Choices under the Occupation:

Resistance, Collaboration and Accommodation in Two Towns in Francophone Belgium, 1940-1944.

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

AJMS	*Archives des juridictions militaires supprimées,* Brussels.
Bodleian	*Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford,* Oxford
Cegesoma	*Centre d'études et de documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines, Studie- en documentatiecentrum Oorlog en hedendaagse Maatschappij,* Brussels
Haupt.	*Hauptmann*

I. Introduction

To the south of the Belgian city of Charleroi lies an area of rolling countryside known as the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse. The countryside, agricultural and wooded, is dotted with a tapestry of villages and small provincial towns or *bourgades*. This study specifically deals with a small part of this region, two towns and their rural hinterlands, during the German occupation of 1940-1944. The study focuses on how these communities related to the changing internal and external dynamics of the period and how the experience of occupation shaped regional and national identities. In this way, it is hoped that the study will point towards wider trends of the period in a provincial context, not simply in the region in question but also further afield in Belgium and beyond.

Philippeville and Mariembourg, the two towns in question, are situated roughly ten kilometres from each other and, at the time of the occupation, shared a number of similarities beyond geography alone. Both traced their origins to the early 16th century when they had both been founded as fortress towns to police the unstable French-Burgundian borderlands. By the 1940s, however, the only surviving traces of this illustrious past were their unusual, radiating street plans. Economically, the communities revolved around agriculture, forestry work and marble quarrying.[1] Because of their rail and road connections, they acted as hubs for the surrounding countryside and were relatively prosperous economic and administrative centres in their own right, with cafés, restaurants and cinemas. Despite or perhaps because of this, both were comparatively self-contained communities. Conservative and Catholic in outlook, each were dominated by a small class of notables, often members of liberal professions, who monopolised administrative and civic positions. Neither was particularly large; the extreme-right Rexists, perhaps rather generously, estimated Philippeville's population at 9,300 and Mariembourg's at 3,500 by 1941.[2] While Philippeville could boast of its status as the third capital of the Province of Namur to some extent, both were typical of the small towns which dotted the large expanse of rural Wallonia south of the belt of industrial areas stretching from the coal fields of the Borinage to the city of Liège.

[1] P. Stavaux, 'Philippeville: Résistante Silencieuse, 10 mai 1940 - 3 septembre 1944' (Catholic Univ. of Louvain-la-Neuve licentiate thesis, 1994), pp. 4-5.
[2] Cegesoma, AA1314/296: Facsimile report on Rexist membership in the *Cercle de Philippeville*, undated.

To the populations of Belgium's metropolitan centres, on whom historians of the Second World War have often focused, this region might well have seemed peripheral and even backwards. When Louis Ottobon, a journalist for the Charleroi-based newspaper *La Province de Namur*, visited Philippeville in August 1940, he articulated many of these prejudices about rural Belgium. Philippeville, Ottobon wrote, was a 'petite ville historique remarquable par ses vieilles bâtisses de pierres aux toits d'ardoises au style plus que millénaire' populated by a 'peuple courageux et travailleur, obstinément attaché à ses traditions'.[3] In other words, the towns and their communities were static, immune from socio-political developments elsewhere in the country, resembling the idealised Walloon rural world of the 18th century more than the dangerous and volatile one of the Second World War. Yet little could be further from the truth. During the course of the occupation, societies, like those which these towns epitomised, sustained social change at least as dramatic, if not more so, than the cities at the centre of most narratives. Recognising this is all the more important because *bourgades,* such as Philippeville and Mariembourg, accounted for a sizeable part of the Belgian population at the time. Likewise, as Ottobon's comments illustrate, these communities retained a strong sense of localism which allowed each region to claim some form of unique character to the detriment of centralised or national identity.[4] How these communities related to the provincial and national governments was complex and changed considerably during the war.[5] Ignoring the small-town experience of occupation thus risks ignoring an important facet of the experience of occupation as a whole. Far from being obscure and peripheral, towns like Philippeville represent a canvas on which historians can read the same change and patterns under the occupation which touched a significant proportion of the nation as a whole.

The German occupation of Belgium is, of course, comparatively well-studied.[6] On the morning of 10 May, despite the best efforts of the Belgian government to avoid confrontation, Belgium was invaded by Germany. Within just 18 days, military resistance collapsed across the country. The government fled into exile in France, later moving to

[3] L. Ottobon, 'La Tourmente s'est déchaînée à Philippeville', *La Province de Namur*, 19.4.40. 'A small, historic town, remarkable for its old stone buildings with slate roofs in a style that has lasted a millennium…[its] plucky and industrious people, obstinately attached to their traditions.'
[4] M. Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944-1947* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 53-4.
[5] N. Wouters, 'Localisation in the Age of Centralisation: Local Government in Belgium and Nord-Pas-de-Calais (1940-1944)', in *idem*, H. Van Goethem and B. De Wever (eds.), *Local Government in Occupied Europe (1939-1945)* (Ghent, 2006), pp. 84-6.
[6] For a broad summary of Belgium under occupation, see W. Warmbrunn, *The German Occupation of Belgium, 1940-1944* (New York, 1993). For a more detailed study, see H. Jacquemyns, *België in Tweede Wereldoorlog* (9 vols, Kapellen, 1991), ii: Een Bezet land.

London, while King Leopold III and his army surrendered formally on 28th May. Belgium, together with some French border territories in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, fell under a newly-created *Militärverwaltung*, under *Wehrmacht* jurisdiction, based in Brussels. The occupation itself, however, does not represent a homogenous period and changed considerably in nature. From the start, the occupation administration was fundamentally concerned with restoring order and stability and, as such, was keen to work through existing social institutions. By 1941, however, the growing hostility of an increasingly hungry population as well as ideological considerations moved the Germans into increasing contact with Belgian pre-war fascist parties. The *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (VNV) was favoured in Flanders, while Léon Degrelle's Catholic Rexist Party emerged as the principal collaborationist group in Wallonia. While open resistance was always restricted to a minority, Rex's active collaboration gained little support from a population which it increasingly alienated. By the end of 1941, if not earlier, it was clear to all that a German victory was far from inevitable. Increased German demands, for civilian labour and the deportation of Belgium's Jewish population, meant that existing hostility only grew. By 1942, disparate networks of organised resistance existed in towns and cities across the country while the frustration of collaborators was manifested by their increasingly violent retaliations and an accompanying polarisation. Resistance activity increased palpably as, by the end of 1943, it was impossible to hide the dire situation on the Eastern Front and the visible decline of effective German power in Belgium itself. The resistance finally peaked after the Allied landings in Normandy in June 1944. Even before September when British and American troops had crossed the Belgian frontier, an effective occupation existed on paper alone.

Local studies, when done well, provide a valuable insight into the way policies, conceived and implemented by the central institutions of the state and of political power, actually play out in the social fabric of daily life. Above all, it must be noted that local studies are not the same as local history. Local history focuses on the history of a geographic area which is of primary importance in its own right. By contrast, we are interested in breaking down a larger historical period or phenomenon into a local unit for analytical clarity. As Clifford Geertz noted in his field, very much a parallel one, 'Anthropologists don't study villages… they study in villages.'[7] To some extent, the study of history in local context follows the same rules: 'the locus of study is not the object of study'.[8] The case for studying wider phenomena in this way is strengthened, not just by the validity of the enterprise, but also by the insights they

[7] C. Geertz, 'Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *idem*, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), p. 22.
[8] *Ibid*.

can yield. In the case of the occupation in France, detailed studies of life at a local level, notably John Sweets' study of Clermont-Ferrand and Robert Gildea's work on the lower Loire Valley, have been immensely influential in shaping a wider social history of the occupation.[9] By demonstrating that the French retained substantial agency over the conduct of their day-to-day lives, such studies have done much to further understanding of the form that the occupation took. In this model, we can better understand the role that pre-existing social institutions, political structures and local culture played in shaping it. As such, these studies have provided a sharp insight into the 'social reality' of the occupation and demonstrated the wider point that the actual nature of the occupation was determined as much by the French themselves as by the Germans. There is no reason to believe that a similar method cannot yield similarly beneficial results across the Franco-Belgian border. Philippeville and Mariembourg are, in this respect, ideal case-studies because they complement our predominantly centralised, urban narratives of the German occupation in Belgium.

As the region is one with which I have no personal connection, it was chosen for its relative wealth of sources. As elsewhere in Belgium, there is a rich literature created by amateur local historians who have assembled primary documents from private archives and conducted oral-history interviews. There are also a number of academic studies treating thematic aspects, like the resistance, in the same regional context which have been helpful. The most important sources, however, have been archival. Most are held in the Cegesoma archives in Brussels and comprise papers and documents seized by the military prosecutor (*auditorat général*) from local collaborators in the aftermath of the liberation. Newspapers and other documents were accessed at the *Archives de l'État*, also in Brussels. Most usefully, however, I was able to get access to the classified archives of the former Ministry of Justice held by the *Collège des Procureurs-Généraux* which held some crucial papers on the later stages of the occupation in the Mariembourg region.

[9] See J. F. Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France: The French under Nazi Occupation* (Oxford, 1986); R. Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In Search of the German Occupation, 1940-1945* (Oxford, 2002).

II. Accommodation

The period following the start of the occupation resists simple characterisation, especially that of the binary opposition between 'collaboration' and 'resistance' common in early writing on the subject. In a study of the eastern-Belgian town of Verviers under occupation, the historian Jacques Wynants proposed to characterise the period as one of 'disintegration' brought about by the invasion followed by 'reconstruction'.[10] This model seems eminently applicable to Philippeville and Mariembourg. Within the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse at least, this process of reconstruction is best exemplified by the development of a form of 'accommodation', based around a number of individuals who positioned themselves as mediators between their communities and the Germans. It was not, as has been argued, necessarily a period of good relations between occupiers and occupied per se. Above all, it occurred against the backdrop of a situation in which the local community found itself defenceless in the face of an unpredictable and all-powerful German administration. A workable *modus vivendi* was thus not a luxury but a necessity for the local community.

In Philippeville and Mariembourg, as for the other towns of Belgium, the outbreak of war and the invasion itself was a period of total crisis which swept away old certainties. For Philippeville in particular, because of its strategic importance on the line of French counter-advance, the period between the start of the war on 10th May and its occupation on the 15th was characterised by destruction, both physical and psychological. Within hours of the German invasion, the first bombs fell on Philippeville. By the night of the 14th, the Rue de Namur lay in ruins, debris blocked the streets and a plume of black smoke, coming from two fuel trains in the town's station, could be seen from miles around. A third of the town's houses were damaged within just a few days. Refugees clogged the town's streets and nearly overwhelmed the nunnery which acted as a makeshift hospital. Among the refugees, fear and rumours ran riot, especially in Mariembourg where the German destruction of the town in August 1914 had left lasting emotional scars. Amid the falling bombs, terrified refugees and columns of sorry-looking French soldiers, order in Philippeville collapsed**.** Fully two thirds of Philippeville's population fled southwards towards Mariembourg and France in the days before the arrival of the first German troops.[11] The trauma and chaos of the whole period was described by a visiting journalist from *La Province de Namur*:

[10] See J. Wynants, *Verviers 1940: Contribution à l'Étude d'une Ville et d'une Région au Début de l'Occupation allemande* (Brussels, 1981).
[11] J. Couvreur, *Philippeville Mai 1940: Histoire et Témoinages* (Philippeville, 2013), p. 23.

> 'Les raids de l'aviation allemande se poursuivirent sans discontinuer [*sic*]. Les engins jetés du ciel produisaient des déflagrations formidables. Des maisons s'écroulaient. Des lueurs d'incendie embrasaient le ciel. Partout, les vitres volaient en éclats. Tout Philippeville, vidé de la moitié de ses habitants, tremblait. Ceux qui étaient restés, vivaient retranchés dans les caves.'[12]

Despite its comparative rapidity, the German invasion of Philippeville can be firmly depicted as a period of disintegration. The violence of the episode swept away the pre-war *status quo*, creating a new and frightening situation in which the communities were left powerless and without effective representation in a position that they did not understand.
However, it was not just the communities themselves which fell victim. Local institutions, especially those of local government, were a major casualty. Nico Wouters has characterised the period of occupation as one of 'localisation' but in the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse, this was only partly true.[13] Communal governments served as a bridge between the local and the national. As an institution, the communal council and the position of *bourgmestre* (mayor) was highly influential. Not only did the *bourgmestre* represent the community to the outside world, but the communal council gained social capital from the class of people who came forward to fill it. In Philippeville, almost all the communal positions were filled by the town's bourgeoisie. The institution had certainly not inspired unconditional faith in the interwar period and there had been widespread calls to reform it. However, as an institution to mediate the whims of the central government (felt to be 'above' the day-to-day concerns of the locals and prone to making stupid, arbitrary decisions), the institution still performed an essential and exclusive local function.[14] With the invasion, the mere existence of the institution was called into question. In many cases, the local government was swept up in the *Exode*, with officials abandoning their posts in the process. More fundamentally, however, it was not immediately obvious whether the institution would actually have a function in the occupied country and whether the central and provincial governments would even continue to exist in any meaningful way. In the aftermath of the invasion, there were a number of attempts to revive the communal government but without success. In Philippeville, the non-'*fuyard*' members of the communal government met on 16th May, 'en

[12] L. Ottobon, 'La Tourmente s'est déchaînée à Philippeville', *La Province de Namur*, 19.8.40. 'The German air raids continued without interruption. The devices falling from the sky created formidable explosions. Houses collapsed. The glow of fires set the sky ablaze. Everywhere, windows exploded into pieces. Philippeville, emptied of half of its inhabitants, trembled. Those who stayed lived dug into the cellars'.
[13] Wouters, 'Localisation in the Age of Centralisation', pp. 88-9.
[14] *Ibid*, pp. 83-4.

concert avec la *Kommandantur*', presumably in an attempt to revive some kind of administration along pre-war lines.[15] In Mariembourg, Edgard Challe, the *bourgmestre*, used the occasion of the invasion to seize personal power at the head of an unelected and oligarchic '*Conseil des Notables*' and seemed unwilling to relinquish his new-found powers. 'Il prétend être roi dans sa commune' complained a Rexist report in December 1940.[16] It was clear, however, that faith in the administration could not be quickly restored. The squabbling over the role of *bourgmestre* at Philippeville merely confirmed that the institution was not performing its function and was not fit for purpose. Although it continued to function and, perhaps, regained some faith with the increasing stability of 1941, its monopoly on community relations with the outside world was temporarily broken.

The community felt increasingly unprotected from external forces at a time when these external forces were uniquely threatening. To characterise the phase immediately following the arrival of the German forces as a 'honeymoon period', in Werner Warmbrunn's words, of mutual respect and tolerance between Belgians and Germans withstands little scrutiny in the case of Philippeville.[17] The initial arrival of the Germans was met with a certain amount of relief, with the convent diary remarking on the 'excessivement correct' behaviour of the German troops and noting approvingly the religious tendencies of army doctors encountered.[18] But this belied continued external threats which, though reduced after the Belgian surrender on 28th May, still continued. British aircraft bombed Philippeville on a number of occasions in late May and June, causing a certain amount of consternation. Refugees and troops continued to flood Philippeville's streets for more than a month after the end of hostilities.

Far more worrying, however, was the behaviour of the new *Kommandantur* which, no sooner ensconced in quarters in Philippeville's town square, began to fire out orders and directives at an astonishing rate.[19] The directives, which covered everything from the exact treatment of mouth ulcers in cattle and the size of road-signs to the millimetre to major

[15] A. Lépine, 'Le début de la 2e guerre mondiale à Philippeville: Journal des Sœurs de Notre-Dame', *Cahier d'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, 5 (1993), p. 17. 'In concert with the *Kommandantur*'.
[16] 'Mariembourg: Au fil des jours', *La Province de Namur*, 6.10.40; AJMS, 1151/L/46: Maurice Pirard to Jean Georges, 10.12.40. 'He wants to be King of his commune…'.
[17] Warmbrunn, *The German occupation of Belgium,* pp. 53-4.
[18] Lépine, 'Le début de la 2e guerre mondiale à Philippeville', p. 15. 'excessively proper'.
[19] For a discussion of the position of the Philippeville *arrondissement* within the German administration, see Stavaux, 'Philippeville: Résistante silencieuse', pp. 15-7.

administrative redistribution, must surely have intimidated their Belgian recipients.[20] It was abundantly clear that the German authorities knew little of local *mœurs* and had little interest in respecting them. Whereas the communal government had moderated the demands of external power in the past, the Germans had few such qualms. A less benign demonstration occurred on 28th May when the German authorities ordered the immediate evacuation of the tiny rural communes around Brûly-de-Pesche, south of Mariembourg, apparently at random. Several thousand civilians were displaced in the process.[21] The German authorities had shown themselves able to exercise their unchallenged power in an extremely arbitrary way, without taking into account the interests of the local community.

The behaviour of the German authorities illustrated the fundamental vulnerability of the community and its powerlessness in the face of the external. It also illustrated an essential 'need' within the community for mediators or 'hinge men' who could defend, or at least represent to some extent, the opinions of their community. German power, though fundamentally external, was also basically human. From its establishment, the *Kommandantur* was less of an institution than a number of individuals.[22] Despite representing the deeply-impersonal Military Government in Belgium and Northern France, the *Kommandant*, Haupt. Funk, was himself a known quantity to some extent. Despite a certain suspicion, in both Philippeville and Mariembourg, civilians talked with and even befriended German soldiers. The *Kommandantur* itself functioned as a drop-in centre, with fixed opening hours, where civilians could appear in person to argue their case.[23] Good contacts with German administrators could therefore be used expressly to defend the local community or individuals from German demands. This mediation could be done on a personal basis, creating a basic protocol, and leaving some individuals, especially those in positions of institutional or social power or, simply, German speakers, uniquely well-placed within their communities as a whole.

The emergence of this form of accommodation was in evidence within days of the initial German arrival. The nuns of the *Sœurs de Notre-Dame* in Philippeville seem to have realised this from the start of the occupation. In May 1940, when rogue German soldiers jumped the convent's wall and tried to break in, the nuns solicited the support of a 'petit officier' billeted

[20] For instance, see Cegesoma, AA92/1: Order No. 8 of the *Ortskommandantur* Philippeville, 8.6.40, Order No. 12, 13.6.40, and Order No. 32, 11.8.40.
[21] A. Lépine, 'Quelques Souvenirs de Guerre dans l'Entité de Cerfontaine (1940-1945)', *Bibliothèque Historique d'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, 139 (2004), pp. 7-9.
[22] The number of German soldiers in Philippeville is estimated at fewer than 40 throughout most of 1940, see Stavaux, 'Philippeville: Résistante silencieuse', p. 16.
[23] Cegesoma, AA92/1: Order No. 12 of the *Ortskommandantur* Philippeville, 13.6.40.

nearby who shouted at the soldiers and ordered them out. The nuns also rapidly realised that *Sœur* Julie, a German with rumoured National Socialist tendencies, might be uniquely well placed to manage the convent's relations with the new authorities in the *Kommandantur*.[24] The success of the mediation, real or imagined, spurred a huge expansion in the numbers of individuals attempting to make approaches (*démarches*) towards the *Kommandantur*. Much to the disgust of the local Rexists, it was local notables, regardless of their political sympathies, who descended on the *Kommandantur* to plead their cases and that of their clients:

> 'Ce qui est le plus curieux, nous en avons des exemples tous les jours autour de nous, ces acharnés contre l'Allemagne avant le 10 mai, ceux qui nous insultaient d'Hitlérions…qui criaient dans nos meetings "A Berlin" etc. Ceux-là maintenant sont les plus habiles pour se faufiler près de la *Kommandantur*, y chercher des avantages et hypocritement s'attirer la sympathie et cependant dans leurs entourages ils tablent toujours sur une victoire anglaise…'[25]

It was those in positions of local power or influence and who possessed certain skills who were most able to exercise influence with the *Kommandantur*, regardless of their political loyalties. A premium was put on German language skills, especially significant in light of the poor standard of French apparent in the *Kommandantur's* communiques. In nearby Dinant, the *Festungskommandantur* issued a particularly emphatic circular against communicating with the German authorities in any language other than German. 'Ceci n'est pas permis. Dorénavant, toutes les requêtes libellées en langue française, quel que soit [*sic*] leur objet, seront considérées comme nuls.'[26] Likewise, attempts to provide 'gifts' to sweeten relations with members of the Philippeville *Kommandantur* were quickly stifled:

> 'Je vois en cela un signe heureux que la population veut donner une forme à sa reconnaissance envers l'administration allemande pour les efforts que celle-ci fait dans l'intérêt de la population….[mais] si l'administration militaire réussit à remplir

[24] Lépine, 'Le début de la 2e guerre mondiale à Philippeville', p. 16. 'Small officer'
[25] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pirard to Georges, 3.11.40. 'What is most curious of all is that we see examples around us every day of those people the bitterest disposed towards Germany before 10 May, those who insulted us as "Hitlerites"…, who yelled "Go back to Berlin" at our meetings etc. It is those people there who are most adept at sliding in close with the *Kommandantur*, looking for advantages and hypocritically enticing all sorts of sympathy while always counting on an English victory when among their own entourages…'.
[26] Cegesoma, AA108: *Communication de l'Administration Communale*, 14.09.40. 'This is not allowed. From now on, all requests formulated in French whatever their objective, will be considered void'.

> sa mission pour le bien-être général, elle considérera toujours cet aveu consciencieux comme ca [*sic*] récompense.'[27]

By November 1940, however, it had become obvious that the Germans were most interested in dealing with those in positions of institutional power alone. The convent and communal government, the two 'institutions' of Philippeville, figured highly in this and were in constant contact with the *Kommandantur*. When, in September 1940, a telephone cable was cut in an act of unorganised defiance, it was the communal government which came to the aid of the population. The Germans, threatening the forced evacuation of a significant part of the Philippeville *arrondissement*, were prevailed on by Paul Le Boulengé and Joseph Coibion, the leading members of the local government, to reduce the penalty to a mere extension of the curfew and a civilian guard on the cable.[28] The ability to negotiate with the German authorities bought the communal government some of the legitimacy it had lost in the eyes of the locals. By the end of 1940, both the communal administrations of Philippeville and Mariembourg were routinely receiving letters asking the *bourgmestres*, or other members of the administration, to intercede on behalf of local individuals whose interests were threatened by German demands.[29]

From the autumn of 1940 to the spring of 1942, the idea that official, institutional, local power was intimately connected with mediation was well-established. The concept of intercession by an individual who could bridge the local and the external was a fundamental part of the relationship of accommodation reached with the Germans in Philippeville and Mariembourg. Increasingly, intercession provided a new *raison d'être* for the communal authorities to recover their purpose. Plainly, personal intercession as a relationship of accommodation was not simply restricted to the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse. Further up the chain, the archive of Prince Emmanuel du Croy, the German-appointed Provincial Governor of Namur from 1942, preserves dozens of letters requesting the intercession of the Prince on behalf of an individual prisoner or hostages, often pleading some kind of personal introduction. 'Ne pensez-vous pas qu'un mot, écrit, en faveur de sa libération, par votre cher frère son Altesse le Gouverneur de la province de Namur, serait décisif? Son nom, sa qualité de Gouverneur, me semblent tout puissants pour obtenir cette grâce' wrote one petitioner

[27] Cegesoma, AA92/1: *Ortskommandantur* to *bourgmestres*, 1.8.40. 'I see in this a happy sign that the population wishes to give a form of recognition to the German administration for the efforts it has made in the interest of the population…[but] if the military administration succeeds in its mission for the general wellbeing, it will consider this conscientious acknowledgement as its [sole] reward'.
[28] Lépine, 'Le début de la 2e guerre mondiale à Philippeville', p. 45.
[29] For an example, see Cegesoma, AA 1314/296: Leroy to Pirard, 21.7.40.

in 1943.[30] Nor did this pattern end at the provincial level. During this 'temps des notables', even the King himself functioned as a similar kind of recourse for grievances from across the country.[31]

As long as the Germans remained the external, hegemonic power, the civilians in Mariembourg and Philippeville continued with their profound devotion to the concept of the well-placed and trusted Belgian mediator to intercede on their behalf. With the local government unable to solve the immediate problems which the community faced, the legitimacy of these institutions temporarily passed to those who could.[32] It should also be noted that this system of local intermediaries did not exist in the same way in cities, where communities were forced to manage their own relations with the occupiers on an individual basis. As a result, these populations found mediation much less effective and so tended towards confrontation in a way not seen in the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse until 1944, if at all.[33] The populations of Philippeville and Mariembourg seems to have been quite content with this state of affairs, which prescribed its own rules and reciprocal obligations. This was crucial to the system's viability. In the manner of a client-patron relationship, behaviour had to be altered to cultivate connections which might, one day, be useful. In nearby Walcourt, farmers made a public donation of produce to the King in 1941, escorting the delivery to Laeken in person as a token of their respect.[34] Lower down the hierarchy, as we have seen, prominent local figures also developed 'entourages' of some sort. That this system could acquire the status it did is a testament to the needs of a population which found no outlet within any of the pre-established channels. These were, after all, communities which did not suddenly change their expectations of what should be expected in the way of governance and support from a local power source.[35] As a result, for a certain period of the occupation, this deeply-unofficial system acquired legitimacy in its own right. This has particular

[30] Cegesoma, AA951: Guibert Naniot to Emmanuel du Croy, 5.10.42. 'Do you not think that a word written in favour of his liberation from your dear brother, his Highness the Governor of the Province of Namur would be decisive? His name [and] quality as governor would seem to me to be all-powerful in obtaining this pardon?'
[31] J. Gotovitch and J. Gérard-Libois, *L'An 40: La Belgique Occupée* (Brussels, 1971), pp. 167-198. 'Time of the notables'.
[32] N. Wouters, 'The War for Legitimacy at the Local Level', in M. Conway and P. Romijn (eds.), *The War for Legitimacy in Politics and Culture, 1936-1946* (Oxford, 2008), p. 128.
[33] L. Taylor, *Between Resistance and Collaboration: Popular Protest in Northern France, 1940-1945* (New York, 2000), p. 62.
[34] J. Roba and J. Leotard, *La Région de Walcourt-Beaumont pendant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (2 vols, Walcourt, 1984), ii, 46-50.
[35] M. Conway and P. Romijn, 'Political Legitimacy in Mid-Twentieth-Century Europe: An Introduction', in *eidem*, *The War for Legitimacy,* pp. 2; 4-5.

implications when we consider the role of Rex and the seizure of local institutional power which will be considered in the next chapter.

III. Collaboration

While Philippeville and Mariembourg were witnessing the creation of a *modus vivendi* between the German occupiers and the population, one local group felt strongly that it was not receiving the privileges it deserved. Founded in 1935, the Rexist Party had developed a reasonable following in both towns through its doctrines of Social Catholicism and political radicalism. With the outbreak of war, Rex had aspirations of mirroring the status of the VNV in Flanders and becoming the leading party of a New Order, both domestically within Wallonia and internationally within a German-dominated Europe.[36] This chapter will explore how they attempted to use the external situation in which they found themselves for their own, local gain. The beginning of 1941 was a period of great optimism for the Rexists of the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse who felt themselves on the cusp of the power which had so far eluded them. For all their local initiatives, however, the Rexists still found themselves marginalised at every turn and failed to transform the external situation into local advantage. As its activity escalated, Rexists also found themselves on a collision course with a population who not only rejected their ideological stance but considered them to be more German than Belgian. In the face of such hostility, Rexist activists became increasingly dependent on the Germans for their positions and even their own protection. They used what power they had to settle local scores. By the time that both Philippeville and Mariembourg received long-coveted Rexist *bourgmestres* in 1942, it became clear that their local influence had almost totally evaporated. By the end of this episode in late 1942, Rex had taken institutional power but its grip on the *pays réel* was weak as ever before.

It was clear from an early stage of the occupation that the Rexists of the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse were conscious that the new external situation presented by the occupation could open up opportunities which had been denied them before the war. Political life in the Philippeville *arrondissement* during the interwar period, as elsewhere in rural Belgium, was dominated by the Catholic Party. Nonetheless, Rex had succeeded in making some electoral headway, however fleeting. Despite gaining an impressive 21% in the 1936 elections, its electoral support had declined below 8% by 1939 and continued to drop.[37] Rexist meetings in Mariembourg were frequently disrupted by hecklers and its membership, if dedicated,

[36] For a full treatment of Rex's origins and ambitions, see M. Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium: Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement, 1940-1944* (London, 1993).
[37] D. Falmagne, 'La Résistance armée dans l'Arrondissement de Philippeville (1940-1944)' (Catholic Univ. of Louvain-la-Neuve PhD thesis, 1994), p. 7.

remained dispersed and tiny.[38] Perhaps as a result of this, the *Kommandantur* showed no interest in Rex. Maurice Pirard, the local organiser for Rex in Mariembourg, found that only his minor position in the communal administration got him anywhere near the *Kommandantur*, 'ma qualité de rexiste n'intervient pas.'[39] Much to their chagrin, the Rexists found themselves ostracised from the process of accommodation as well as from civic society at large.[40] Even civic institutions established after the defeat, like the Philippeville branch of the *Corporation Nationale des Agriculteurs et de l'Alimentation* (CNAA) or the local Prisoners of War relief charity, consciously ostracised Rexists. When Maurice Leclercq, a known Rexist from Mariembourg, arrived at a meeting of the local branch of the CNAA, he was immediately accosted by the organisation's committee, filled by exactly the same bourgeois clique that Rex so despised in the communal government.[41] One of them, Coibion, the *bourgmestre* of Philippeville, confronted Leclercq, declaring that 'on sait à Mariembourg que vous êtes rexiste et cela ne doit pas être…si je savais que la corporation a des affinités avec Rex, je démissionnerais immédiatement.'[42] While a Rexist did succeed in taking control of the minor *Comité intercommunal de ravitaillement du canton de Philippeville*, it is clear that the change in the town's situation did not necessarily equal an important role for the party locally; Rexists were still as marginal as they had been in the pre-war years.

Despite these early setbacks, there was considerable enthusiasm and optimism for the immediate future of the moment. 'Je vous présente nos meilleurs vœux pour l'année 1941', wrote Pirard to his superior in Rex. 'Que cette année nous apporte le triomphe de nos idées.'[43] Developments in early 1941 appeared to justify these hopes. January 1941 saw a rapprochement of sorts between Rex and the occupiers. Rex's own *Führer*, Léon Degrelle, threw his lot in with the Nazis and announced his support for Nazism and for the policy of collaboration. In a small way, this seemed reciprocated by renewed Nazi discourse on the New Order in which many of Rex's long-term ambitions might be realised.[44] Externally, too, the party could command unprecedented resources. Enthusiastic party members began

[38] At its height in 1941, Mariembourg had just 49 members out of a total population of 3,500. Philippeville, with a population almost three times the size, managed just 25 members. Cegesoma, AA1314/296: Facsimile report on Rexist membership in the *Cercle de Philippeville*, undated.
[39] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pro Justitia of Pirard, 18.4.46. 'My position as a Rexist didn't come into it'.
[40] See the complaints raised in AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pirard to Georges, 3.11.40.
[41] P. Strummanne, 'L'Autonomie Communale: Une Institution Périmée', *La Province de Namur*, 12.9.40.
[42] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pirard to Georges, 14.02.41. 'We know in Mariembourg that you are a Rexist and should not be…if I knew the Corporation [i.e. the CNAA] had ties to Rex, I would resign immediately.'
[43] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pirard to Georges, 31.12.40. 'I send you our best wishes for the year 1941. May this year bring the triumph of our ideals.'
[44] F. Steurs, 'Collaboration', *La Province de Namur*, 24.4.41.

distributing endless newspapers, pamphlets and party propaganda produced by the central party to locals who exhibited the slightest curiosity in the movement, whether they or not they asked for it.[45]

By May 1941, this enthusiasm had reached fever-pitch with flurries of correspondence between its widely-distributed membership and the local *Cercle rexiste*. Party activities were stepped up hugely, particularly in campaigning and the recruitment of members. The hope was that, in the new climate, the results could be unprecedented. 'Je compte sur vous pour faire un effort pour l'organisation… le besogne sera maintenant plus facile, avec les nouvelles circonstances, il faut faire des membres.'[46] Beyond membership, the group also began distributing propaganda and taking an active part in recruitment for pro-German formations such as the paramilitary *Garde Wallonne* and, later, for Degrelle's *Légion Wallonie* fighting on the Eastern Front. There was even a concerted, if unsuccessful, attempt to revive Rex's pre-war paramilitary wing, the *Formations de Combat*, in Mariembourg. To this end, a number of local members, led by the enthusiastic Philippevillain Arsène Navaux, even went on a four-day training camp at Kontich to be lectured on tactics and organisation.[47] The culmination of this period of reinvigorated political activity was the opening of a special office on the Rue St-Louis in Mariembourg on 11th May intended to provide the local *cercle* with a venue for meetings and training for members.[48]

For all its enthusiasm for wider political and military events, however, it is clear that Mariembourg and Philippeville's Rexists were fundamentally concerned with power in their own community. Many, Pirard included, felt that it was the 'devoir' of all 'vieux rexistes' to stay put in their communities and take civic positions rather than to leave it and join the *Légion*, as the Rex hierarchy intimated. Within a day of arriving at the training camp at Kontich, all except one of the *cercle*'s members had returned home.[49] In a number of cases, it also seems that Rexists believed that, the Occupation could produce substantial benefit for the status and position of the community as a whole. In Philippeville, an illegal pamphlet distributed in 1942, shortly after the promotion of the town's Rexist *bourgemestre*, adopts a mocking tone which must surely parody the party's own local rhetoric. 'Sous ma haute direction,' the author writes, posing as the *bourgmestre* himself, 'la ville de Philippeville

[45] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pro Justitia of Camille Lesoir, 20.03.45.
[46] Cegesoma, AA 1314/296: Pirard to Walcourt *chef de district*, 13.05.41. 'I am counting on you to make an effort in organisation…the task will now be much easier in light of present circumstances, we must get more members.'
[47] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pro Justitia of Pirard, 18.4.46.
[48] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Circular from Rex-Mariembourg, 18.05.41.
[49] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pro Justitia of Pirard, 18.4.46.

deviendra une des premières villes du pays. Je suis d'ailleurs en pourparlers avec mon ami Degrelle pour qu'il fasse désigner notre ville comme chef-lieu de province…j'en ferai une ville modèle.'[50] Similar rhetoric can also be seen in Mariembourg. Jean Georges, a Mariembourgeois, had succeeded in rising up the party hierarchy and was widely considered to be the 'pivot moral du mouvement' in the whole province.[51] Georges' continued interest in the affairs of his home town, together with the readiness of the local party to bend to his every whim, reflected a confidence in Rexist ranks that the region could benefit from its new Rexist leadership.

Rex's dreams of imminent power proved to be short-lived. The movement's increased activities and pro-German stance rapidly brought it into confrontation with the rest of the community. In September 1941, the windows of a shop belonging to Gabriel Claes were smashed by unknown locals in the early hours of the morning.[52] The unprecedented violence of the attack on Claes, one of Philippeville's leading Rexists as well as the town's future *bourgmestre*, shook the town and prompted a flurry of rumours. Such was the hostility towards Claes, that the local *inspecteur de l'enseignement*, Gaston Goulard, felt compelled to put up posters denying claims that he had given Claes any assistance in the aftermath of the attack:

> 'Des individus mal intentionnés colportent en ville le bruit que sur mes conseils, je conduisais en ce moment M. Claes à la *Feldgendarmerie*. C'est absolument faux… Je n'ai de leçons de patriotisme à recevoir de personne…'[53]

Opposition to Rex was, however, far from a purely clandestine phenomenon. Local figures, led by Maurice Barthélemy, head of the Philippeville *gendarmerie* and whose position put him beyond sanction, openly mocked and threatened Rexists in the streets and the cafés of the town. In a report of September 1941, Pirard complained to his party superiors that Rexists in Mariembourg had become pariahs who could not walk the streets freely:

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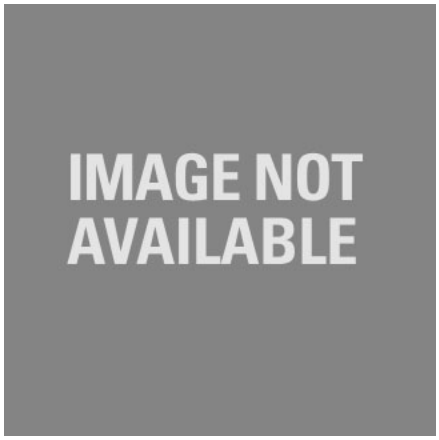
[50] Reproduced in J. Couvreur, *Philippeville 1940-1945: Histoire et Témoinages* (Philippeville, 2014), p. 13. 'Under my esteemed leadership, the town of Philippeville will become one of the first towns of the country. I am already in discussions with my friend Degrelle in order to get the town designated as the administrative centre of the province… I will make a model town of it.'
[51] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pirard to the *Auditeur Militaire*, 1.9.46. 'Moral pivot of the movement.'
[52] 'Philippeville', *La Province de Namur*, 6.9.41.
[53] Reproduced in Couvreur, *Philippeville 1940-1945*, p. 11. 'Badly-intentioned individuals are circulating the rumour in town that, on my advice, I immediately drove Mr. Claes to the *Feldgendarmerie*. That is absolutely false… I need no lessons in patriotism from anyone…'

> 'La propagande contre REX dans nos région [*sic*] est très intense. Celle-ci est conduite par diverses autorités qui jouissent d'une influence - ex. Le lieutenant de Gendarmerie Barthelemy [*sic*] qui traque nos camarades en plein café à Philippeville. Il tourne en dérision les rexistes et particulièrement les Légionnaires [et] en buvant son verre il émet le vœu que tous périssent en Russie.'[54]

Moreover, Rex found that the hostility of the existing state institutions allowed its members little recourse. When a certain Marie Gérard, who had publicly threatened a Rexist ('lorsque les Anglais reviendront vous aurez la tête coupée!'), came before a tribunal in Couvin, she was let off by the judge who ruled that 'la liberté de parole existe encore'.[55] In effect, though Rex still aspired to local power and had unprecedented external support, it increasingly found itself marginalised in the very communities it wished to govern.



Face of collaboration: Maurice Pirard (at back), head of Rex-Mariembourg, and his entire household mix freely with German officers from the Dinant-Philippeville *Kommandantur*, c. 1942. Copyright unknown.

As a result of the growing hostility to the movement, its adherents became more and more reliant on external forces. By late 1941, most of the local Rexists had highly-developed persecution complexes according to which everyone, from the blackmarketeers to the *commissaire d'arrondissement,* was openly conspiring against them.[56] Confrontations were common and, in 1943, Claes was involved an altercation at a café which ended with him firing his revolver at the son of the proprietor.[57] Rather than acting on behalf of the region,

[54] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pirard report to the *Inspecteur Fédéral*, 19.9.41. 'Propaganda against Rex is very intense in our region. It is conducted by several authorities who have some influence – eg. Lieutenant Barthélemy of the *Gendarmerie* who mocks out comrades in the middle of the café in Philippeville. As he drinks, he derides Rexists and particularly the Legionnaires [and] expresses the hope that they will all die in Russia.'
[55] *Ibid*. 'When the English come back, you'll get your heads cut off!'; 'Freedom of speech exists still.'
[56] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pirard report to *Inspecteur Fédéral*, 11.11.41.
[57] Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, p. 208.

Pirard and other Rexists began denouncing political opponents to Rex's headquarters in Brussels and the *Feldgendarmerie*.[58] In doing so, they were abandoning any attempt to achieve power through the support of the local population. Instead the Rexists were staking their position on the influence of the national party and German backing. With little support and widespread local opposition, the Rexists instead hoped to take over formal, institutional positions to achieve power. The position of *bourgmestre* became especially important as, after the dissolution of the *conseil communale* in April 1941, almost all local power was concentrated in a single position.[59] As early as July the same year, Rex-Mariembourg began planning its candidate for the position, although the actual appointment was obstructed at every turn and remained out of reach until the summer of 1942.[60] In the interim, the Rexists increasingly withdrew from the rest of the community. Pirard began to cultivate a friendship with a number of German officers, including Haupt. Müller of the newly-merged *Kommandantur* of Dinant-Philippeville.

As a result, by the time that Rexists were appointed to the positions of *bourgmestre* in Philippeville, Mariembourg and the surrounding rural communes in the summer of 1942, a polarisation had emerged between the Rexists and the rest of the population. The integration of Rexists within the established structures of local government did not create a rapprochement either. Within days of Pirard's appointment as *bourgmestre*, his house was attacked with tar-filled glass bottles in the early hours of the morning, splashing its facade in tar.[61] Feeling increasingly persecuted and powerless, the Rexists turned to the Germans and used their connections to the outside to settle old scores. Pirard began a series of denunciations of personal enemies and political opponents.[62] The feeling of powerlessness was not unjustified. Initiatives to form an effective *Garde Rurale*, supposedly under the jurisdiction of the *bourgmestre*, ended in almost total failure. In nearby Rosée, an exasperated official wrote that local farmers were ignoring even formal orders to take part in the *Garde* and that, as a result, 'la garde rurale fut suspendu [*sic*], les hommes ne se présentant plus à l'appel.'[63]

The primary theme that emerges is one in which the external support for Rex could not translate into local power. Politically-motivated collaboration was always a minority

[58] AJMS, 1151/L/46: *Note pour le conseil de Guerre* by Eugene Frapier, undated.
[59] Stavaux, 'Philippeville: Résistante Silencieuse', p. 22.
[60] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Rex-Mariembourg to the *commissaire d'arrondissement* of Philippeville, 7.7.41.
[61] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Police report concerning an *acte de mauvais gré à caractère politique,* 3.8.42.
[62] AJMS, 1151/L/46: *Note pour le conseil de Guerre* by Eugene Frapier, undated.
[63] Cegesoma, AA36/36: *Circulaire pour information copie de lettres venues des communes*, 20.12.42. 'The *Garde Rurale* is suspended, the men no longer presenting themselves when ordered.'

phenomenon in the two towns and, even by the winter of 1941, Rexists felt embattled in their own communities by an overwhelmingly hostile population. Unlike the Germans, with whom they were increasingly associated, the Rexists were within striking distance of the population and could be publicly attacked and ridiculed in a way which the Germans themselves never could be. As a result, the period of optimism and expansion in the winter and spring of 1941 gave way, without notable successes, to a feeling of persecution and resentment. Even with the promise of the New Order, being a Rexist became more and more unacceptable. 'Pour plusieurs raisons dont le premier [*sic*] ce est [*sic*] que mes parent ne savent pas que je suis affilié au mouvement rexiste, je me vois obligé momentanément de donner ma démission…,' wrote one member to Pirard, 'n'envoyez aucune correspondance rexiste chez moi.'[64] Reviled and increasingly withdrawn from society at large, Rexists saw their power decrease even as they finally achieved the institutional power that they had coveted since 1936. In other words, external recognition did not translate into the local influence which had been a primary motivation. More significant for the social history of the towns, however, was the inevitable separation that the Rexist seizure of power entailed. With Rexists in the positions of power originally designed to shield the population from the outside, the local population was alienated from its own institutions and communal authority. As a result, the Rexist seizure of power marked an end to the era of peaceful occupation and, through the ensuing polarisation between a pro-German minority and a patriotic majority, created a climate of virtual civil war within the community.

[64] Cegesoma, AA1314/296: Unknown Rexist to Pirard, undated. 'For a number of reasons, of which the first is that my parents do not know of my affiliation to the Rexist Movement, I feel myself obliged to resign my membership for the moment…do not send any Rexist correspondence to my house.'

IV. Resistance

Like much of its experience of the war, Philippeville's liberation on 3rd September 1944 was suitably traumatic. Occupied by soldiers of the SS *Das Reich* division, the town's civilians again took refuge in cellars and the town's underground passages as they had in 1940. Allied aircraft strafed German vehicles in the town square, destroying the town's statue of Queen Marie-Louise in the process. Fighting in the town lasted several hours.[65] For the Philippevillains emerging from hiding the following morning, liberation was not the moment of euphoria perhaps expected. Photographs of Philippevillains greeting the liberators the following morning show crowds just a fraction the size of those which attended public events during the occupation. Even the celebratory ringing of church bells, the first for years, lasted barely 20 minutes.[66]

In no small part, the reticence of Philippeville's population can be attributed to the disintegration of civic life in the later stages of the occupation; a process which Martin Conway terms 'destatification' and in which the growth of 'the resistance' played no small part.[67] Even while the town's own *épuration* of collaborators was taking place, the local resistance faced off with outsiders, other *résistants* from as far away as France, trying to enforce their own forms of justice on the community.[68] This clash between the internal and external is just one symptom of the breakdown of law and order which begun during the latter stages of the occupation, from around 1942, and intensified until the liberation itself.

The development of resistance is, of course, one of the most contentious issues within the historiography of the German occupation in Belgium and beyond. As in much of Belgium, a recognisable pattern can be seen in the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse. From the isolated and minor sabotages of September 1940, local resistance consolidated and expanded from 1941, becoming increasingly organised and ambitious over time. By 1944, a number of resistance groups operated within Philippeville and the *arrondissement* as a whole boasted a substantial resistance presence as well as some notable achievements, disproportionate to the region's population or strategic importance.[69] The wooded, rural landscape around Philippeville and Mariembourg also, from 1943, supported a number of armed *maquis*.

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[65] Couvreur, *Philippeville 1940-1945,* pp. 101-4.
[66] *Ibid.,* pp. 1, 3, 89, 103-6.
[67] Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium*, pp. 50-1.
[68] There are reports, unfortunately uncorroborated, of these outsiders from as far afield as France and wearing *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* insignia. See Stavaux, 'Philippeville: Résistante Silencieuse', p. 33, 38.
[69] Falmagne, 'La Résistance armée dans l'Arrondissement de Philippeville', pp. 84-7.

These groups, often *résistants brûlés* or *réfractaires* from elsewhere in the country, had little to do with local communities and, in some cases, were almost indistinguishable from the bandits who, by 1943, habitually raided the countryside at night.

It is against this background of multiple 'resistances', both within the communities and outside them, that an understanding of context is essential. Historians studying the resistance elsewhere in Europe have long argued that the phenomenon is a primarily local one and that local considerations outweighed larger, abstract concerns like ideology. In the case of Italy, D. J. Travis argued that an understanding of the local contexts in which the Italian resistance operated was paramount. He argued that, for local people, resistance was much less an ideological choice than a social and cultural one.[70] This has been embraced by historians of the resistance in France who have seized on local studies as the best way to highlight this. In the case of Southern France, H. R. Kedward has argued that in order to understand the *maquis*, it is necessary to understand the interplay of local social and cultural identities and 'the very localised nature of the outlaw culture' which intersected with them.[71] In this chapter, we shall examine the nature of these 'resistances' as well as how they were shaped by the social contexts of their creation, and how they collectively contributed to the breakdown of civil order and the near-anarchy which reigned by the end of the occupation.

The first 'resistance' which we should identify is, of course, the resistance which developed within local communities themselves and were thus primarily a social phenomenon. It was, of course, a minority phenomenon but one that had a grossly disproportionate influence within the communities in which it developed. Although far from limited to the major towns, it was primarily focused in the region's urban centres. Recruitment and organisation was organised on a personal basis and, as such, tended to emerge within certain milieux and existing social networks within communities. This pattern can be seen within *Le Lion Belge*, a minor right-leaning group which ran an intelligence network codenamed *Service BAYARD*, in the Philippeville region. Robert Delincé, a resident of the village of Vodelée and a manager at a local quarry, was recruited into the network in 1942 after meeting with a certain Charles Hermant, the brother of the *curé* of the nearby village of Omezée. He, in turn, later recruited

[70] D. J. Travis, 'Communism in Modena: The Provincial Origins of the Partito Comunista Italiano (1943-1945)', *The Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), p. 891.
[71] H. R. Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942-1944* (Oxford, 2003), p. 286.

Willy Charlier, an electrician and café proprietor from Philippeville.[72] The group formed by Francis Geiger, notionally part of the nation-wide *Légion Belge* movement, was specifically based around a small number of young people who, presumably, knew each other from before the war.[73] The fact that all were, or shared, previous personal acquaintances with the members of their network and came from roughly the same class, age group and (presumably) political milieu, is no coincidence. Once engaged in an 'active' resistance group, members seem to have entered a wider 'resistance sphere' and there was considerable interaction between cells despite the political traits apparent within each. Charlier of the *Lion Belge* gradually moved, as did many in Philippeville, into the Catholic *Mouvement National Belge* (MNB) and even the left-leaning *Front de l'Indépendance* (FI) within just a few months of his enlistment in 1943.[74]

Of course, these members of the 'active' resistance were just one end of a wider spectrum of opposition to German occupation. Token gestures of resistance, such as mocking Rexists or listening to the BBC, were extremely common and certainly not restricted to a small 'class' of *résistants*. When the house of a certain Constant Massin was raided in April 1943, the assemblage arrested around the radio set included the entire Massin family and a number of their friends.[75] Some figures active in this petty resistance, like the *gendarme* Barthélemy, even moved seamlessly to participation in the active resistance, perhaps as a result of the growing polarisation of the community between Rexists and the rest.[76] There was little political distinction either and the vast majority of *résistants* came from the same broadly-Catholic and conservative strata as the rest of the community. The *Lion Belge*'s ideology of 'Dieu! Patrie! Royauté! Justice!' could easily be considered an authentic expression of the beliefs of a fair proportion of Philippeville's population.[77] In effect, the myth of a resistance disassociated from the communities from which it emerged is an oversimplification. It ignores a fundamental aspect which shaped both the nature of the resistance itself, but also its reception – the community from which it emerged and which continued to shape its behaviour.

It was precisely because they were so deeply rooted within the social groupings and even politics of the local communities that the local resistance cannot be totally distinguished

[72] Couvreur, *Philippeville 1940-1945*, pp. 24-5; 38-9.
[73] Falmagne, 'La Résistance armée dans l'Arrondissement de Philippeville', pp. 140-1.
[74] Couvreur, *Philippeville 1940-1945*, p. 39.
[75] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pro Justitia of Constant Massin, 14.12.45.
[76] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pro Justitia of Henri Poncin, 6.11.46.
[77] 'Justice', *Le Lion Belge (Je Sers)*, 15.08.44. 'God! Nation! Monarchy! Justice!'

from it. Perhaps because of this prevalence of low-level resistance activity across the towns, much of the population appears to have had a good knowledge of the *résistants* in their own community and even of some of their exploits. Consequently, even a publically-ostracised 'rexiste notoire' like Pirard could list the subversive behaviour of those who approached him for official permits without apparent difficulty.[78] Those with contacts in the resistance discussed their actions openly in public venues, like railway carriages, even in the presence of strangers.[79] As such, the resistance was not merely shaped by the community as a whole but even might be said to be not fully distinct from a population for which small resistance acts were common and which had a good knowledge of the resistance acts within its own community.

Finally, it must be noted that the actions of the local resistance were, with a few exception, generally made with the population's safety as a consideration. While some groups initially committed a few spectacular sabotages, notably the near-total destruction of Walcourt Station and eight locomotives by Geiger's cell in November 1941, these provocative actions became increasingly rare. The German reprisal actions which inevitably followed these actions made them increasingly unviable. In the aftermath of the Walcourt sabotage, 30 local notables were taken hostage and 200 radios confiscated.[80] While a number of similar actions did occur, the vast majority were less confrontational and more symbolic. Distribution of underground newspapers, particularly *Solidarité* or the *Voix de la Résistance*, played an important role from 1943. As many as 250 copies were distributed each month in Philippeville alone.[81] Pamphlets were circulated denouncing the behaviour of specific, local collaborators or the heavy-handed behaviour of the *Garde Rurale*.[82] By restricted itself to acts of a less-provocative nature, like intelligence-gathering and minor sabotage such as cable-cutting, the community as a whole was spared from large-scale reprisals.[83]

The contrast between this urban resistance and the *maquis* could not be sharper. While the former represented a known commodity, the latter represented an unknown regarded by locals with suspicion and a certain amount of fear. This was hardly surprising. Although Philippeville and Mariembourg became increasingly divided and polarised, a certain order reigned in the streets. By contrast, the *maquis* occupied a countryside where, by 1943,

[78] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pro Justitia of Ernest Caudriaux, 21.9.45. 'Notorious Rexist'.
[79] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pro Justitia of Pirard, 23.2.46.
[80] Roba and Leotard, *La Région de Walcourt-Beaumont*, ii, 83-5.
[81] Cegesoma, AB1251: Report on *La Voix de la Résistance* and *Solidarité*.
[82] Couvreur, *Philippeville 1940-1945*, pp. 12-3.
[83] See *Ibid*., pp. 68-70.

governance had almost entirely disappeared and where bandits and *maquisards* could not necessarily be distinguished. Above all, the *maquis* represented an external threat and could not be trusted to act in the interests of the community as the local resistance generally could.

Unlike the local resistance, the *maquis* evolved not from the community but from the breakdown of law and order itself. As food became more and more scarce and black-market prices rose, attacks on farms and isolated houses increased. German control hardly extended into the countryside. Attempts to resolve the developing crisis by instituting a *Garde Rurale* proved extremely unsuccessful. Distrusted by the Germans and the population at large, by 1943 the unarmed *Garde* found itself outgunned by the very thieves it was trying to stop and its own personnel were complaining about the burdens it imposed. 'En général, les cultivateurs sont hostiles aux patrouilles actuelles,' wrote the head of the Matagne-le-Grand section. 'Ils doivent, disent-ils, abandonner leur ferme et risquer pendant leur absence de subir des actes malveillants.'[84] By April 1942, even the staunchly pro-German *Province de Namur* was forced to acknowledge the extent of the 'lâches attentats… commis un peu partout dans le pays' which the occupiers could do little to resolve.[85] Against this background, the wooded and lawless countryside of the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse provided a suitable environment for the development of armed bands of partisans.

The problem was, of course, how to delineate where banditry stopped and resistance began. The *maquis* was, in many cases, forced to steal from farms to sustain its activities, but others clearly saw no conflict between self-enrichment and patriotic resistance. Often this was not clear-cut. The Huon *maquis* near Mariembourg appear to have passed from 'legitimate' sabotage of industrial sites to pure banditry by 1943.[86] In another case of January 1944, the *Voix de la Résistance* felt compelled to issue a condemnation of a *maquis* operating near Oignies, 'se disant membres du MNB', whose behaviour was more akin to 'un organisme de bandits, plutôt qu'à un groupement patriotique.' 'Nous connaissons le MNB... et nous savons pertinemment bien que le MNB n'agirait pas ou ne permettrait pas d'agir de la sorte.'[87]

[84] Cegesoma, AA36/36: Matange-le-Grand section report to CNAA *réunion provinciale de Namur*, 8.1.43. 'In general, the famers are hostile to the current patrolling. They say that they have to abandon their farm and risk, during their absence, suffering malevolent acts.'
[85] 'L'Ordre doit régner en Belgique', *La Province de Namur*, 19.3.42. 'Cowardly attacks…committed almost everywhere across the country.'
[86] Stavaux, 'Philippeville: Résistante silencieuse', pp. 89-90.
[87] 'Avertissement à la Population', *La Voix de la Résistance*, 01.44. '[*Maquisards*] calling themselves members of the MNB…[whose behaviour more resembles] an organisation of bandits rather than a

Indeed, the frequency of disclaimers about bandit activity in the underground press perhaps indicates that the behaviour of the *maquis* in the region threatened the legitimacy of the resistance as a whole:

> 'Il s'est trouvé, parmi la lie de la population, une minorité agissante et redoutable d'individus sans foi ni loi qui, exploitant la rigueur des temps, s'attaquent à la propriété privée, rançonnant nos compatriotes désarmés, multiplient les assassinats et les agressions à main armée, et n'hésitent pas recouvrir leurs rapines de la fallacieuse étiquette du patriotisme. LE FRONT DE L'INDÉPENDANCE tient à déclarer publiquement qu'[il]… n'[a] quoi que ce soit de commun avec ces bandes de malfaiteurs dont la criminelle audace sème la terreur dans tout le pays.'[88]

Despite this, however, even the 'real' *maquis* could act in a way which the local resistance would not have dreamed of. The Senzeilles *maquis*, the best-known in the region, regularly robbed local farmers at gun-point, stopped passing trains and roamed the countryside carrying weapons in full view.[89] Attacks by the *maquisards* were more violent than those of the local *résistants* and appear to have been taken with little regard for their own security or that of the local population. The Senzeilles *maquis* sowed the seeds of their own destruction by abducting and murdering three aged German soldiers sent to guard a crashed bomber, apparently without any consideration of the inevitable reprisals against themselves or the local villages, in February 1944.[90]

In many respects, this behaviour can be attributed to the gulf between the *maquis* and the local population. Few locals ever moved seamlessly from town to the local *maquis*. Robert Huon, an enthusiastic Rexist from Mariembourg, was one of the few that did. Huon, who appears to have been widely disliked, became a *maquisard* only after his attempts to achieve a status within the *Garde Wallonne* was rejected (on five occasions) and after being threatened with deportation to Germany by Pirard.[91] His case was rare. Most *maquisards* in

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patriotic group. We know the MNB…and we know full well that they would never act or permit acts of the sort.'

[88] 'La Lutte contre le Banditisme', *La Voix de la Résistance*, 02.44. 'There is, associated with the dregs of the population, an active and formidable minority of individuals knowing neither faith nor law who, benefitting from the severity of our times, attack private property, bleed our unarmed compatriots dry, kill and aggress at gunpoint. They do not hesitate to cover their plundering with the misleading label of patriotism. The *Front de l'Indépendance* declares publically that it has nothing whatsoever in common with these bands of wrong-doers whose criminal audacity spreads terror across the country.'

[89] Lépine, 'Quelques Souvenirs de Guerre', pp. 22-3.

[90] Cegesoma, AA1198/18: *Le Maquis de Senzeilles (3)* manuscript.

[91] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pro Justitia of Henri Poncin, Marcel Wanschoor and Louis Jacobs, 6.11.45.

the Philippeville *arrondissement* chose the area precisely because they were unknown within it; many came from as far afield as Liège, Charleroi or even Flanders.[92] Once arrived and established, they formed their own isolated, self-contained communities in the forests, only venturing forth to launch sabotages or forage. In their 'petite patrie indépendante' in the woods, the *maquis* lived a lifestyle totally different from that of the surrounding communities.[93] 'Ici règne la liberté et le drapeau national flottait librement', wrote an early post-war panegyrist.[94] Indeed, in sharp contrast to the local people, the *maquis* even seemed suspiciously well-provided with food; even 'les liqueurs et les gateaux ne manqu[aient] pas.'[95] With few contacts among the local population, the *maquis* relied strongly on the outside. Their drop points and commanders were usually in far-off Charleroi, meaning that, like the Germans, the *maquis* represented the external.[96]

This threat was accentuated because of the nature of German control in the region by 1943. The effective German presence in Philippeville and Mariembourg varied, but was never high enough to be preventative. As a result, German power relied on the ability to launch crushing reprisals after the fact to dissuade potential saboteurs. By 1944, most of the local *maquis* were already known to the Germans but rarely was any action taken. A *maquis* in Nismes was denounced by Pirard but was never actually supressed.[97] In Senzeilles too, it took nearly four months from the time the *maquis* was denounced to Rex's paramilitary police, the *Brigade B*, for anything actually to happen.[98] Only after a number of provocative attacks in February 1944 did the Germans finally mobilise sufficient resources to round up the group. When they finally did so, however, their force was totally crushing. As many as 500 troops, field artillery and aircraft were deployed.[99] Once begun, the operation continued to pull in members of the community who had little knowledge of, let alone involvement with, the *maquis*. Between February and April 1944, 46 local people, in addition to the 11 *maquisards* themselves, were arrested in a series of raids, 30 of whom were sent to concentration camps.[100] It is easy to see why the local community, caught in the middle of a

[92] Compare, for instance, with the *maquisards* arrested at Senzeilles in 1944, who came from across Wallonia, Flanders and even included a French national. Couvreur, *Philippeville 1940-1945*, p. 53.
[93] N. Hustin, *Souvenez-Vous…!* (Philippeville, no date), p. 2. 'A small independent nation.'
[94] *Ibid*. 'Here reigns liberty and the national flag floats freely.'
[95] 'Le Maquis de Senzeilles', *La Meuse* (Namur edition), 26.02.47. 'Liqueurs and cakes were not lacking'.
[96] *Ibid*.
[97] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Haupt. Nitschke report to Haupt. Kuhley (*Kommandantur* Dinant-Philippeville), 17.7.44.
[98] AJMS, 1151/L/46: Pro Justitia of Rose Toussaint, 23.10.43.
[99] 'Le Maquis de Senzeille [*sic*]', *La Meuse* (Namur edition), 4.03.47.
[100] Couvreur, *Philippeville 1940-1945*, pp. 52-4.

battle between two external forces, withdrew into itself. In such a circumstance, the local resistance – a known quantity and one grounded in the community – constituted a protection of sorts from these chaotic surroundings. It is this function, perhaps, that was in evidence as the local resistance faced off with the outsiders during the liberation.

In effect, if it is at all possible to talk of a single phenomenon of 'resistance' in the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse at all, it was at least immensely complex. In some of its manifestation at least, it was perceived to be just as dangerous as the German threat which it opposed. The local resistance, emerging from late 1941, represented a mere refinement of social trends which already existed. In composition it was redolent of the social milieu from which it was created and, in ideology, similar to that of the majority of the population, much of which was already engaged in more minor acts of resistance. As a result, the local resistance was clearly co-dependent on the local communities, in a way which the *maquis* was not, and this made it a known quantity for the population. As such, we might question whether *maquisards* and *résistants* were, in fact, fighting the same war. For the *maquisards*, self-preservation appears to have been a secondary consideration. Retaliations, inevitable after major attacks, were accepted by the *maquis* as part of the course. By contrast, for all their symbolic resistance, the local resistance prioritised local stability and security at least as much as ultimate victory. Intelligence gathering, hiding pilots and distributing newspapers were naturally important, highly-symbolic resistance actions but we might speculate that they were chosen with other considerations in mind. Unless explicitly denounced, they could pass more or less unnoticed and did not risk retaliations against the community as a whole in the same way that, say, sabotage did. The gulf between the two groups was exacerbated by radically different priorities, as well as their social origins. It is worth comparing, too, the very different priorities of the resistance within the industrial centres and cities. If we accept Lynne Taylor's judgments, this resistance was characterised by 'ferociously dedicated' individuals who were locked in a form of total war where 'no quarter was given and none was expected… [and where both Germans and *résistants*] each sought to destroy the other.'[101] The difference with the local resistance of the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse could not be more striking. As the *maquis* continued its war against the Germans around them, the local resistance withdrew into a force that was as much about protecting the community, in the face of Germans and *maquisards* alike, as it was about fighting an occupation.

[101] Taylor's study focuses on the industrial areas of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais which, although French, formed part of the same occupation zone as Belgium and the same trends could certainly be observed in Belgian cities such as Charleroi or Liège. See Taylor, *Between Resistance and Collaboration*, p. 62; 157.

V. Conclusion

The effects of the occupation on Philippeville and Mariembourg were certainly profound. As towns which had been relatively secure in their status as self-contained and peaceable communities prior to 1940, the occupation was a watershed. For the first time, certainly since 1918, outside forces, of which the locals knew little, had forced themselves into the community at large. As the nature of these external demands changed, the local societies themselves were twisted by circumstance. As a result, the period of occupation was not one of destruction but of profound, if gradual, social change.

The societies which greeted the liberators, albeit cautiously, in September 1944 were markedly less coherent and self-confident than they had been at the start of the war. Fractured by internal political strife, and at the mercy of an external situation over which they had little control, there was no possibility of the towns returning to the coherence and unity which had been such a defining local characteristic before the war. The drama of Rex's rise and fall had created significant polarisation which went beyond the purely political. Enmity was personal and split the community, not into sides, but into factions. The balkanisation of the community into groups – resisters, bandits, blackmarketeers, Rexists and the like – could not simply heal at the moment of liberation. For example, rumours swirled for years afterwards that locals, Rexist or otherwise, had helped Germans draw up lists of hostages in the closing months of the occupation to settle local quarrels.[102]

In this factional and suspicious community, there was no rallying point for the community. The notables, dominant before 1940, were certainly no such point. The age of 'luttes homériques' among the small local élite, beyond popular concerns and isolated from the population, was, if not totally finished, certainly much shaken.[103] These were, after all, the same group whom the local population had put their faith in as intermediaries and who had, in almost all cases, failed outright to achieve concessions from the German authorities and their New Order allies within the institutions of the Belgian state. Instead, the Communists, who had had no significant regional presence before the war, suddenly grabbed nearly 10% of the local vote in the 1946 election.[104]

With internal harmony far from guaranteed, by 1944, provincial towns like Philippeville and Mariembourg were in a world where the outside could no longer be shut out through the

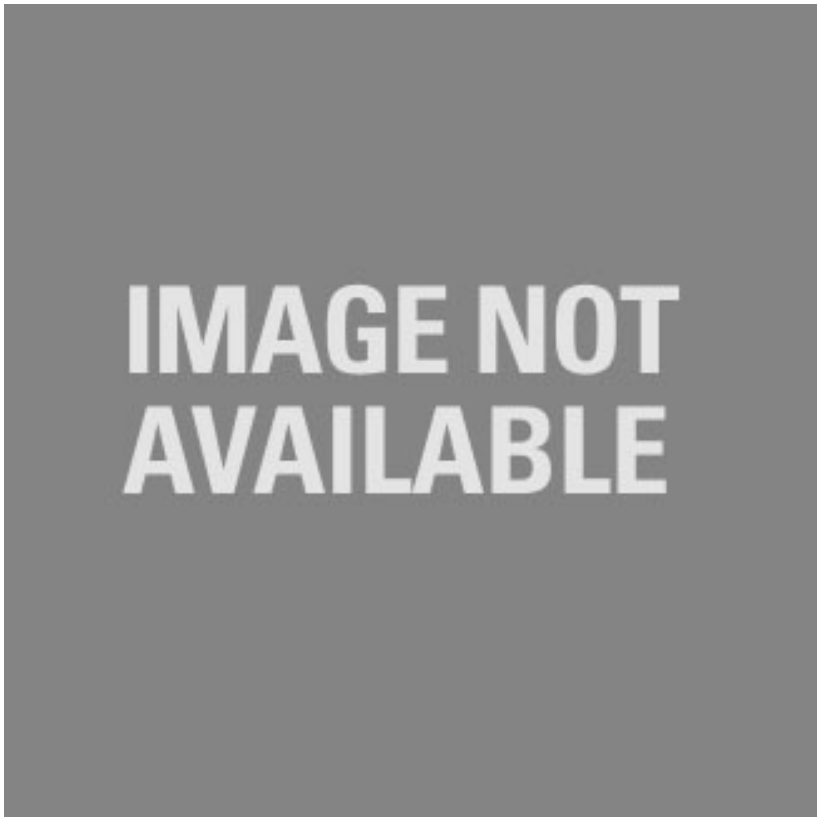
[102] FSJP, 1151/L/46: *Note pour le conseil de Guerre* by Eugene Frapier, undated.
[103] 'J'accuse M. Piston', *La Province de Namur*, 18.8.40. 'Fighting of Homeric proportions.'
[104] Falmagne, 'La Résistance armée dans l'Arrondissement de Philippeville', p. 7.

belief that all problems could be resolved locally. What both Rex and the Resistance shared, above all, was attachments to a wider, national movement on which both relied almost like a system of patronage. Their allegiances could remain local, but their allegiance was firmly entwined with the success of their groups nationally. By contrast, the locally-grounded elite had failed to achieve concessions precisely because their status was founded on purely-local prestige alone. Detached from patronage chains reaching beyond their own *communes*, their status depended on their perceived utility to German administrators as community representatives which, in turn, depended on the community's belief that they actually had influence with the external forces. When exposed or questioned, both fundamental assumptions proved fragile. The issues which remained for the community by the liberation, notably the return of the town's prisoners of war from Germany, could not be resolved except at a national level and the local élites were no longer equipped to act as moderators. Therefore, the occupation both forced the region out of its isolation and sharpened its sense of belonging to a wider Belgian imagined community.[105]

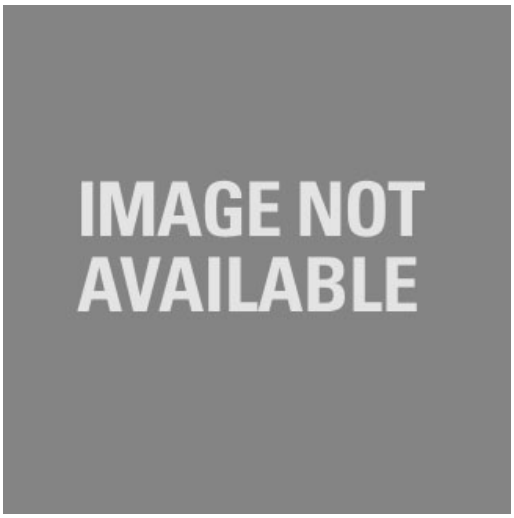
It is worth speculating about whether this change might also be reflected beyond the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse. Even by 1944, rural Belgium was still a landscape dominated by *bourgades* like Philippeville and Mariembourg. As such, there is no reason to believe that the social developments in either town were unique. In many respects, the consequence of the occupation was similar in many of the rural communities of southern Belgium – notably in the Ardennes – but also in the rural communities of Dutch-speaking Flanders, notably in the provinces of West Flanders and Limburg. The cultural and linguistic divide between Flanders and Wallonia was perhaps less pronounced than that between the industrialised, urban centres and the rest. For all these small-town communities, the most immediate impact of the war was the collapse of central state authority and, through it, a much more vivid sense of local autonomy. Yet the most durable legacy of the end of the occupation was the fracturing of that autonomy and an unprecedented integration into national life. In this respect, perhaps Philippeville and Mariembourg were not so different from similar towns in France or the Netherlands. Much which can be said about the region also has an important wider relevance to Western Europe in the same period. If a similar change in relations with the outside occurred across Wallonia, Belgium or further afield, the occupation would certainly seem to have been a truly formative period for the neglected world of small-town Europe as a whole.

[105] This idea is explored further in Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium*, p. 53.

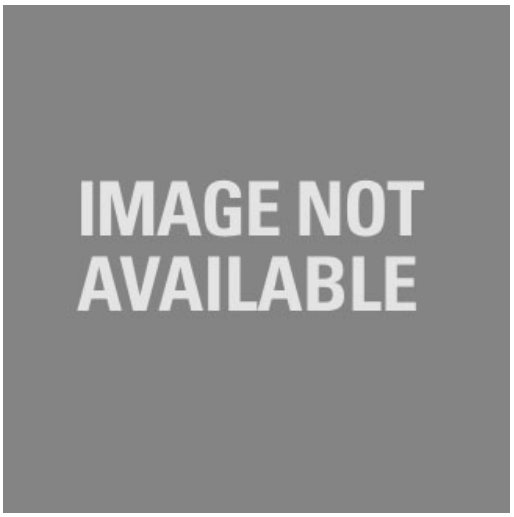
Appendix



1. A 1943 map showing Philippeville, Mariembourg and the surrounding settlements. Note particularly the large forested areas in which the *maquis* thrived and which, to an extent, isolated the towns and villages from the outside world. Namur (Sheet 12), 1943 edition. 1:100,000. Bodleian, C28 (42).



2. The town of Philippeville from a British War Office map of 1944, showing the town's distinctive street plan – a legacy of its Early Modern heritage. Dinant South-West (Sheet 90.SW), February 1944 edition. 1:25,000. Bodleian, C21.18.



3. A 1944 map of Mariembourg from the same source. The town, with a similar street plan to Philippeville, sits in a slight alluvial plain surrounded on almost four sides by extensive forests. Givet North-West (Sheet 104.NW), April 1944 edition. 1:25,000. Bodleian, C21.18.

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