

Exchange of letters on “Belgium edges closer to split as rival factions fail to agree”

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It was the Kingdom of the United Netherlands which was created as a “buffer state” in 1815. Belgium broke away in 1838.

AB

Dear AB,

You are right in saying that the Kingdom of the United Netherlands was a buffer state, but that does not preclude the Kingdom of Belgium created after the revolution of 1830 from also being a buffer state.

The same imperatives that governed British foreign policy at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and gave birth to the United Kingdom of the Netherlands were still very much in operation a decade and a half later. Preventing any potentially hostile foreign power from holding Belgium is one of the recurrent themes of British foreign policy.

As Alfred Thayer Mahan long ago pointed out in *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, controlling the English Channel was the quickest way of defeating the British Empire, and Belgium was, from that point of view, absolutely crucial to British interests. From Marlborough’s campaigns in the War of the Spanish Succession to Waterloo and the two world wars, Belgium has had a strategic significance for Britain.

The French Revolution of 1789 and the revolutions of 1830 injected a new element into the matter—that of class. Britain had no desire to see a revolutionary government on the other side of the channel.

If Belgium had to be allowed independence, then it was safer to turn it into a petty kingdom. The Treaty of London established the Belgian monarchy and made Belgium a neutral state. In its origin, therefore, Belgium is a response to both the conflicts between the great European powers and the class conflicts that characterised the emergence of modern Europe.

In the twenty-first century, those factors that made Belgium significant may seem to have diminished. Britain no longer controls a quarter of the globe, the great powers that fought two world wars are members of the European Union, and certainly the *Economist*, at least, can see very little reason for the continued existence of Belgium.

That would, however, be a short-sighted view because the national conflicts that found expression in World War I and World War II have never been fundamentally resolved, and the conflict between global economy and nation states is once again intensifying.

Regards

Ann Talbot



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