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- 1 If the Germans had taken only eighteen days to inflict on Belgium a humiliating defeat in May 1940, the Allies after the breakout in Normandy needed no more than ten days to flush out the Nazi occupiers from the small country. On September 8, 1944, Belgian Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot and his government returned to Brussels after more than four years of exile in London, making Belgium the first liberated country with a restored constitutional government. Two days later, British Major-General George Erskine arrived in the Belgian capital. He and his American adjunct, Colonel John Sherman, established the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) Mission to Belgium that took control of Allied affairs at the national level. The Allied Mission included a Civil Affairs staff that was to handle all problems of national scope. At the same time, American and British forces created Civil Affairs detachments at the provincial and local levels that were to act as their eyes and ears, to encourage good relations, to coordinate efforts with the local administration, and to aid the Belgians by providing food, medical supplies, and transportation.¹
- 2 The Germans did manage to put up a fight north of Antwerp and the Albert Canal and in northern West Flanders province until early November. But such resistance could not lessen among troops and civilians a sense of immense relief about the comparatively minimal losses and damage with which the liberation of Belgium had been accomplished. All this, as much as the satisfaction of having regained their freedom, explains why Belgians across the country received their liberators amidst chaotic scenes of joy and gratitude so intense that they would impress many an Allied commander and soldier for the rest of their lives. It probably also goes a long way in explaining why much of the literature on the liberation of Belgium has traditionally been focused on the stunning military feats of the Allies and why the memories of the liberated are often content to linger on the initial euphoria and the clichés of chewing

gum and chocolate. They would almost make us believe that, after the cheers and kisses in September 1944, the Allied armies packed up, moved on to Nazi Germany, and vanished from Belgium altogether, allowing the country to get back to normal all by itself.

- 3 The reality was, however, that as long as the campaign against neighboring Germany continued, there remained a mass presence of Allied troops in Belgium. Indeed, even when Germany was defeated in May 1945, pulling out troops and equipment took time, so that even by the spring of 1946 a significant number of Allied soldiers remained on Belgian soil. American forces were concentrated mostly in the French-speaking southern part of Belgium whereas Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north encountered predominantly British and Canadian (and some Polish) liberators. Still, with high concentrations of GIs in Brussels, the key logistical hub of Antwerp, the ports of Bruges and Ghent, and the easternmost Flemish province of Limburg, it is fair to say that the American presence was massive across the width and breadth of the country.

1. Waves of Admiration

- 4 All of the liberators, whatever their country of origin, could count on being mobbed by a population that showed itself ecstatically grateful. Commenting on the scenes, one American intelligence report stated: "Civil Affairs coming into Belgium found their welcome more warm hearted than in France; and there was no doubt of the warmth of the sentiment of this somewhat emotional people." Indeed, American liberators were looming particularly large in the imagination of Belgians from the earliest moments of deliverance. "They had such confidence," beamed a man who watched the Americans arrive in Liège, "that it was a joy to behold."²
- 5 That confidence seemed particularly justified when measured by the staggering material wealth of the American military. A historian of the French liberation has noted that the US convoys had the impact of "a publicity caravan," instantly selling the liberated on America's "youth, power, and wealth." It was no different in Belgium. Children in Liège, for example, could be seen running after American convoys from which GIs would "scatter onto the sidewalks badges, cartridge cases, cans, and even coins showing the US eagle." As well as the more traditional offerings of peacetime publicity, of course, like fruit and candy and even chocolate and the ceaselessly amazing chewing gum.³
- 6 Even the details of uniforms and weapons seemed to indicate that the future belonged to the Allies, and especially to the Americans. A boy in Ottignies watched the GIs' every move. "The Americans moved about with ease," the young villager observed with a sharp eye for detail. "Their uniform was made of a lighter fabric that allowed them more comfort and freedom of movement. Their shoes were made of soft leather and without the hobnails of the German boots, and the soldiers gave me the impression that they were dancing while they marched." Like the GIs in Ottignies, American soldiers across Belgium were about to dance their way into the hearts of many, easily outshining the Brits and Canadians who came across as the much poorer cousins of the mighty Anglo-Saxon family.⁴
- 7 The waves of admiration for the Americans continued to ripple and reverberate as long as they remained on Belgian territory from 1944 to 1946. The GIs were seen as powerful symbols of hope, not least because of the material abundance they represented.

Belgians had been conditioned to think of the GIs as ambassadors of abundance even before they arrived. The US had remained largely unknown in Belgium before 1914. It was the massive American campaign to provide relief during World War I that had caused the country to take firmer shape in Belgian consciousness. Many would never forget the wheat, corn, rice, sugar, and lard that had helped alleviate hunger courtesy of the Americans.

- 8 In the course of World War II, much of the Allied as well as the enemy propaganda regarding the US revolved around the role it had announced for itself as the 'Arsenal of Democracy'. As soon as the US entered the war, British aircraft were dropping leaflets over Belgium extolling the industrial might of the ally that had now at last officially joined the alliance. Great Britain, one such pamphlet said encouragingly, could now count on "munitions, heavy and light arms, airplanes straight from the Ford factories that for the time being have suspended the production of cars." Another leaflet showed a drawing of airplanes and other war materials spilling from President Roosevelt's arms as if he were a modern-day Santa Claus. The influential British radio broadcasts played on similar themes. Indeed, economic might constituted so potent a feature of the American war contribution that Nazi propagandists in Belgium considered it vital to try and undermine that particular image.
- 9 Continuous hammering on the same theme by supporters and detractors of the US alike ensured, however, that economic might was exactly that which, by the time of the liberation, had become most impressive about America in people's minds. Not least because it reached back across the Great Depression to tap into older European images of the US as the home of modernity and wealth. Those images had begun to take shape at the end of the nineteenth century and become firmly entrenched during the decade that followed World War I. They now took on a new life in the big void brought about by the dramatic failure of Germany's professed New Order.⁵
- 10 It was the motorized and mechanized aspects of the American military that caused by far the most awe and admiration. This was vividly illustrated by the vehicle that most easily caught the imagination of civilians: the jeep. In September 1944, when the phenomenon was still new and unusual, Belgian journalists could be seen misspelling the odd-sounding name as 'yeep'. But there were no more such irreverent mistakes by the time the distinct-looking vehicle was commonplace in cities and rural areas alike and the admiration for its speed and versatility virtually universal. The jeep is, one newspaper declared, "as fast and as maneuverable as the American cars." Indeed, if the GIs were ambassadors for a society of abundance, the countless jeeps were just as many mobile billboards for the motor industries of Detroit, and by extension for America's roaring consumer culture. Belgium had experienced the first clear glimpses of its seductive power after World War I, when marketing and products of American brands like Singer, Otis, Columbia, and Ford – to name just a few – had become ubiquitous. Now, at the end of this war, as one Belgian newspaper reported in September 1944, the US would reduce its war industries by no less than forty percent. Inquisitive readers could not but ask themselves what kinds of consumer products these highly efficient industries might be turning to next.⁶
- 11 The liberators, and again the Americans in particular, represented cultural dazzle as much as material abundance. If the Americans plunged Belgians into darkness it was most often a pleasant and comforting one that allowed people to escape at last. "Went to the cinema with mom this afternoon," a teenage girl from Antwerp scribbled in her

war diary in August 1944, "a sad film: *Immensee* starring Kristina Söderbaum." Barely two weeks after the liberation, however, on September 21, the same girl was over the moon as she confided to paper that, the following day, she and a friend would go see "the first American movie." The feature film had the much more upbeat title *Little Princess*, a role played by the infectiously glamorous child star Shirley Temple.⁷

- 12 The sudden rupture in movie fare could be felt in theaters across the country in the fall of 1944. American movies had been very popular in Europe and Belgium before the Nazi-German occupation. It was Nazi Germany, however, that slammed the door shut for English-language movies. Keenly aware of the propaganda value of motion pictures and determined to make their own film industry the dominant one in Europe, they banned Anglo-American products at home as well as in the occupied territories. Belgium was no exception. By the summer of 1940 all British and American films had been impounded and carted off to factories to be processed into chemicals useful for the war effort. Yet the liberation caused Hollywood to stage a spectacular comeback. In the six months following liberation, barely 2.5 percent of the movies that were screening in Brussels were of Soviet origin, while slightly less than 9 percent were French, and another 9 percent British. Almost 79 percent of the movies for which people in the Belgian capital were queuing were made in the US.
- 13 Weary of the fear and stress, people now also craved music, not so much for its soothing words as for its pulsing beat. They were tired of listening and obeying; they wanted to move, experience their bodies, feel alive again. What music then could better suit the mood of the times than that which had sprung from ragtime and blues, the melodies and rhythms that black slaves had developed in America to give expression to their deep longing for freedom. Nothing could feel more liberating at the end of four years of authoritarian rule than to dance to the improvisations and deliberate distortions of jazz, the lively rhythm of swing, the emotional excitement of hot, and the nonsense of scat.
- 14 These exciting new forms of American music, like the motion pictures made in the US, had already found enthusiastic audiences in the Old World before the war. In fact, it was a Belgian, Robert Goffin, who as early as 1921 had published one of the first jazz magazines. What had been a trickle of American music before the war, however, turned into a flood with the arrival of the Allies. The Nazi ban on American music had all but ensured its popularity. Thanks to much illegal tuning in to the BBC, by the time of the liberation, without the help of record sales or live performances, Glenn Miller had become a household name among Belgians, and his brand of swing a symbol of freedom. Moreover, it was in the heady multicultural atmosphere of liberated Brussels that postwar icons of Belgian jazz like Bobby Jaspar, René Thomas, and Toots Thielemans would cut their teeth. But although the epicenter of the new music was located in the capital, shock waves reverberated across the country. By March 1945 newspapers were lamenting what was described as a "dance fury" infecting every town and village. Indeed, before long, Belgians were referring to any small orchestra simply as a 'zjas'.⁸
- 15 The liberated Belgians danced to the Allied beat with total abandon. They did not need Hollywood's master illusionists to convince them that what Anglo-Saxon societies stood for was much more appealing than anything the false Nazi prophets had ever promised. "There is," General Erskine acknowledged in mid-October 1944, "a very healthy appetite for British and American news, information, films, and literature." Still, SHAEF

did not intend to leave anything to chance in this deeply ideological war and showed itself keen to help mold the Allied message wherever it could. "As a means of rubbing out past Nazi efforts and instilling sound ideas in future," Erskine continued, "I hope every endeavour will be made to meet our requirements."⁹

- 16 Special responsibility for the cultivation of "sound ideas" fell to two SHAEF branches. The first, the Public Relations branch, was responsible for censorship. But Allied authorities spent much more time facilitating the spread of information likely to sustain and increase confidence in Britain and the US. This was largely the responsibility of a second SHAEF section, the Psychological Warfare branch. The American Office of War Information (OWI) played a significant part in this campaign for hearts and minds. At the end of 1942, for example, it had been given the power to ban the export of films highlighting the less attractive side of American society. This affected not only films dealing with racial or labor conflicts, for example, but also Westerns and crime movies where law and order failed to come out on top. Also, early in 1945, the OWI invited Belgian newspapermen over to the US. By the spring of 1945 this initiative was bearing considerable fruit. Extensive coverage of the US by the major Belgian newspapers was splashed across front pages. The aim had initially been to have the Belgian correspondents impress the home readership with America's war effort. But with the war in Europe over by the time the Belgians set out on their tour of the US, their hosts decided that the newspapermen might just as well use the occasion to enlighten their audiences back home about America's giant potential in a future world at peace. Which is why in June 1945 Belgians found themselves reading not just rapt reports about yards "where ships shoot up like mushrooms," but about the cargo that would soon be filling their holds, from the meat processed in Chicago to the fantasies generated by Walt Disney and the film studios of California.¹⁰
- 17 The liberated Belgium of 1944 did not have the *Stunde Null* (the Zero Hour) experience of a defeated Germany in 1945. But its people had experienced sufficient trauma and its society enough of a setback to accept that inspiration for the time being would have to come from elsewhere. Far removed from the crash of Europe's ruin, America now more than ever before appeared to be the beacon of modernity. "Skyscrapers," admitted Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the leading philosophers of postwar Europe, "were the architecture of the future, just as the cinema was the art and jazz the music of the future." If this was true, then America was the country of the future. Many in Belgium certainly thought so at the end of the second global war imploding the Old World. Journalists of a regional Flemish newspaper were happy to report that the small country in its cleanliness and industriousness reminded many an American soldier of home. And they were even happier to relay to their readers the ultimate compliment: "Everywhere the American has been thus far people were one hundred years behind America. In Belgium we are only twenty years behind!"¹¹

2. Currents of Discontent

- 18 All the while, however, it was by no means merely love and good feelings between the civilian population and the mass of Allied soldiers. Even while much of Belgium was dancing to the mesmerizing beat of the liberators, currents of discontent were gaining significant force beneath the waves of admiration. The Allies had a first major crisis in public relations on their hands when in the winter of 1944-45 they dramatically failed

to meet the high expectations created by their very arrival. The first winter of liberation proved to be unusually harsh. In addition to a shortage of civilian transportation and badly damaged infrastructure (mainly as a result of Allied air attacks in preparation for the Normandy invasion), frozen canals and icy roads quickly caused the distribution of food and coal to be slowed down. But things were made still worse when the Germans launched a massive counteroffensive in the Ardennes and stepped up their V-weapons offensive against the logistical hub of Antwerp. By mid-December 1944, after three months of Allied control, the official food ration, measured in calories per day, continued to be slightly worse than it had been under the Germans before the Normandy invasion. SHAEF in the first week of January was describing the coal situation as "very critical." Not surprisingly, confidence in the Allied management of the country plummeted. Street protests erupted across the country with placards and banners demanding more to eat and better heating.¹²

- 19 The especially grating comment that the Germans had succeeded where the Allies had failed in terms of bringing coal to the people, General Erskine did not deign worthy of a complex answer in a nationwide radio broadcast on February 4, 1945. Instead of discontent, Erskine asked Belgians to show loyal acceptance of Allied decisions "as a demonstration of our complete support of General Eisenhower." And if that was not forthcoming, Erskine chided the Belgians, they should do well to consider that the situation in their country, bad as it might be, was still not "as hard as it is in Poland, Holland and Greece." Finally, before wishing listeners good night, Erskine pointedly noted that he did not believe "there is a single Belgian who would exchange even the hardest conditions of life, and freedom – for German occupation, Gestapo, torture and murder."¹³
- 20 If that was true, however, it did not stop Belgians from taking offense at the increasing humiliation that American abundance was causing them. Military logic dictated that absolute priority had to be given to the defeat of Nazi Germany. But to people who had lived through hard times for four years, in the first winter of liberation that logic appeared exceedingly perverse. Reports from Belgian liaison officers in Charleroi observed that, since most of the people in this industrial region were laborers and miners who were having a hard time making ends meet, a "chill" had descended on relations with the Americans who were receiving more than they could possibly consume. And that was true not only of meat and fats, but even of luxuries like coffee and chocolate. What was making civilians really angry, reports from across the American sector warned, was that GIs thought nothing of wasting food in full view of those going hungry. Convoys of army trucks loaded with food and cigarettes stood parked along the boulevards of Mons without tarpaulins. "The goods," one observer ruefully remarked, "are exposed to the bad weather and are spoiling while the population lacks everything." Elsewhere in Mons civilians employed by the Americans claimed they saw soldiers throw food in dumpsters day after day. Rather than hand them out to the Belgian workers, GIs in their depots at Cronfestu preferred to burn entire boxes of chocolate bars for no other reason than that they showed slight traces of humidity. People in Arlon were deeply insulted to see Americans plow left-over food into the soil or douse it with petrol to make it unsuited for consumption.¹⁴
- 21 Walter Ganshof van der Meersch, the head of the state security section within the Belgian liaison mission with SHAEF, believed that the situation was grave enough to warrant a blunt message to the Allied command. "It has been reported to me several

times," he wrote to General Erskine in English as early as January, "that the American Armies are destroying or wasting great quantities of army food in front of the local population. In the very distressing state of the population, this creates, of course, an extremely unfavourable impression."¹⁵

- 22 The sight of GIs flaunting their country's abundance harked back to age-old images of America as the country where the roads were paved with gold. But it just as easily revived concerns about the rampant economic power of the Americans. That power had become particularly threatening by the late nineteenth century. The New Order press during the occupation had shrewdly manipulated these fears by calling on Belgians and other Europeans to unite under German leadership against the Anglo-Saxon bloc and its imperialist ambitions. In the dark winter of 1944-45 there were fresh fears that so much economic pull might leave Belgium and its more vital resources vulnerable. These fears were soon being fueled by rumors across the American sector that giant depots were being built up not only for military victory, but also with an eye to a postwar economic offensive. Many of the rumors originated with Belgians who worked in the depots. They were astounded not only by the "immense quantities" of supplies, but also by the "extremely diverse" range of American items. What raised most suspicion was that many of those items seemed to have nothing to do with the military. People in Soignies talked of crates full of combs and lipstick. In Jemappes there were said to be large stocks of feminine beauty products and lingerie. Workers at Cronfestu insisted that the depots held everything from pocket knives to lighters and wallets. One stupefied Belgian employee there insisted he had seen at least fifty cubic meters of crates filled with nothing but playing cards. "An approximate calculation," an equally incredulous liaison officer reported, "has enabled me to estimate the packs of cards at one million if the information I was given is correct."
- 23 Some of these stories took on lives of their own and became necessarily exaggerated. Most of them were true, however, as they merely inventoried the merchandise that post exchanges on military installations sold to GIs as a matter of routine. But even if people had known this, it would have been impossible for them to believe that soldiers fighting a war were having easier access to consumer articles than civilians who had been deprived of them for so long. Inevitably, therefore, conspiracy theories arose to explain what did not seem to make any sense otherwise. In Jemappes a liaison officer reported that the population had concluded the Americans could only be building up such stocks "to pave the way for a postwar market that no other industry can compete with." Indeed, the allegations were stirring up sufficient unrest for Belgian authorities in mid-March 1945 to launch an investigation and to be given access to the depots. The investigating officer afterwards reported that he had found no evidence of supplies for women, although he added that because of the large number of women in the US military such supplies might be present in depots elsewhere. The Jemappes depots did hold large quantities of candy and chocolate, but, the officer pointed out, everyone knew that American troops were "crazy" about sweets and that these were part of their standard ration. In short, he concluded, there was no foundation for "rumors that the American government supposedly engages in commercial activity under the cover of its army." "What is true," he emphasized, "is that all these rumors seriously sap public opinion's confidence in our allies from the United States."¹⁶
- 24 It was the end of winter that caused the crisis mood to recede and with it any danger of public opinion mutinying against liberators who had so much more than the liberated.

Still, in the course of spring, a new crisis in Belgian-American relations emerged. Indeed, the end of the war in Europe was soon causing large swathes of the Belgian population to feel unsafe in the presence of American troops. This had everything to do with the way in which the US War Department was handling the demobilization of forces in Europe. The pullout took place in such haste and amidst so much chaos that even a US Army study later admitted it resembled an "organized rout" more than anything else. It was by no means only the Americans who caused disturbances in Europe following the surrender of Nazi Germany. On July 4 and 5, 1945, for example, Canadian troops caused riots with much looting and damage in the English town of Aldershot. Yet even the American press was making much of the arrogance and misbehavior that appeared to characterize US troops in particular. In November 1945, for example, *Time* magazine admitted that across Europe this was often causing relations with civilians to be "strained to the utmost."¹⁷

- 25 Belgian authorities in July 1945 reported from the industrial city of La Louvière: "The population has grown tired of the Allied troops. That attitude is due to the fact that we have emerged from a long enemy occupation only to find it replaced with another foreign occupation." Even people in the somewhat quieter countryside shared the attitude of the people in La Louvière with regards to the GIs. "They have brought to us," a report on Visé summed up in September 1945, "habits that the population was not accustomed to: gangster exploits across Belgium, the propagation of venereal diseases, massive requisitions of buildings, and the exploitation of interests vital to our national economy. That atmosphere has made even a region as hospitable as ours embrace the current saying: 'from our liberators, oh Lord, liberate us.'"¹⁸

3. Whispers of Change

- 26 Still, despite serious tension and several crises in the relationship with the American liberators, the GIs caused stubborn whispers of change to persist in Belgian society long after their noisy departure. The Belgians would never again manage to get back to life as they had known it before the war. For that, the trauma of war, the humiliation of German occupation, and the exhilaration of liberation had seeped too deep into the foundations of society. Their combined impact made five years feel like an eternity. On September 14, 1944, the liberation in Verviers was celebrated with a band, veterans bearing flags, and men and women of the resistance marching proudly in their uniforms. Behind them in the parade followed the mayor, two aldermen, and a judge. Not on foot like the others, but in a stately horse-drawn carriage. Such a scene, juxtaposed with the memory of German *Panzers* and the omnipresence of American jeeps, appeared archaic and suddenly strangely out of place.
- 27 The presence and prestige of the Americans in particular had served as a catalyst of change. It is true that Belgium's political elite returned to the stage largely intact. However, this relative restoration went hand in hand with a groundswell of democratization that dramatically impacted people's very expectations.¹⁹ Quite ironically for a generation that had come of age during the Great Depression, the GIs had done much to spread a cult of abundance. For a people that had known years of shortages under the Germans and was experiencing the humiliation of having to beg and steal from the Anglo-Americans, the longing for a better life involved above all an obsession with material progress. Belgians could and would no longer be satisfied with

a life of subsistence. And American troops liberated their minds into believing that a life of affluence was not only perfectly feasible, but that it lay waiting just around the corner. Which is perhaps why, as Alain Brossat has noted in his work on France in 1944-45, so many of the liberated have found their memory of "the American moment" so irrevocably condensed into a number of "fetish objects" like chewing gum, cigarettes, instant coffee, the jerrican, and the jeep.²⁰

- 28 At the end of September 1944, one Flemish newspaper was confident that peace would usher in a democratic renaissance. Tellingly, however, the newspaper was not in the first place referring to political democracy, but "democracy in this sense: that the standard of living will be much higher than before the war." Belgians bought into the American cult of abundance with barely disguised eagerness. Historian Mark Mazower has rightly pointed out that in the postwar period, because of an initial lack of money to spend, the "production of desires" manifested itself quite some time before the actual "purchase of goods." But rather than the advertising agencies and retailers of the 1950s which Mazower identifies, it was the Allied and especially the American publicity convoys of 1944-45 that set this production of desires in motion.²¹
- 29 Substantial pay increases in 1944 and 1945 and a rapid industrial resurgence fueling employment had foreign observers talk about "the Belgian miracle" before there was any mention even of a Marshall Plan. That miracle was translated almost immediately into a rising demand for consumer items, a trend further strengthened by redistribution set in motion by the newly introduced social security system. With stops and starts, Europe's old bourgeois regime of consumption in the postwar years would be transformed inexorably into one of mass consumerism. Belgium was among the spearheads of that evolution and, in order to keep the momentum going and its population happy as well as productive, gladly integrated itself into what historian Victoria de Grazia has called America's Market Empire. It took the Belgian retail trade slightly more than two years after the war to exceed its prewar volume. Visiting Belgium for the American State Department in mid-1946, economist Charles Kindleberger in a letter to his wife expressed surprise at the quantities of luxury items that were being imported from the US. These included cars, spirits, soft drinks, and above all expensive nylons of which in 1947 alone Belgians purchased some ten million pairs.²²
- 30 The American presence in many ways also contributed to the erosion of authority. The rigid social order was shaken, a contemporary Belgian sociologist noted, not only because war had destroyed and disrupted much of society, but also because in some unexpected ways it had opened new vistas that promised to erode provincialism. "Workers whose lives were particularly narrow and whose possibilities for advancement were excessively limited," the sociologist wrote, "have traveled, worked with people greatly different from themselves, established relationships with people of all nationalities, learned new customs, and gained realization of things they had not dreamed of." The sociologist specifically mentioned the experience of the 200,000 Belgians who had volunteered or been forced to work in Nazi Germany. But since he was writing in an American journal at the end of 1945, he might just as well have been alluding to the hundreds of thousands of Belgians who had worked for or had otherwise become closely acquainted with the Anglo-Americans at home.
- 31 Indeed, conservative elements in Belgium and across Europe, from Britain to Germany, were particularly anxious about the mass presence of Americans that the war had

suddenly made possible. That anxiety harked back all the way to the nineteenth century, when America's rising mass democracy had caused much dislike for that society among European elites on different ends of the political spectrum. If those elites had not been able to hide a measure of admiration for America's technology, management skills, and efficiency, they showed much trepidation in the face of an egalitarianism that was the other side of what Dutch historian Rob Kroes has called its "unfettered modernity." It was that blatant egalitarianism more than anything else that made America a potentially subversive force in the eyes of anyone keen on preserving and cultivating the advantages of status, whether economic, political, or cultural. And it was those most threatened who traditionally had been keenest to associate America with decadence, degeneracy, and *Unkultur*.²³

- 32 A moral panic took hold of various authorities, and not least Belgium's powerful Catholic Church. A popular Belgian riddle in 1945 asked what the difference was between the occupation and the liberation. Answer: during the former, women had to hide their men; during the latter, men their women. The joke betrayed the impotence of Belgian men during the war. But it also hinted that the liberation's licentiousness could not have arisen had American troops been oversexed and Belgian women completely unwilling. The loosening of social controls, the presence of large numbers of young and exotic liberators and, not unimportant in a predominantly Catholic country, the sudden mass availability of contraceptives in the form of condoms, allowed many women actively to pursue sexual pleasure during the liberation. Historian Marilyn Lake has made the case that this "wartime stimulation of female desire" was carried over into marriages old and new in the form of "high expectations of personal pleasure." With sexual as well as household roles shaken up, some women renegotiated their marriages. Still others decided to take full control of their personal lives by filing for divorce. A majority of the high percentage of women in Liège who became divorced in 1947, for example, had been married between five and fifteen years. The average age of the divorcées was between 30 and 40 and most of them went ahead with the decision without holding a job outside of the home.²⁴
- 33 There were worries too about the changes that the liberation had set in motion among young people. Historian Fabrice Maerten in research on the French-speaking part of Belgium has made the point that the mentality of young people had begun to undergo fundamental transformations as early as the end of World War I. That is when the emergence of a consumer society (spurred on in part by the American model) gradually made them embrace individualism and become politically disengaged. This was reflected, for example, in the decline of membership in both Christian and socialist youth movements. Maerten has argued that the depression of the 1930s and the Nazi occupation, with "their collective constraints and impetus of solidarity," had merely "slowed down and/or masked an evolution that would become glaringly obvious again with the arrival of the Allies."²⁵
- 34 But, although Maerten is keen to emphasize that the profound change in mentality did not originate in 1944, he does not deny that the huge presence of Anglo-Americans did much to accelerate the reemerging trend. That probably helps to explain why the change appeared to be so abrupt to many in Belgium and had adults and authorities worry about youth as a force of destabilization. The Catholic press in particular railed against children who were allowed to run wild. "Not just in the cities and the workers' quarters," one newspaper lamented a year after the liberation, "but even in our good

old villages things are going downhill. Modern youth has no more guidance in life, has lost its bearings and just lets things roll. These days, children no older than 14-15 go where they want, to cafés, cinemas, and dance halls. And since the liberation our boys and girls have seen and learned things that have had a perverse impact on their young natures." Boys and girls alike, it was said, were enjoying "strong cognac and exotic cigarettes as if there was no tomorrow." Allied uniforms appeared to have the effect on girls of magnets. Teenage girls hung around dance halls hoping to be picked up and not caring if the GIs were black or white. "On train and tram girls and soldiers are in each others' arms, in poses that are far from edifying." It is not difficult to recognize behind these concerns about moral corruption, older European images of American habits as culturally shallow, vulgarly materialistic and, ultimately, insidiously subversive. In that context, arguments between adolescents and adults over American influences can be understood, in the words of historian Uta Poiger, as "contests over moral, cultural, and political authority."²⁶

- 35 Finally, yet another contest over authority was announced by the presence of many thousands of African-American troops who served in Belgium as part of the logistical rear. Their presence sent mixed messages and the Belgian response to black American troops was equally complex. The segregation and discrimination of black GIs surprised and disappointed many Belgians who regarded them as liberators like all others. One woman said she had expected the Americans to be "ahead of the others." At the same time, however, the mere sight of blacks in crisp uniforms carrying weapons and handling heavy artillery appeared to be announcing a brave new world in which continued control over the vast and rich colony of the Congo no longer seemed as certain as it had been before the war. Although much tension arose from relations between Belgian women and Allied troops in general, it is telling that in several peace parades, floats acted out the presence of Americans by showing women in the intimate and compromising company of inhabitants dressed up as *black* GIs.
- 36 In their peace parade on July 22, 1945, inhabitants of the village of Oneux near Comblain offered perhaps the most incisive synthesis of what the liberation meant to them and many other Belgians. In one particular group, three villagers were dressed like GIs who could easily be understood to stand for the new world order in which American power, hard and soft, had moved center stage. That they had chosen to be black soldiers to represent the US and that another actor had painted his face half-black and half-white sent out clear signals of changes in racial relations and the challenges this posed in terms of imperial future and national identity. That the other two actors in this group were young women was equally revealing. They simply played themselves. But by showing themselves provocatively intimate with the black Americans and defiantly in control of the steering wheel of the vehicle transporting the group, they demonstrated that it was not just white dominance, but male authority, too, that might never again be what it had been before. The vehicle, at last, was a horse-drawn, canvas replica of a jeep, symbol of the imaginative power of science and technology, but even more so of a cult of abundance promising to smother painful memories of the era of sacrifice. This truly was, bright letters summed up on the driver's side, a "modern liberation."²⁷

NOTES

1. F. S. V. Donnison, *Civil Affairs and Military Government: North-West Europe, 1944-1946* (London: HMSO, 1961), 37-40, 111-119, and 469-471.
2. Harry L. Coles and Albert K. Weinberg, *Civil Affairs: Soldiers Become Governors* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1964) 805.
3. André Kaspi, *La libération de la France, juin 1944 – janvier 1946* (Paris: Perrin, 1995) 473.
4. Désiré Debroux, "Histoire d'un gamin (1939-1945): Ottignies-Limelette," AB 2240, Center for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society, Brussels (WCS).
5. Nathalie Maleux, "La propagande parachutée d'Angleterre sur la Belgique occupée: Analyse de la forme et du contenu." (Thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1995), 36 and 71-72.
6. *Het Belang van Limburg* (HBVL), 23 and 30 September 1944.
7. D. Aerts, AB 1591, WCS.
8. Cécile Marechal, "Le cinéma et le jazz à Bruxelles à la Libération (sept. 1944 – fév. 1945)" (Thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1985), Vol. A, 6-7.
9. Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force Belgium (SHAEFB), Fortnightly Report (FR) No. 2, 3, 17 October 1944, WO 202/682, AA 1230, WCS.
10. *Le Soir*, 10 June 1945.
11. Sartre is quoted in Peter Duignan and L. H. Gann, *The Rebirth of the West: The Americanization of the Democratic World, 1945-1958* (London and Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 410. HBVL, 1 October 1944.
12. SHAEFB, FR No. 6, 2, 12 December 1944, WO 202/686, AA 1230, WCS.
13. SHAEFB, FR No. 10, Annexure II to Appendix E, 6 February 1945, WO 202/682, AA 1230, WCS.
14. Reports in Folders 972, 1005, and 1020 of the Archives du Haut Commissariat à la Sécurité de l'État (SE), WCS.
15. Ganshof to General Erskine, January 1945, Folder 528, AA 1311, WCS.
16. Reports SE in Folders 526-527 and 1098, AA 1311, WCS.
17. On Aldershot, see *Le Peuple*, 7 July 1945. On the American press, see John Willoughby, *Remaking the Conquering Heroes: The Social and Geopolitical Impact of the Postwar American Occupation of Germany* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 149.
18. SE reports, Folders 526 and 1054, AA 1311, WCS.
19. David Elwood makes a similar point in this issue when he refers to "the revolution of rising expectations."
20. Alain Brossat, *Libération, fête folle, 6 juin 44 – 8 mai 45: Mythes et rites ou le grand théâtre des passions populaires* (Paris: Autrement, 1994) 163-164.
21. HBVL, 24-25 September 1944. Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*. (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 307.
22. Karel Veraghtert, "De naoorlogse economie en het Marshallplan, 1944-1960." In *Oost West West Best: België onder de Koude Oorlog, 1947-1989*. Edited by Mark Van den Wijngaert and Lieve Beullens. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1997) 70-71. 'Market Empire' and 'bourgeois regime of consumption' are concepts taken from Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2005).
23. Guillaume Jacquemyns, "Readjustment Problems of the Repatriates" in: Smith Simpson, ed., "Belgium in Transition." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 247 (September 1946): 86. Rob Kroes, "European Anti-Americanism: What's New?" *Journal of American History* 93, no. 2 (2006): 428.
24. Marilyn Lake, "Female Desires: The Meaning of World War II," *Australian Historical Studies* 24, no. 95 (1990): 275 and 282-284. Marc Malevez, "Aspects démographiques de la libération." (Thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1985) 87-89.

25. Fabrice Maerten, "Jeunesse et résistance. Entre mythe et réalité: Le cas du Hainaut, 1940-1944," *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps Présent* No. 8 (2001): 304-305.
26. HBVL, 22 September and 19 August 1945. Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000) 2.
27. Photo No. 104379, CWS.
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ABSTRACTS

The historiography of the liberation of Belgium traditionally focuses on military operations and the first enthusiastic encounters with Allied troops in September 1944. In reality, however, Allied forces remained stationed on Belgian soil until late in 1945, causing relations to be much more complex than is generally remembered. This paper examines the American presence in Belgium, both in terms of waves of admiration and currents of discontent, and concludes that, despite their mixed reception, American troops more than any others came to represent a 'modern' liberation creating rising expectations

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