.<sup>26</sup> Senators for the *Eerste Kamer* were appointed by the king himself and in most cases consisted of noblemen. In many other administrative and military offices as well William chose to appoint (southern) noblemen. The hereditary of noble titles seemed like a good reason to offer noblemen careers in the ever-expanding state apparatus, due to the heredity of the throne itself. As a result, William surrounded himself with noblemen at court and the nobility acquired more political power than ever before, making them a group who gave substantial political support to the Orange dynasty, especially in the south.<sup>27</sup> The question of what city was to become the capital was evaded by annually moving all the central government institutions between The Hague and Brussels. Despite the constitutional limitations and bicameralism, William I above all ruled as an absolute monarch though. He maintained a firm political grip on the two chambers and made most decisions himself. The heritage of the efficient Napoleonic state apparatus proved a useful tool for William's absolutist rule.

Historical legitimation was also sought, and proved hard to be found. The north had no royal tradition while the south had no history with Orange at all. Moreover, since the Dutch Revolt the northern and southern provinces had gone their own separate ways and hadn't experienced a shared history at all. William I tried to find common ground by referring to the glories of the shared history of north and south under Burgundian dukes during the late Middle Ages,<sup>28</sup> but when he wrote out an essay-contest for an '*algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden*' none of the 44 contenders could write something satisfactory.<sup>29</sup> The King's son, the Prince of Orange enjoyed larger popularity in the southern provinces due to his active involvement in the Battle of Waterloo, where he was wounded by Napoleonic forces. This recent event of history marked some form of unity that had been shown

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<sup>24</sup> In 1813 an earlier coronation took place in Amsterdam, already legitimating Orange rule in the northern provinces.

<sup>25</sup> P. Rietbergen en T. Verschaffel, *Broedertwist*, p. 14

<sup>26</sup> The northern provinces presumably had a population of 2 million, while the south had 3.5 million inhabitants. See: E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen 1780-1980*, p. 99-103

<sup>27</sup> I. de Haan, *Het beginsel van leven en wasdom: De constitutie van de Nederlandse politiek in de negentiende eeuw*, (2003, Amsterdam) p.22-23

<sup>28</sup> J. Janssens, *De Helden van 1830*, p. 16, and E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen 1780-1980*, p. 106-110

<sup>29</sup> P. Rietbergen en T. Verschaffel, *Broedertwist*, p.17-18

by the Dutch-Belgian forces on the battlefield of Waterloo, and was celebrated with the construction of a gigantic pyramid-like monument in Quatrebras, where the Prince of Orange had fallen wounded. Besides the monument, there was a three-century gap to a shared history of north and south, and it proved difficult to overcome this gap.

Another structural difference between the north and parts of the south was linguistic. The majority of the southern population spoke Flemish, a language very closely related to Dutch. However, in some of the southeastern provinces and among many educated groups in other southern provinces French was the common language. William I, who was very aware of his objective to create a secure buffer state against France, considered it necessary to eradicate all elements of French culture from his realm. As part of his *Eenheidspolitiek* William initiated *Vernederlandsing* policies, which were designed to gradually convert the entire southern population to the Dutch language.<sup>30</sup> William immediately proclaimed Dutch to be the official language, but didn't make its use in legal courts or even the Estates-General mandatory. Northern educated groups generally understood French as well, so difficulties in the Estates-General didn't appear at a national level. At the regional legal courts however, resentment against the *Vernederlandsing* did evolve. Many of the southern intelligentsia had received their education in French, during the Napoleonic annexation. As a result, the southern intelligentsia predominately spoke French. This proved to be problematic at legal courts and in public offices in the Flemish-speaking provinces, where Dutch was the only legally allowed language from 1823 onward. In the southeastern provinces the use of Dutch was recommended, but not mandatory, since a majority of the population there only spoke French.<sup>31</sup> In the military as well Dutch was the only accepted language, making it impossible for French-speakers to pursue a career in the military. Not surprisingly, many of the radical revolutionaries that played an important role in the escalation of the Brussels Riot were young educated French-speaking lawyers, who weren't able to pursue a career due to government linguistic restrictions.<sup>32</sup> The linguistic issue frustrated them and thus helped to develop a small, but determined opposition in the years before the Revolt. For the majority of the southern population however, the *Vernederlandsing* only made life easier, as they were able to settle their official and legal affairs in their native tongue hereafter..

Was there such a thing as an Belgian identity prior to 1830? The earlier 1790 Brabant Revolt and the resulting short-lived Belgian Republic certainly suggests so. However, a remarkable conclusion can be found when examining the Brabant Revolt more closely. According to Geert van den Bossche, Belgian nationhood was simultaneously born with the revolutionary 1790 Belgian Republic for political and linguistic reasons. Southern elites, accustomed to a great degree of decentralized power, resisted the centralization attempts by the Austrian emperor. Meanwhile, the revolutionary Belgian Republic could exercise a far greater influence on its ordinary subjects simply because the new state communicated to them in their own language, which enabled them to understand political events more than ever and made them identify themselves with the new state to some extent. Belgian nationhood thus originated in the resistance against political centralization by elites and the linguistic similarity between a revolutionary Belgian Republic and its ordinary subjects.<sup>33</sup>

These two pillars of Belgian nationhood can easily be adopted into the pre-1828 United

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<sup>30</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen 1780-1980*, p. 101 and p. 110-111

<sup>31</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen 1780-1980*, p.110-111

<sup>32</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.28-29

<sup>33</sup> G. van den Bossche, *Political propaganda in the Brabant Revolt: Habsburg 'negligence' versus Belgian nation-building*, in: *History of European Ideas, Volume 28, issue 3* (2002), p. 119-144

Kingdom of the Netherlands. Political power was more centralized under William I than it ever had been under the Austrian emperor, but the 'Belgian' elites themselves were involved into William's government on a large scale, with the appointment of many public and political offices to southern noblemen. Southern liberals initially did appreciate many aspects of William's rule, most noteworthy the anticlerical ones. In addition, for a great deal of ordinary people interaction with the state was once again possible in their native tongue. Identity prior to 1830 was therefore mostly based upon religion, as any other foundations of Belgian nationhood had disappeared. The suspicions between protestants and catholics remained, but ideas about 'Belgians' and 'Hollanders' as opposing national identities only seriously started to develop in the last months of 1830, when the Revolt had already irreversibly escalated.

#### I. IV A failed experiment?

When all summed up it becomes clear that structural contradictions between the northern and southern provinces were obviously present when William ascended the throne in 1815. These contradictions continued to play a role in the fifteen years leading up to the 1830 Revolt and were used thereafter to justify the birth of a new nation. The most obvious and perhaps most important difference was religious and the reforms of ecclesiastical matters by a protestant king caused significant resentment in among southern Catholics. Higher clergymen sought support in Rome to no avail, while lower clergymen warned their parishes for the influences of the dangerous protestant king. Many (rural) Catholics did resent royal, protestant interference in their religious affairs, but organized interregional opposition against the king didn't exist before 1828. Moreover, William gained the support of an older generation of liberals and wealthy landowners by continuing the sale of church lands and terminating the Catholic monopoly on education. The Concordat of 1830 thereafter did enough to exclude Catholics from the latter revolutionary movement, which many of them immensely distrusted due to its liberal character.<sup>34</sup> The huge differences between northern and southern economies required entirely different fiscal policies. Finding a good balance between these policies proved to be very hard and was even further complicated by the disastrous public debt. Nevertheless the realm was wealthier in 1828 than anyone could remember, and general optimism about the future endured. The Dutch colonies provided the cement between north and south by serving as a market for southern industry and northern trade simultaneously. The southern industry also profited from royal funds, improved infrastructure and an enlarged domestic market. As a result, southern industrials evolved into an important supporting group for the royal government.<sup>35</sup> Williams *Eenheidspolitiek* and *Vernederlandsing* policies were supported by some groups and resented by others. While William made public careers accessible for some important groups (most notably, noblemen), other educated groups were denied public offices due to their language (most importantly, French-speaking lawyers who would later form the revolutionary core). His absolutist rule and thorough reforms enjoyed support from various groups throughout the entire society, but summoned opposition among others. Long-term contradictions and resentment of William's policies thus had created critical voices ever since 1815, but these voices never evolved into an organized

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<sup>34</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.36-41

<sup>35</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen 1780-1980*, p.103-106 and p.115-121

opposition. Short-term economical deterioration and new political developments made these critical voices turn into organized violent revolutionaries. How this could happen will be analyzed in the next chapter.

## Chapter II

### The outbreak and escalation of the Belgian Revolt: 1828-1831

#### I.I The origins of the 1830 revolutionaries

In the last months of 1828 a series of petitions were sent to the *Tweede Kamer* that included various demands for reforms. The first of these petitions came from Liege liberals who demanded complete freedom of press, but was rejected by the king. It inspired others to do same however, resulting in hundreds of (mainly) southern petitions in the first months of 1829; including demands for freedom of press, freedom of education, linguistic reforms and ministerial responsibility. Pressure on the government grew, as the petitioners raised 40.000 signatures and organized a successful electoral campaign for *Tweede Kamer*-candidates who supported their cause. During the summer of 1829, the King gave in to the pressure and approved many of the petitioners' demands.<sup>36</sup>

The petitioners' movement was the first organized, interregional opposition movement. The fact that 40.000 people supported the movement by putting up their signature shows that its demand must have had a broad, significant support throughout the realm. Even more interesting is the fact that the petitioners' movement consisted of and was supported by southerners mostly, with only a marginal contribution from the northern provinces of North-Brabant and Limburg.<sup>37</sup> Their demands then must have reflected broad-based political ideas among southerners. Furthermore, demands for ecclesiastical, linguistic and freedom issues clearly are not the result of short-term circumstances or coincidences, but rather of structural differences between north (where no significant opposition against these issues was reported) and south (where hundreds of petitions were signed by tens of thousands of people throughout the entire society). Therefore it can't be denied that the first organized southern opposition evolved as a result of structural contradictions between north and south, since the petitioners' demands mainly targeted *Eenheidspolitiek* and *Vernederlandsing* policies.

It's important to understand why this petitioners' movement evolved as late as 1828, for if structural contradictions were to be at its base, one would expect a movement of this kind somewhere around 1820, when the detested policies were implemented. The main reason for this is the influence that French Romanticism had on a new generation of southern 'neo-liberals'. The term 'liberal' is problematic for the early nineteenth century, since no clear definition of what was 'liberal' existed and 'liberal ideas' tended to rapidly change, as they did in the 1820s in the southern provinces. Romantic influences and a lack of pre-revolutionary memories changed ideas about the role of state and church within society among young French-educated intellectuals, who Kossmann

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<sup>36</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen: 1780-1980*, p.129-131

<sup>37</sup> *Idem*, p. 129

identifies as 'neo-conservatives' who actually called themselves 'neo-liberals'.<sup>38</sup> This group consisted of lawyers, some of them still pre-graduates, who weren't able to pursue a legal career due to the fact that Dutch had become the mandatory language in legal court.<sup>39</sup> Inspired by this 'neo-liberalism' and unable to pursue a legal career, many of them became journalists of like-minded newspapers. The first of these newspapers were founded between 1824 and 1827. Their message was anti-governmental and Romantic, condemning parts of the French Revolution and protesting increasing governmental interference into society. This is where catholic and neo-liberal ideas started to overlap: both pursued reduced government influence in society, even though they had different reasons to do so. Catholic newspapers joined in, and from 1828 onward a neo-liberal-catholic coalition was born, that would in turn start to organize petitions.<sup>40</sup>

The coalition didn't last long. King William I saw it as a threat to his power, and started negotiating the demands of the separate groups of the coalition, and gave in to most of them during the summer of 1829. A Concordat with the Pope re-enabled the church to appoint their own bishops and allowed them to educate clergymen without state interference. The *Vernederlandsing* laws were also withdrawn, once again allowing French in southern legal courts and public offices. However, ministerial responsibility and freedom of press remained two bridges too far for William as he refused to limit his royal power to neo-liberal demands. By giving in only to separate demands from separate parts of the petitioners' movement William succeeded in dismantling the potentially dangerous coalition, especially by satisfying the catholic opposition.<sup>41</sup> A second petitioners' movement in autumn 1829 was estimated far less dangerous; the majority of the 350.000 signatures was brought up by illiterate rural people from Flanders, who signed (or drew an 'x') for freedom of a press they couldn't read and freedom to speak a language they couldn't understand.<sup>42</sup> William justly doubted whether all signatories knew what they signed for and as a result again chose to reject demands for freedom of press and ministerial responsibility, only giving in to further linguistic demands by making French the official language in French-speaking provinces.<sup>43</sup> What remained after the organized opposition after two waves of petitions was a small circle of neo-liberals who, during the summer of 1830 exclusively lived in southern cities and were often involved with government-criticizing newspapers.

This small group of neo-liberals, however determined they might have been, never could have launched a full-scale independence revolution all by themselves. Instead, another major factor must have been present that explains the popular uprising in Brussels and several other southern cities in August 1830. The participation of large groups of people who had no traditional interest in politics or who weren't traditionally opposed to the government can only be explained by their relative economical deterioration. Successive harsh winters cause crop failures which made food prices rise to extraordinary levels. As a result the price of potatoes, the primary food for the majority of the population, had more than doubled in 1830 as compared to its 1825 price-level.<sup>44</sup> Other

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<sup>38</sup> Idem, p.126-127

<sup>39</sup> This was the fact in all legal courts throughout the realm, with exception of the French-speaking Wallonian provinces. However, due to the fact that many southern lawyers had received their legal education in French, the number of French-speaking lawyers far exceeded the number of jobs offered by Wallonian legal courts.

<sup>40</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen: 1780-1980*, p.121-131

<sup>41</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.40-42

<sup>42</sup> E.H. Kossman, *De Lage Landen: 1780-1980*, p.130

<sup>43</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.40

<sup>44</sup> R.C. Allen, *Prices and Wages in Antwerp & Belgium, 1366-1913*, seen at 31-5-2013 at [www.iisg.nl/hpw/data.php#europe](http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/data.php#europe)

important foodstuff saw extreme price-rises as well, causing wheat to cost nearly twice as much in 1830 as it did in 1825.<sup>45</sup> Examination of Robert Allen's data on European foodstuff prices and labour wages shows that the cost of living increased all over Europe. Since prices rose continent-wide between 1825 and 1832, it is safe to assume that climatic causes caused consecutive years of crop failures.<sup>46</sup>

Although the increased food-prices were a realm-wide problem, southerners suffered more under its consequences than northerners. As the price of foodstuff rose, the demand for industrial goods fell dramatically. As a result, large groups of southern industrial labourers lost their employment and only source of income and relied upon poverty relief in the cities. Since large-scale industrial labour was still confined almost exclusively to the south, the economical desperation was felt by many more there than in the north.<sup>47</sup> Thus the agricultural crisis, caused by climatic developments, turned into an economical crisis that especially hit southern industrial labourers. Their presence in southern cities on the eve of the Revolt can thus be seen as a historical coincidence, entirely the result of a sudden short-term development.

These two groups, a small group of neo-liberals and a large group of poverty-stricken unemployed labourers were present in the city of Brussels on the evening of the 25th of August 1830, and were to play a major role in the events of that evening.

## I. II The escalation of rioting

*La muerte de Portici* was a well-known opera in the Brussels *Muntschouwburg*, as it had been running for quite some time prior to what would become its most famous performance. It had been prohibited by the city governor several times but on the evening of 25th August 1830, King William's birthday, he saw no serious threat in the opera or its visitors and approved its performance. In addition, the opera would keep certain critical voices occupied while Brussels would celebrate the King's birthday with fireworks in an illuminated city-centre.<sup>48</sup>

The events that evening evolved entirely different than anyone would have expected though. The audience of the *Muntschouwburg* consisted of revolutionary Frenchmen (who still wore cockades from the recent French July-revolution), southern neo-liberals and young students. Inspired by the recent revolutionary success in France and the revolutionary message of the opera<sup>49</sup> anti-government slogans were shouted and disturbances broke out. Encouraged by French revolutionaries and neo-liberals a group of thirty students and youngsters set out on what Witte calls a political charivari, a folk custom where symbols or persons of the government were visibly attacked or mocked to express that they had offended moral values. Targets of this charivari were the houses of hated political figures; Minister of Justice Van Maanen, the chief of police and the head of the pro-

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<sup>45</sup> R.C. Allen, *Prices and Wages in Amsterdam & Holland, 1500-1914*, seen at 31-5-2013 at [www.iisg.nl/hpw/data.php#europe](http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/data.php#europe)

<sup>46</sup> For the entire collection of data see: R.C. Allen, *Consumer price indices, nominal/ real wages and welfare ratios of building craftsmen and labourers, 1260-1913*, seen at 31-5-2013 at [www.iisg.nl/hpw/data/.php#europe](http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/data/.php#europe)

<sup>47</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.51

<sup>48</sup> J. Janssens, *De Helden van 1830*, p. 23-26

<sup>49</sup> The play symbolized the 16th-century revolutionary struggle of Naples against Spanish tyranny.

government newspaper *Le National*. Spectators of these violent attacks on pro-government symbols are a large crowd of people who were expecting to see the announced fireworks show. The fireworks were cancelled at the last moment though, since the government's insensitivity was broadly protested: an expensive fireworks show to celebrate the King's birthday in economical harsh times was criticized by many. This last-minute cancellation left a disappointed crowd looking for a thrill. Among them were many labourers who, devastated by unemployment and poverty, blamed the *Gemaal*-tax for the increased food-prices and thus were attracted by the attacks on the houses of the politicians they blamed for their situation. Attracted by the successful attacks, a cheering crowd started following the thirty attackers and eventually started pillaging themselves, although some of them might initially have been paid to do so by neo-liberals. Their targets are not surprisingly: groceries, clothing stores houses of the rich and the arsenal of the *Schutterij*. The pillaging of stores indicates a food riot rather than a charivari; the first targets of the violent crowd were those places where food was distributed. The houses of the wealthy that were ransacked were often inhabited by rich industrial entrepreneurs, who were blamed for the loss of employment. The stealing of weapons from the *Schutterij*-arsenal can be explained as an act of defense (local troops had already opened fire upon the rioters) and because of the fact that the civic guard of the *Schutterij* was often embodied by those people who were now rioting. The next morning unrest continued, as groups of unemployed labourers attacked factories and smashed the machines they blamed for their poverty.<sup>50</sup>

The Brussels Riot fundamentally existed of two different riots; a political charivari by a group of thirty rioters inspired by the French Julyrevolution and 'neo-liberalism' and a socio-economic riot with labourers pillaging shops and houses of the wealthy and performing 'Ludditist' attacks against factories. Most importantly, the Brussels Riot had no clear political agenda nor did it exist of an organized revolutionary movement; the violence was aimed at specific targets that symbolized hated policies or taxes. The charivari was aimed at the Minister of Justice and at certain pro-government newspapers since its promoters (neo-liberals and French revolutionaries) resented censorship on their oppositional newspapers. It was an act of political protest, not a revolutionary one. The socio-economical riot contained a food riot and violent protest against unemployment, but definitely not a revolutionary agenda. Both these riots occurred at the same time and place because of coincidence; a large crowd was gathered near the *Muntschouwburg* to watch the last-minute cancelled fireworks and the charivari-violence as well as incitement by its participators triggered them to convert their own (short-term) grievances into violence as well. Both riots were possible because targets of all kinds of grievances were present and close to each other in Brussels; government buildings, houses of the rich and famous and presence of food, clothing and weaponry that could be pillaged.<sup>51</sup> That this wasn't the uprising of a suppressed nation against its Dutch oppressor is supported by the fact that all buildings that were attacked were inhabited or possessed by southerners, with the Minister of Justice's house as sole exception.<sup>52</sup>

The authorities, with little numbers and indecisiveness leadership,<sup>53</sup> stood powerless in the face of an unexpected riot of this scale and could only withdraw. In order to prevent further pillaging of their properties, various groups of property-owners formed a *Burgerwacht*, an armed militia they

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<sup>50</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p. 51-55 and J. Janssens, *De Helden van 1830*, p. 23-33 and P. Rietbergen and T. Verschaffel, *Broedertwist*, p.22-24

<sup>51</sup>E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p. 51-55

<sup>52</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen 1780-1980*, p. 133

<sup>53</sup> The chief of police had actually been knocked out; when addressing a crowd someone threw a piece of furniture against his head. Another coincidence, with adequate leadership the Brussels Riot might have been suppressed in the first place.

paid themselves to restore order in Brussels. The *Burgerwacht*, partly embodied by the rioters themselves (who could use the salary), managed to disarm the remaining rioters and restore order the next day. A privately-paid armed militia was in control of the city now however, and in order to prevent further disturbances Brussels' mayor decided to form an emergency city government which would embody the financiers of the *Burgerwacht* as well as the neo-liberals who initiated the political riot.<sup>54</sup> Actual control of Brussels now rested with a non-governmental armed body which called itself the *Commissie voor de Algemeene Veiligheid*. This security committee decided to send a delegation to William which requested compliance with the demands from the earlier petitions (freedom of press and abolition of the *Gemaal*-tax as main demands) in order to prevent further rioting. Even with Brussels in 'revolutionary' hands, no intention to separate south from north existed yet.

News about the Brussels Riot spread quickly, encouraging additional riots in some southern cities and leading to the preventive recruitment of militias in many others. In no other city however did political and socio-economical riots occur simultaneously,<sup>55</sup> nor did government control break down. Very often the *Burgerwacht* in other cities co-existed with government forces to prevent further riots without ever gaining actual influence in the local administration.<sup>56</sup>

### I. III Dutch response to 'Mutinous Belgians'

*"Landgenooten! TE WAPEN! TE WAPEN! Is de kreet die in Noord-Nederland weergalmt... Zoo de muitzieke hoop zegeviert, moeten wij óf Fransch worden, of ons door Belgen, die wij als Franschen gekend hebben hebben, laten overheerschen... In rebellen moet de soldaat zijnen broeder niet zien. Rebellenbloed is geen broederbloed"<sup>57</sup>*

Northern public opinion was outraged at the Brussels Riot. Many northern newspapers reported 'mutiny' in Brussels and it took only days before the first pleas were published that demanded severe punishment for the Belgian treason<sup>58</sup> while the *Algemeen Handelsblad* concluded on 11 September that separating Belgium from Holland was the only sane thing to do, seeking Dutch territorial enlargement rather in the north-east.<sup>59</sup> These are mere examples supporting Kossmann's conclusion: Dutch public opinion saw the Brussels Riot as a treasonous Belgian attack against Holland that called for severe punishment.<sup>60</sup> While no developed national identity had existed in the south, a centuries-old national identity existed in the former Republic. So in a phase of the Revolt were southern

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<sup>54</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p. 56-57

<sup>55</sup> Antwerp for example only saw food riots, while Liège liberals openly sympathized with the Brussels Riot and caused political unrest in their city. Remarkably, food riots broke out in the German cities of Aachen and Köln as well after word of the Brussels Riot had spread; it underlines that the economical deterioration was an European phenomenon.

<sup>56</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.56

<sup>57</sup> *Bredasche Courant*, No. 74: 02-09-1830, (Breda, 1830) seen at 01-06-2013 at [www.kranten.kb.nl](http://www.kranten.kb.nl)

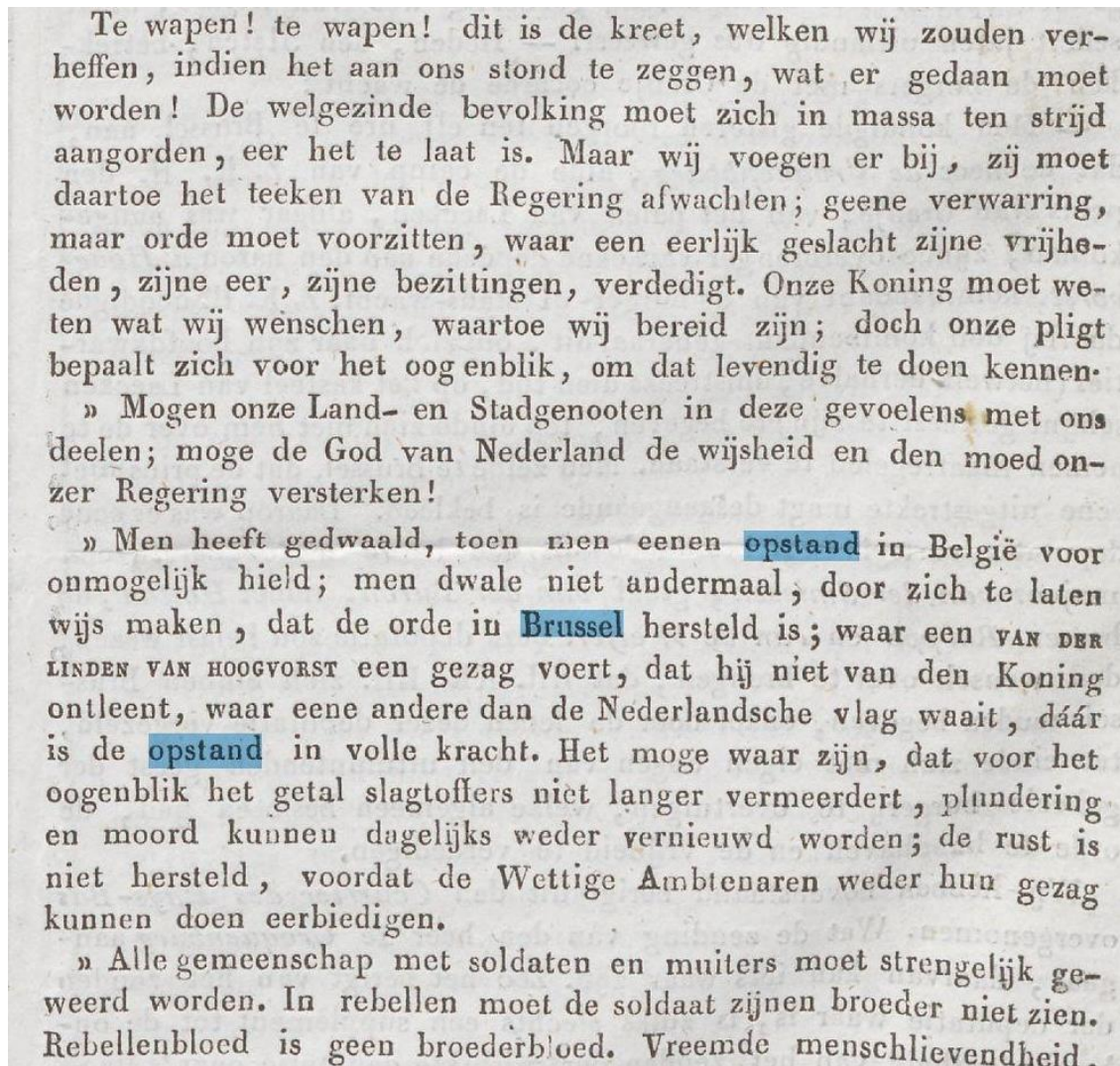
<sup>58</sup> *Arnemsche Courant*, No. 104: 02-09-1830, (Arnhem, 1830) seen at 01-06-2013 at [www.kranten.kb.nl](http://www.kranten.kb.nl)

<sup>59</sup> *Algemeen Handelsblad*, No.73: 11-09-1830, (Amsterdam, 1830) seen at 01-06-2013 at [www.kranten.kb.nl](http://www.kranten.kb.nl)

<sup>60</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen 1780-1980*, p.133



opposition still was centered around Brussels, with no serious intention of Belgian independence or organized southern opposition, northern public opinion was already speaking in terms of 'Hollanders' and 'Belgians' as two competing nations. Copies of northern newspapers were of course spread throughout the southern provinces and the anti-Belgian sentiment expressed by these newspapers substantially helped creating a Belgian identity. The northern press labeled the Brussels Riot as a national uprising before the rioters themselves had even thought to do so.<sup>61</sup>



Te wapen! te wapen! dit is de kreet, welken wij zouden verheffen, indien het aan ons stond te zeggen, wat er gedaan moet worden! De welgezinde bevolking moet zich in massa ten strijd aangorden, eer het te laat is. Maar wij voegen er bij, zij moet daartoe het teken van de Regering afwachten; geene verwarring, maar orde moet voorzitten, waar een eerlijk geslacht zijne vrijheden, zijne eer, zijne bezittingen, verdedigt. Onze Koning moet weten wat wij wenschen, waartoe wij bereid zijn; doch onze pligt bepaalt zich voor het oog enblik, om dat levendig te doen kennen.

» Mogen onze Land- en Stadgenooten in deze gevoelens met ons deelen; moge de God van Nederland de wijsheid en den moed onzer Regering versterken!

» Men heeft gedwaald, toen men eenen **opstand** in België voor onmogelijk hield; men dwale niet andermaal, door zich te laten wijs maken, dat de orde in **Brussel** hersteld is; waar een VAN DER LINDEN VAN HOOGVORST een gezag voert, dat hij niet van den Koning ontleent, waar eene andere dan de Nederlandsche vlag waait, dáár is de **opstand** in volle kracht. Het moge waar zijn, dat voor het oogenblik het getal slagtoffers niet langer vermeerderd, plundering en moord kunnen dagelijks weder vernieuwd worden; de rust is niet hersteld, voordat de Wettige Ambtenaren weder hun gezag kunnen doen eerbiedigen.

» Alle gemeenschap met soldaten en muiters moet strengelijk geweerd worden. In rebellen moet de soldaat zijnen broeder niet zien. Rebellenbloed is geen broederbloed. Vreemde menschlievendheid.

Image B. Warmongering language in the *Bredasche Courant* of 2 September 1830.<sup>62</sup>

The official response was more moderate. William called for an extraordinary meeting of the Estates-General to discuss the demands made by the Brussels delegation. Meanwhile his two sons, the Prince of Orange and Frederik were sent to lead an army that would restore order in Brussels. The Estates-General meeting took place on 13th of September. The Brussels security committee was invited to the Estates-General meeting as well, which meant that the moderate members from this committee would be in The Hague until the Estates-General finally concluded their decision on the 29th of

<sup>61</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen 1780-1980*, p.133

<sup>62</sup> *Bredasche Courant*, No. 74

September. This left a power vacuum that was easily filled by the radical neo-liberals, who had initiated the political aspect of the Brussels Riot and were now left in charge of the city and its *Burgerwacht*.<sup>63</sup> The Prince of Orange went to negotiate with them upon his arrival at September 3rd, and overplayed his hand in his negotiations with the radicals. Thinking of his own ambitions, he agreed to an administrative separation between north and south under the Orange dynasty.<sup>64</sup> It would prove to be prelude to his attempt to ascend the Belgian throne by siding with the revolutionaries later in October. William, furious with his son's betrayal, ordered him to return to The Hague and ordered his younger son, Frederik, to restore royal power in the city by force.

The radical security committee members meanwhile fled the city after Frederik had proclaimed to grant amnesty to all involved in the rebellion, with exception of its initiators. At the eve of the confrontation between 'revolutionary' and government forces in Brussels, the only neo-liberal group that seriously promoted Belgian secession had fled to France, leaving the defense of Brussels (and thus the 'revolution') to an ill-equipped, untrained militia consisting mainly of paid labourers without a clear political connection to the neo-liberal radicals. However, the spreading of northern anti-Belgian newspapers and rumours of the ransacking of Brussels as a punishment measure by the government armies boosted the morale of the Brussels defenders enormously. In the guerilla-like battle that followed the Dutch attack stalled, forcing the Dutch army to withdraw from Brussels. The loss proved to be highly demoralizing for the Dutch army, and many of its (southern) soldiers deserted, while the remainder withdrew to the northern provinces. The only remaining Dutch military presence in the south was in the citadels of Antwerp and Maastricht. The radicals returned upon hearing of their victory and eagerly stepped into the power vacuum left in the wake of the Dutch retreat; they declared themselves to be the *Voorlopige Bewind* for all of Belgium on the 26th of September, three days before the Estates-General decided upon an administrative separation.

In the wake of the Battle of Brussels a struggle for the allegiance of the southern provinces would begin between the government in The Hague and the provisional government in Brussels. This struggle would continue after the provisional government had declared the independence of Belgium on October 4th, with another attempt of the Prince of Orange to bring the revolutionaries under his royal leadership. The attempt proved futile, since William publicly opposed his son's Belgian ambitions, even though the Prince of Orange enjoyed some support in some West-Flemish provinces (especially around Antwerp) initially.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, while William was desperately trying to acquire international military support,<sup>66</sup> the provisional Belgian government started building a nation, with an army, a constitution and a lot of anti-Holland propaganda. The irreversible turning point came on October 27th, when drunk soldiers from a revolutionary Brussels regiment shot at the city citadel in Antwerp. Dutch general Chassé's response was in line with what northern public opinion had been demanding for quite some time: he returned fire on Antwerp by bombarding it for seven-and-half hours, which resulted in significant destruction of the city.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.58-63

<sup>64</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen 1780-1980*: p.134-135

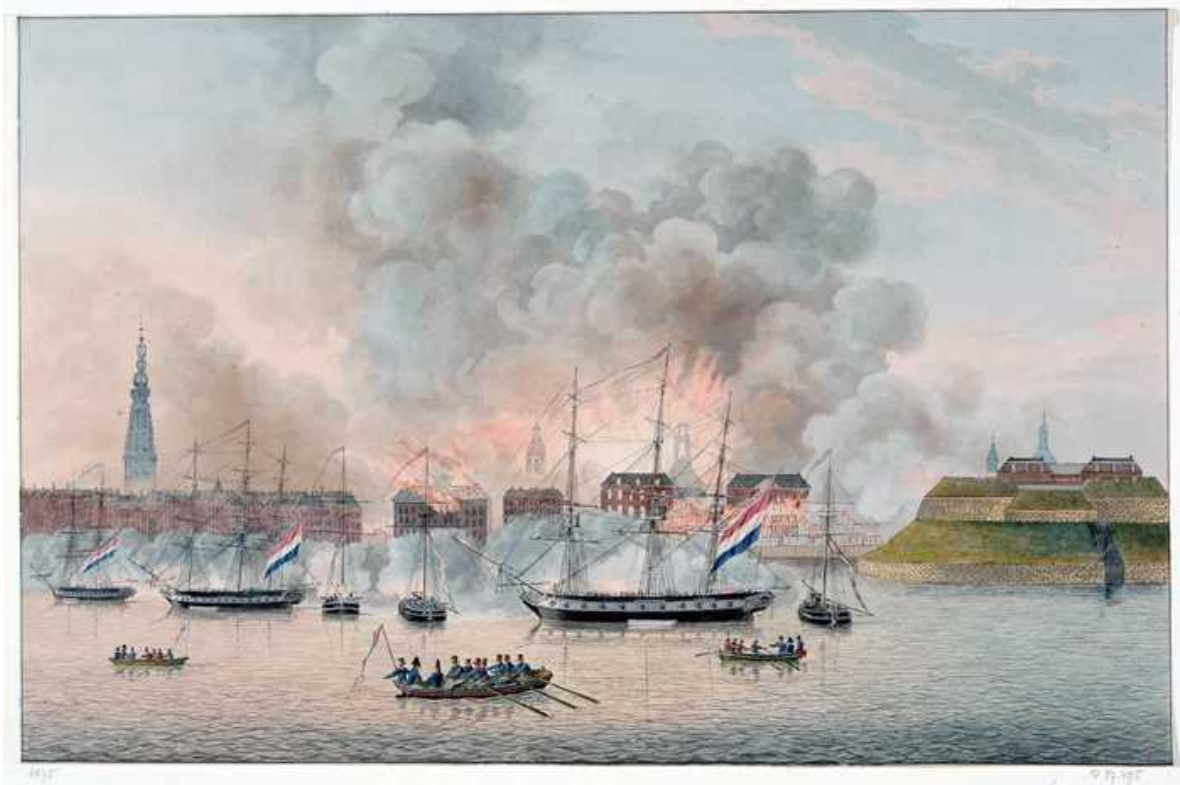
<sup>65</sup> T. Cartwright (an English delegate based in Antwerp), *Les chances du Prince d'Orange*, (Correspondence to Lord Aberdeen at 7-10-1830), in: M. Lamertin (ed.), *Bulletin de la Commission Royal d'Histoire, Tome XCVIII* (Brussels, 1935), p.461-462

<sup>66</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.72-77

<sup>67</sup> T. Cartwright, *Les causes et responsabilités du bombardement. Les tentatives d'armistice* (Correspondence to A.J. Bidwell at 28-10-1830), in: M. Lamertin (ed.), *Bulletin de la Commission Royal d'Histoire*, p.492-498

The Brussels Riot broke out due to two major factors. Firstly, political unrest that, inspired by the French July-revolution, was taken to the streets by a small group of youngsters as a political charivari. Secondly, as a socio-economical protest that contained the pillaging of stores, houses of the rich and 'Luddist' attacks on factories. Together they were enough though to break down control over the city by the official government. This resulted in the foundation of a militia, the *Burgerwacht*, which in turn was headed by the city's security committee, which included some of the radicals who initiated the political charivari. Northern public opinion condemned southerners for their 'mutiny' and demanded fierce punishment. William responded more moderately, but gave radicals the opportunity to cease control over the city after the political moderate members of the security committee left for the Estates-General he called. The Prince of Orange meanwhile undermined chances for the continuation of the union as he pursued his own ambitions for a Belgian throne. As the Dutch army was unexpectedly defeated, the Brussels radicals started believing in their chances and declared Belgian Independence shortly thereafter.

When viewed like this, it becomes clear that the escalation of the Brussels Riot is mainly due to the coincidental appearance of two different riots at the same time and place. The political riot was largely influenced by a recent French event, while the socio-economical was entirely caused by short-term economical deprivation, which in turn was caused by European-wide climatic causes. The outbreak of these two separate riots then was, up to a certain level, coincidental as well and not the result of long-term structural contradictions between north and south. That the Brussels Riot could evolve into a nation-wide uprising can partly be explained by the artificial absence of moderate leaders in Brussels, the individual actions of the Prince of Orange, the military failure of his brother Frederik and finally, the individual choice of general Chassé to bombard an entire city to rubble. Again, these events are not explicable by structural differences between north and south alone. Whereas the north did have an old, developed national identity (that was clearly expressed in northern press), the south did not have such an identity, but would rather develop one after the north publicly condemned them and bombarded them.



**Image C. The seven-and-half hour long bombardment of Antwerp by general Chassé.**

#### **I. IV Imagining the Belgian Nation**

Creating a national identity in a country with no common language or shared history had proved very difficult in the United Netherlands. The task the provisional Belgian government encountered after their declaration of independence didn't prove any easier though; large parts of the population wavered to support the Brussels independence claim, anarchy prevailed as a power vacuum existed in large parts of the country, rumours about foreign military intervention circulated and there was no agreement on what an independent Belgium should become. Remarkably, the radical revolutionaries that had declared Belgian Independence after the Battle of Brussels doubted whether Belgium should be an independent country at all.

Many members of the provisional government were distinct pro-French and were actively promoting a French annexation of Belgium. The initial request for French annexation emphasizes the lack of a Belgian identity among the most radical revolutionaries themselves and doesn't suggest that a 'Belgian' identity was present among the southern population in the first months of the revolution.<sup>68</sup> Although French popular opinion probably supported military intervention and annexation of the Belgian provinces, the French King didn't want to risk war with other European powers over Belgium (since they firmly rejected French expansionism) and decided to remain passive.<sup>69</sup> Even in a later phase, when the provisional government had already decided to maintain Belgian independence under a new constitutional monarchy, several attempts were made to offer

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<sup>68</sup> P. Rietbergen and T. Verschaffel, *Broedertwist*, p.36-37

<sup>69</sup> Fagel, *Le désir de paix du Gouvernement et de l'opinion français. - La politique de non-intervention* (Correspondence to Mr. Verstolk at 1-9-1830), in: M. Lambertin, *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire, Tome XCIX* (Brussels, 1935), p.19-20

the throne to the son of the French King in February 1831.<sup>70</sup> This shows that, while it was never accepted by the French King or the European powers, the Belgian revolutionary government actively sought affiliation with France for a long time.<sup>71</sup>

The opposite happened as well, as counter-revolutionary coups took place in an attempt to restore Orange rule in several Flemish cities, such as in Ghent and Antwerp in early 1831. This shows that for some important groups Dutch rule and markets were still preferable to anything Belgian or French. Not surprisingly, these coups were supported by middle-class groups in cities that had acquired great wealth through Dutch colonial trade and royal funds. Despite serious organization, a counterrevolutionary march in the name of the Prince of Orange on Brussels in 1831 failed due to a lack of equipment and leadership.<sup>72</sup> According to Witte though, the absolute top of society remained loyal to the Dutch King, and actively promoted reunification with the Netherlands. Among them were industrialists, entrepreneurs, merchants, the nobility, intellectuals and former public servants who all had benefitted from William's policies and had no trust at all in the sustainability of a Belgian state. Since freedom of press was a constitutional liberty in Belgium, they published thousands of pamphlets, newspapers and articles prior to 1839 in which they ridiculed the Belgian state and her new king, Leopold I. The expectation was that the discrediting of the new Belgian state could lift European opinion in favour of reunification under Orange at the Congress of London, and to complete this goal, substantial funds were paid by William to the Orangist press in the south. In local politics as well Orangists were broadly represented; they were elected into many city councils and in some important cities (Ghent, Mechelen, Lokeren, and others) they even held a majority position until as late as 1842. As Belgian repression against the Orangists increased and the likeliness of an actual reunification decreased, thousands of them migrated to Holland.<sup>73</sup> The substantial number of Orangists makes clear that certain important groups did not identify themselves as Belgians, but actively sought reunification with the Dutch. Since middle-class groups and intellectuals tend to be decisive in the formation of a national identity, the allegiance of these groups to the Dutch nation can't be underestimated.

In the immediate and middle-term aftermath of the Belgian Revolt many Dutch and Belgian publications tried to explain the events of 1830. Leading revolutionaries used their hindsight to point out all the unequal treatment and exploitation of Belgium by the *Hollanders*.<sup>74</sup> For them, this supposed exploitation confirmed that Belgium and Holland had been two different nations all along. The anti-Holland sentiment and ongoing domestic quarrel with the Orangists must have had significant influence on this revolutionary hindsight however. Despite all efforts though, the creation of a Belgian national identity has remained difficult and according to Witte the process took until at least 1847, when liberalism and Catholicism finally came together.<sup>75</sup> In any case, the difficulty of imagining the Belgian nation seems to confirm the importance of certain coincidences that surrounded its birth.

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<sup>70</sup> P. Rietbergen and T. Verschaffel, *Broedertwist*, p.40-42

<sup>71</sup> Especially Great-Britain kept resisting renewed French influence in Belgium.

<sup>72</sup> P. Rietbergen and T. Verschaffel, *Broedertwist*, p. 48

<sup>73</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.115-123

<sup>74</sup> For an example, see: L. de Potter, *De Belgische Omwenteling, 1828-1839: persoonlijke herinneringen met bevestigende bijlagen* (Dordrecht, 1840)

<sup>75</sup> E. Witte, *De Constructie van België*, p.148-168



## Conclusion

When we examine the United Netherlands between 1815 and 1828, we can see that there were clear structural differences between the northern and the southern provinces. Religious, economical, linguistic and political differences were met with *Eenheidspolitiek* and *Vernederlandsing*, policies that were aimed at marginalizing these differences and creating a truly unified Kingdom of the Netherlands. Not surprisingly, some of these policies caused resentment among certain parts of the population, especially as Catholics saw a protestant King interfere in their ecclesiastical affairs and as a group we have distinguished as 'neo-liberals' protested the absolute royal power and *Vernederlandsing* policies. Overall though, the United Netherlands were doing fairly well, and had grown into a wealthy and seemingly stable realm in the 1820s. Long-term contradictions existed, but didn't lead to the formation of an organized opposition until the first petitioners' movement in 1828. As certain demands were petitioned that partly were justified by these structural north-south differences, the King gave in to many of them and thus dissolved organized opposition. One year later though, an unexpected riot of enormous scale broke out in Brussels. This Brussels Riot was fundamentally consisted of a political riot, influenced by the French July-revolution and promoted by neo-liberals and a socio-economical riot that was caused by short-term economical deterioration. The influence and actual presence of a recent foreign revolution in Brussels can be called coincidental. The fact that high food prices, caused by continent-wide bad harvests due to climatic circumstances, had caused unemployment and short-term economical deterioration can't be seen as the result of a structural north-south contradiction either. The fact that both riots occurred at the same time in the same place is coincidental as well; the presence of a socio-economical frustrated crowd near a thirty-man political charivari couldn't have been foreseen. The escalation of the Brussels Riot thereafter was possible due to a harsh anti-Belgian response in northern public opinion, the calling of the Estates-General which left an armed militia in the hands of Brussels radicals, the individual ambitions of the Prince of Orange which undermined the union, the military failure of Frederik and the decision of general Chassé to bombard Antwerp. After that, when Belgian Independence had already been declared, these structural differences between north and south still did not evolve naturally into something as a Belgian nation by itself. Instead, Belgium's right to exist as an independent nation was contested for many years by the revolutionaries themselves, a significant Orangist opposition and the northern Netherlands. When all summed up, it can't be denied that structural differences between north and south did play a role. However, historical coincidences might have played an even bigger role.

**8786 words (excluding notes and bibliography)**

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