



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Belgians prevent King Leopold III from resuming the throne, 1950

6 July

1950

to: 1 August

1950

Country: Belgium

Location City/State/Province: *Throughout Wallonia (southern Belgium), Brussels (in Flanders), city of Liege*

Goals:

To prevent King Leopold III from returning to Belgium and resuming the throne.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › Threat by Socialists and labor to form a provisional government declaring Wallonian independence
- 010. Newspapers and journals

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Democracy

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Walloon nationalists
- socialists
- workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Belgian Socialist Party (PSB), General Federation of Belgian Labor, Federation leader André Renard

Partners:

Walloon nationalists, Duvieusart government

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Belgian Socialist Party (PSB)
- General Federation of Belgian Labour
- Walloon nationalists

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Duvieusart government

Segment Length: *Approximately 4 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

King Leopold III of Belgium

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Police shot three protesters dead on July 30th; a fourth died from related injuries.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

During World War II, Belgium was occupied by Nazi Germany from 1940 to 1944. King Leopold III of Belgium remained in Brussels as the civil government fled to Paris despite the insistence by Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot and Foreign Affairs Minister Paul-Henri Spaak that he go with them. The Pierlot government took Leopold's decision to remain as indication that he intended to collaborate with the Germans and establish a new government under German control. On 28 June 1940 Pierlot called Leopold a traitor on the radio, creating a permanent rift between Leopold and the exiled government.

The King became a German prisoner of war in the family's Laeken Castle and remained largely popular with the Belgian people. When France was also occupied by the Germans, the Prime Minister and his cabinet left for London to establish a government-in-exile. In 1944 the German occupation left but the German Gestapo took Leopold and his family to Germany and then to Austria. The Belgian elected government returned to Brussels and established Leopold's brother Prince Charles as the regent, representing the crown.

After Germany's defeat and the war's end, a considerable debate emerged in Belgium--known as the Royal Question--as to whether their King had collaborated with the Germans and should return to the throne. On 19 July, 1945, Parliament reinterpreted the Belgian constitution to state that the King was not be allowed to "resume the exercise of his constitutional powers until after a deliberation of the Houses sitting in joint session stating that the impossibility has come to an end." For six years, Leopold and his family lived in exile in Pregny-Chambésy near Geneva, Switzerland.

The returned Belgian government, now led by Socialist Party (PSB) leader Spaak, was a coalition of anti-Leopold socialist and pro-Leopold parties. The Socialists could count on support from labor organizations like the General Federation of Belgian Labor (ABVV/FGTB) based in Liège, which had announced solidarity with the anti-Leopoldist front, and repeatedly indicated their readiness to launch a general strike at a moment's notice to support the demand that Leopold abdicate the throne.

The Leopoldist Christian Social Party (PSC), however, supported the Leopold's return and called for a referendum on the issue. When Spaak denied their request for a referendum, the PSC withdrew their support from the government. In 1946, a commission of inquiry exonerated Leopold of treason. Nonetheless, controversy concerning his loyalty continued.

The 1949 election granted Christian Democrats an absolute majority in the Senate and near absolute majority in the Chamber of Representatives. Under the authority of Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens, the PSC government organized a national referendum on the royal question for 12 March, 1950.

Belgians voted 57% in favor of Leopold's return. Regional divisions were reflected in the split between secularized, left-wing, French-speaking Wallonia and Brussels, where nearly 60% voted against Leopold's return, and catholic, right-wing, Dutch-speaking Flanders, where 70% of the population voted in favor. During the war, Germans had supposedly treated the Flemish more favorably, and Walloons believed that King Leopold had proved he was more a king to Flanders than Wallonia. The Walloon Question developed alongside the Royal Question: a movement for increased autonomy was born on 20-21 October, 1945 with the establishment of the National Walloon Congress.

In March 1950, André Renard, leader of the General Federation of Belgian Labor offered the Congress the support of 85,000 steel workers in alliance with their anti-Leopoldist goals.

The government had agreed before the referendum that King Leopold II should only be allowed to return on the condition that each region pronounced in his favor (Wallonia's 'nay' disqualified the referendum). However, after the general election of 4 June 1950, the Catholics received an absolute majority in both the Senate and Chamber of the Representatives. As per the 1945 bill, the PSC majority parliament under Prime Minister Duvieusart voted that the king's inability to reign had come to an end on 20 July, 1950. Two days later Leopold returned to Belgium.

Throughout the month of July, socialists, Walloon nationalists, and workers united to protest Leopold's return, demanding his abdication. On 6 July, the Walloon industrial belt went on strike. Between 10 July and 12 July the whole "black country"--a coal mining region centered on Charleroi--went on strike, and workers numbering in the thousands protested in Charleroi with banners. On 14 July, there were 10,000 demonstrators in the Walloon city of La Louvière.

On 22 July the transportation sector joined in, with sabotage against bridges, buildings, high-voltage lines and rail tracks. That sector's workers then went on strike four days later.

On 26 July Renard made the official call for a general strike in the trade union newspaper *La Wallonie* (reprinted two days later in *Le Soir*): "The strike will be general, indefinite, total. We will not care of the equipment. We will let the water drown the coal-mines. The blast furnaces have not been filled up ; the coke ovens are abandoned. We issued a stern warning...Leopold III wanted the battle. He has it!"

A mass march on Brussels, the capitol, was planned for August 2nd.

Police on 30 July opened fire on crowds in Grâce-Berleur near Liège, killing four protesters. In reaction, the Socialists and the General Federation of Belgian Labor threatened to form a provisional government declaring Wallonia's independence. According to reports by the Belgian State Security Service, Socialists and the General Federation of Belgian Labor had a plan consisting of multiple methods to remove Leopold: parliamentary debates, strikes, mass demonstrations, and a march on Brussels. The establishment of a Walloon government was a last resort that, if necessary, should be utilized.

To prevent the country from sliding into a civil war, Prime Minister Duvieusart visited Leopold at Castle Laeken the night of the 31st to pressure Leopold to abdicate the throne. Leopold assented, but only after Duvieusart threatened to resign and his ministers declared their solidarity with Duvieusart.

On 1 August 1950, Leopold signed away his regency in favor of his 20-year-old son Baudouin. His brother Charles acted as regent until Baudouin came of age. Baudouin was crowned king on 17 July 1951, a day after Leopold formally signed papers to abdicate the throne.

Research Notes

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