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BETWEEN RESENTMENT AND RE-EDUCATION

The Belgian Occupation Army and the Germans, 1945-1952

For six decades, between 1945 and 2005, Belgian officers and soldiers carried out part of their career or of their military service in Germany. Created as the Belgian Occupation Army, the name changed in the early 1950s to Belgian Forces in Germany, a symbolic name change that marked the beginning of an evolution during which the former enemy became a partner in the framework of NATO in 1955. The article focuses on the first years of this presence in Germany, when the memory of the Second World War and of the second occupation of Belgium by Germany was still fresh. It questions the representation of Germany and the Germans among the soldiers and the officers, but also among those who outlined Belgian military policies in Germany. It shows the “moral superiority complex” of many Belgians towards the defeated, but also towards the British ally who was suspected of being lenient towards the Germans and failed to understand their mentality. Furthermore, the relations between Belgians, British and Germans were conditioned by the Allied refusal to confer the political competences of the military government to the Belgians and by a unilateral British decision to extend the Belgian divisional area to Westphalia, two hundred kilometres east of the Rhine. The principal objective of the Belgian participation in the occupation, the guarantee of the Belgian interests with respect to the defeated Germany, then seemed impossible to reach.

Two geographical areas are at the centre of the analysis : the border region, subject to claims of Belgian reparations, and the city of Cologne which the Belgian troops occupied at the expense of French aspirations on the Rhineland. The article also seeks to understand the very difficult introduction of a Belgian cultural propaganda, which illustrates the tense terrain of Belgian politics towards Germany. If the government adopted a moderate position with regard to the reparations relatively early on, it maintained a hard line where the relations between Belgians and Germans were concerned, fearing a public opinion little disposed to accept a rapprochement. However, the reality on the ground often defied this attitude.