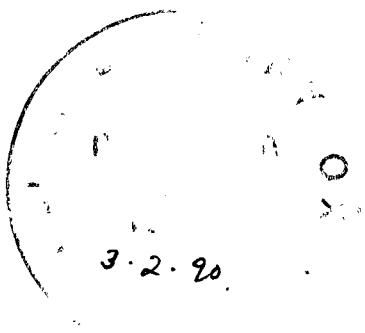


**THE REXIST MOVEMENT IN BELGIUM 1940 - 1944**



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D. Phil. Thesis 1989

University of Oxford

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGRA : Amis du Grand Reich Allemand  
Aud. Gén. : Auditorat Général près la Cour Militaire, Brussels  
Cahiers : Cahiers d'histoire de la seconde guerre mondiale  
CCW : Communauté Culturelle Wallonne  
CW : Cercle Wallon  
C2GM : Centre de recherches et d'études historiques de la  
          seconde guerre mondiale, Brussels  
DeVlag : Duits-Vlaamse Arbeidsgemeenschap  
Doct. : Document  
Doss. : Dossier  
DSI : Département de Sécurité et d'Information  
EM : Etat-Major  
FC : Formations de Combat  
GRMA : German Records Microfilmed at Alexandria  
HSSPF : Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer  
Info. : Information  
Inst. : Instruction  
JS : José Streel  
LC : Louis Collard  
LD : Léon Degrelle  
Le P.R. : Le Pays Réel  
MNPW : Mouvement National Populaire Wallon  
n.d. : no date  
NSKK : Nationalsozialistisches Kraftfahrer Korps  
OFK : Oberfeldkommandantur  
OKH : Oberkommando des Heeres  
PA : Partisans Armés  
POB : Parti Ouvrier Belge  
Pro Just. : Pro Justicia  
Sipo-SD : Sicherheitspolizei-Sicherheitsdienst  
SVTW : Service Volontaire de Travail pour la Wallonie  
UTMI : Union des Travailleurs Manuels et Intellectuels  
TB : Tätigkeitsbericht  
VM : Victor Matthys  
VNV : Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond

# THE REXIST MOVEMENT IN BELGIUM 1940-1944

## SUMMARY OF THESIS

MARTIN CONWAY

Christ Church

The Rexist movement led by Léon Degrelle was the principal francophone collaborationist grouping in German-Occupied Belgium during the Second World War. In the 1930s, the Rexistists had been a movement on the Catholic right of the political spectrum who advocated the replacement of the outmoded parliamentary regime by a more authoritarian New Order which would enable a return to the spiritual values of the Catholic faith. Soon after the Belgian defeat of May 1940, they emerged as enthusiastic advocates of an agreement with the apparently victorious German invaders and in January 1941 Degrelle publicly declared his support for the Nazi cause. This resulted in a marked decline in popular support for Rex but did not bring it the German recognition which he craved. Only in the summer of 1941 with the formation of a *Légion Wallonie* which fought with some distinction alongside the German armies on the Eastern Front was the basis created for closer links between the German authorities and Rex. Subsequently, many Rexistists were appointed by the *Wehrmacht* administrators of Belgium to positions of public responsibility and in January 1943 Degrelle announced the abandonment of his former belief in a unitary Belgian state in favour of the absorption of the francophone Walloons into a Germanic empire. During the latter war years, the Rexistists were often the target of attacks by Resistance groups and the atmosphere of fear created by these attacks together with the opportunistic efforts of Degrelle to forge an alliance with the SS led to a progressive radicalization of the movement. By 1944, the Rexistists had become a beleaguered marginal grouping who increasingly resorted to violence to counter their many enemies and in September 1944 many Rexistists fled from the Allied liberators to exile in the German Reich.

D.Phil. Thesis

Submitted Hilary Term 1989.

## THE REXIST MOVEMENT IN BELGIUM 1940-1944

### ABSTRACT OF THESIS

This thesis is intended as an exploration of one aspect of the history of Belgium in the 20th century and, more generally, as an analysis of the phenomenon of political collaboration during the Second World War. The wartime history of the Rexist movement has never previously been the subject of any academic study. A number of works, most notably those of Jean-Michel Etienne and Emmanuel Gerard, have studied the movement during the 1930s when it was a fringe group on the Catholic right of the political spectrum. But for a number of reasons Belgian historians have not extended this analysis to the years of the German Occupation. Other aspects of the wartime history of Belgium have attracted the attention of historians, notably the vexed problem of the activities of King Léopold III, the role played by the Resistance and the nature of the German Occupation regime imposed on Belgium. In this respect, the works of Jean Stengers, José Gotovitch and Albert De Jonghe have been of especial importance but of these only De Jonghe's magisterial analysis of the rivalries between the SS and the *Wehrmacht* during the German Occupation contains any detailed consideration of Rex.

Collaboration elsewhere in German-Occupied Europe has long excited the interest of historians and others. This has been especially so in France where the works of Ory, Dioudonnat, Brunet and many others have contributed to a fuller understanding of the various pro-German groupings. In addition, the works of a number of historians have been devoted to Quisling's activities in Norway, Mussert's *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* in the Netherlands and the Czech and Slovak collaborationist groupings. But significant gaps in our

knowledge of collaboration remain and this thesis is intended to make a small contribution towards resolving this problem by analysing a movement which, though small in size, was of considerable importance because of its wartime activities and the curious amalgam of Catholic authoritarianism and Germanic National Socialism which motivated its supporters.

My approach in this thesis is emphatically chronological. Other methods of studying the wartime history of Rex are certainly possible. For example, an analysis of the content of its ideology or of the patterns of its relations with the German authorities would both be worthwhile as would be local studies of Rex in specific regions of Belgium. But, as the first attempt to study this subject, I believed it was essential to adopt a narrative approach which would elucidate the principal elements of Rexist wartime activities. This is all the more necessary because of the complexity of that history. It is all too easy in retrospect to regard the war years as a single unit which can be treated as a whole. In fact, during my research, I was continually aware of the profound and rapid changes which took place within Belgium during the four years of the Occupation. The institutional, political and moral atmosphere in 1940 was very different from that which existed by the summer of 1941 ; while in the latter years of the Occupation the pressure of military events and developments within both Nazi Germany and Belgium had once again created an entirely new situation. Thus, I believed that only a chronological approach could make sense of the rapidly changing pattern of Rexist activities.

The documentary material which forms the basis of this thesis is drawn from various sources. Perhaps the most important of these is the dossiers prepared by the Belgian military justice authorities after the war for the prosecution of individuals accused of collaboration. These are housed in the Palais de Justice in Brussels and contain a great wealth of detail, including

the verbatim records of the interrogations of defendants and the documentation seized at the homes and offices of Rexist after the liberation. In the last few years, a number of Belgian historians have been given access to certain of these dossiers but I was the first to be allowed to consult those relating to the principal leaders of Rex. The second category of source material which I used was the records of the German authorities. Along with the Nord and Pas de Calais in France, Belgium was unusual in that it remained until the summer of 1944 under the control of the *Wehrmacht* rather than of a civilian administration. Consequently, it is the records of the *Wehrmacht* which are of the greatest value in any analysis of the Occupation of Belgium. These archives - notably those microfilmed by the American authorities at Alexandria and known by the acronym GRMA - are far from complete but almost all the periodic reports ("*Tätigkeitsberichten*") sent by the *Wehrmacht* officials in Brussels to their superiors in the Reich have survived and these contain a great deal of material relating to Rex. In addition, I consulted a wide variety of other German archive material, of which perhaps the most important was the few surviving reports compiled by the *Sipo-SD* on the political situation in Occupied Belgium. I am, however, well aware that such is the disorganisation and fragmentation of the German records that it remains possible that further important material exists which has not yet come to light.

The third important source of documentary material was the *Centre de recherches et d'études historiques de la seconde guerre mondiale* in Brussels. Established some twenty years ago, this institute is in many ways a model of what can be achieved in the field of contemporary history. Its research staff have collected, as far as is possible, all published and documentary material relating to the period of the German Occupation. The archives which I consulted included their collection of Rexist newspapers and internal circulars as well as

collections of personal papers presented to the Centre by former Rexists and their relatives. Of these the most important is the considerable archive of personal papers relating to José Streel who from 1941 to 1943 was the *Chef du Service Politique* of Rex as well as the principal columnist of the Rexist newspaper, *Le Pays Réel*. These papers consist mainly of self-justificatory accounts of his wartime activities written by Streel in prison after the war and they provide a unique insight into the motivations and behaviour of the leaders of the movement. Streel himself was a young Catholic intellectual and in a subsequent study I hope to explore the path which led him from his involvement in movements for Catholic renewal in the 1930s to support for the German cause.

Another important source of material was the newspaper collections of the *Bibliothèque Royale* in Brussels. I consulted the principal national and provincial newspapers published in Belgium during the years after the Allied liberation in order to study their accounts of the trials of thousands of ordinary Rexists. Though often inaccurate or heavily biased in their tone, I found that these reports contained a great wealth of often picaresque detail concerning the activities of members of Rex and they to some extent compensated for the rather "official" bias of the other source material.

One possible source which I did not make much use of was oral testimony. I visited southern Spain to interview Léon Degrelle, the former head of Rex, who lives there in comfortable exile and also met a number of former Rexists who continue to live in Belgium as well as corresponding with certain others. The meeting with Degrelle was of considerable value but in general I did not find that these encounters with former Rexists contributed greatly to my knowledge of the movement. In a purely personal way, they helped me to gain a broader appreciation of the character of Rex but their memory of specific



events is by now understandably hazy and was of much less value than the records of the interrogations of former Rexists contained in the archives of the Palais de Justice. I am, however, still attempting to contact, through intermediaries, certain Rexists - notably Joseph Pévenasse - who evaded capture after the war and who live under assumed identities in Germany and elsewhere.

The questions which I set out to answer in this thesis were, as I have indicated, relatively straightforward. In essence, I have been concerned to explain how the Rexists came to be involved in collaboration and their subsequent evolution from limited sympathy for German war aims in January 1941 to unconditional support for the cause of National Socialism in 1944. In doing so, I have attempted to adopt a dispassionate approach. The history of Rex is often referred to in Belgium as a "taboo" subject and those journalistic works devoted to Rex often achieve a *succès de scandale*. But I have consciously sought to treat the history of Rex as one would any other period of history, drawing from one Belgian historian the exasperated comment that I describe Rex as if it were the history of Byzantium. Clearly, the moral and political difficulties inherent in the study of a movement which was responsible for so much suffering in the recent past cannot be evaded. My own stance is certainly not one of sympathy for the Rexists but I have attempted to avoid engaging in a simple condemnation of them which would, I believe, hinder my efforts to explain the Rexist phenomenon. Thus, this thesis attempts to provide a factually accurate analytical study of Rex while leaving it to the reader to draw whatever moral or political judgements he or she believes to be appropriate.

Unfortunately, in order to meet the word-length requirements insisted upon by the Applications committee of the Modern History faculty, it has not been possible for me to deal with all periods of the Occupation in equal depth. Thus, more than three-quarters of the thesis (Chapters I to V) deals with the

period from May 1940 to January 1943 while only the last chapter (Chapter VI) provides a necessarily brief account of the subsequent evolution of Rex until September 1944. I do, however, possess much additional material on this latter period of the Occupation and this will be incorporated in the printed version of the thesis.

The principal conclusions of the thesis are, I believe, threefold. In the first place, I attempt to show that the most important reason for the Rexist espousal of collaboration lies in its pre-war history. Collaboration, I argue, was far from being a product of the exceptional character of the German Occupation. Instead, it was a social and political phenomenon, the origins of which are to be found in the history of Belgium in the 1930s. That decade witnessed an unprecedented revolt by wide sections of the population against the system of parliamentary democracy which was regarded as incapable of responding to the challenges of the modern era. The Rexistists were in origin part of this trend and their initial political goal was to build a stronger more united Belgium in which the Catholic faith would play an essential role. By the immediate pre-war years, however, Rex had become a small isolated group whose increasingly radical views led its supporters to detach themselves almost totally from the outlook of their fellow citizens. Thus, through their implacable opposition to the existing political structure, they were pre-conditioned to look with sympathy on the German cause and, although it was only in January 1941 that Léon Degrelle declared his support for Hitler, the seeds of his stance were already evident during the summer and autumn of 1940.

The second general conclusion which I believe emerges from the thesis is the remarkable success of the Rexistists in winning the support of the Nazi leaders. When Degrelle made his declaration of support for the German cause, it was largely ignored by the German authorities in Belgium and their superiors in

Berlin. Rex was in their opinion a "clerico-fascist" grouping which could play no role in a New Europe. Thus, during the early years of the Occupation, the German authorities worked instead with the Flemish Nationalists (the VNV) who, as the representatives of a Germanic ethnic grouping, were regarded as more dependable allies. However, both their need for assistance within Belgium and the military feats of the *Légion Wallonie* formed by the Rexists to fight alongside the German armies on the Eastern Front, gradually led the Nazi leaders to work more closely with Rex. Moreover, Degrelle's announcement in January 1943 that Rex accepted the Nazi contention that the Walloons were in fact a "lost" Germanic nation resolved one of the last obstacles to closer cooperation between Rex and the German authorities. Thus, in the remaining years of the Occupation the movement gradually won the support of the Nazi leaders and Degrelle emerged as a hero of the Nazi propaganda machine who was able to meet the German leaders - including Hitler - on several occasions. A consummate political opportunist, Degrelle used these meetings to forge a close personal alliance with the leaders of the SS who in the last years of the war were the principal power within the Reich. Thus, though the German authorities never accorded Rex the substantial political power which it sought, the movement's alliance with Himmler's SS made it likely that, in the unlikely event of a German victory, Rex and its leader would have been accorded a position of significance in the New European Order.

The final conclusion which I believe should be drawn from this thesis is the marginal importance of the Rexists and of political collaboration in general. Rex never enjoyed the support of more than a small minority of the francophone Belgian population and, apart from its success in winning the confidence of the Nazi leaders, its record during the war years was one of almost total failure. From the early months of 1941 onwards, collaboration in

Belgium - as in much of German-Occupied Europe - became a world isolated from the lives of the majority of the population. Ever more dependant on their German patrons for material assistance and protection from the avenging agents of the Resistance, the Rexists and other collaborators became increasingly irrelevant to the "real" history of Occupied Belgium. Throughout the last forty years, events in German-Occupied Europe have largely been portrayed as a struggle between the forces of good and evil represented by Resistance and Collaboration. In fact, this two-dimensional view of Belgium is unduly constricting. Collaboration and resistance were only two aspects of the reality of the German Occupation and they were in many respects of less significance than other facets of the history of this period. For example, the established powers of Belgian society - such as the leaders of the principal political parties, the Catholic Church and the industrial elite - were not tempted by either extreme stance and instead concentrated throughout the war on preserving their positions of authority. Thus, while both collaboration and resistance will undoubtedly continue to play a major role in histories of the war, there is also a need for a less exclusive approach which considers other less familiar aspects of German-Occupied Europe.

In conclusion, I believe that this thesis provides a largely accurate description of the activities of Rex from 1940 to 1944. It is not, however, intended to be the definitive account of its subject. As the first attempt to analyse the history of the movement, there are undoubtedly many omissions and it is to be hoped that other historians will resolve the current gaps in our understanding of Rex. In the meantime, I hope that this thesis will contribute towards an appreciation of the phenomenon of collaboration which, as popular interest in the subject demonstrates and events in lands as diverse as South

Africa, Afghanistan or the West Bank confirm, remains a central element of the history of our times.

Martin Conway      February 1989.

## INTRODUCTION

It would seem impossible to exaggerate the importance of the Second World War. For many, its events remain all too clear a memory and throughout Europe it is still - almost fifty years later - the central historical event which overshadows the occasionally rather drab post-war history of the Continent. Its power to fascinate even those too young to have experienced it at first hand is amply demonstrated by the huge volume of literature, films and television programmes devoted to aspects of the war while the political divisions which it created within European countries show few signs of disappearing. The Second World War is, thus, in a very real sense part of the present rather than of the past ; and no element of its legacy remains more powerful than collaboration. The image of those men and women who turned their backs on their compatriots in order to assist the German armies has entered popular memory as a key element of the war, helped by the photographs and newsreels of the retribution meted out to the collaborators after the liberation. Thus, collaboration in its various political, intellectual, economic and sexual forms has come to stand - along with the genocide of the Holocaust - as representative of the evil revealed during those years and with which present generations of Europeans still seek to come to terms.

But collaboration was of course far from entirely novel. The wars of the Ancient World and those of medieval and early-modern Europe abounded with examples of traitors who, for reasons of personal greed or revenge, chose to assist an enemy. But the collaboration of the Second World War was in important respects different from these historical precedents. The ascendancy of nationalist loyalties which occurred throughout Europe during the 19th century created a very different moral climate in which to betray one's nation was

regarded as a uniquely serious crime. Secondly, many collaborators were not merely isolated opportunists but the advocates of a political cause. Collaboration was, thus, in these cases collective and could not merely be explained by the individual motives of those involved.

Hence, collaboration, unlike treason, is emphatically modern. There were isolated examples during the First World War - notably in Flanders and Poland - of groups who assisted the Germans or the Western powers in order to further their own nationalist goals, but ideological collaboration was essentially a creation of the Second World War. From Quisling in the north to the Greek fascist groups in the south and from Vichy and Paris in the west to the Ukrainian nationalists and Vlassov's pro-German Russian army in the east, groups of collaborators emerged throughout Europe. Only Poland of the Occupied European countries did not produce a pro-German movement of some importance.

The purpose of this thesis is to study one of the most dramatic examples of collaboration : the Rexist movement which operated in German-Occupied Belgium from 1940 to 1944. Led by Léon Degrelle, this largely francophone political grouping emerged soon after the defeat of 1940 as an enthusiastic advocate of an agreement with the German conquerors and by January 1941 it had voiced its categorical support for the Nazi cause. At first shunned by the German authorities who distrusted both its Catholic inspiration and its young inexperienced leaders, Rex subsequently succeeded in winning the confidence of the Nazi leaders and by the time of the German retreat from Belgium had established itself as one of the principal pro-German groupings within Nazi-Occupied Europe.

Rex was not a creation of the Second World War but a movement whose origins lay in the political life of inter-war Belgium. Like most European countries, Belgium experienced in these years the emergence of a number of

movements opposed to the democratic political structures which had been gradually established after the state's foundation in 1830. Some of these - such as the Communist party - were on the left of the political spectrum but throughout the inter-war period the principal threat to the *status quo* was to come from the right. In the immediate post-war years, a number of small authoritarian nationalist leagues, such as the *Jeunesses Nationales* and the *Légion Nationale*, had already been established <sup>1</sup> but at the end of the 1920s a more substantial challenge began to emerge. This had its origins in the disenchantment of many young Catholic students and intellectuals with the system of parliamentary democracy. They were especially critical of the Catholic party which with almost 40 % of the vote was an unavoidable element of almost every government <sup>2</sup> and which saw its role as the protector of the institutions of the Catholic world. Belgium, though the vast proportion of its population was nominally Catholic, was a largely secular society in which substantial sections of the population - notably the working class of the industrial regions - had lost all contact with the Church. Thus, instead of refighting the stale clerical-anticlerical battles of the 19th century, these young militants believed that the Church and the Catholic party should seek to reconquer the modern world for the Catholic faith <sup>3</sup>.

Many of these young critics were active in the *Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Belge* (ACJB) which had been set up by the Church after 1918 as an organisation for young Catholics. Composed largely of the offspring of the middle classes, this vast movement was dominated by an intense, rather narrow spirituality which, at the instigation of the Catholic hierarchy, established a clear distinction between the spiritual and temporal worlds. Yet, although excluded from political action, the emphasis which the ACJB placed upon the cultivation of personal faith encouraged many of its adherents to look on the



outside world as corrupt and to heighten their dissatisfaction with the worldly manoeuvrings of the Catholic party <sup>4</sup>.

Thus, at the end of the 1920s and in the early-1930s, a number of small movements and revues were launched by former members of the ACJB anxious to bring about a respiritualisation of society. With titles such as *L'Esprit Nouveau*, *La Cité Chrétienne* and *Pour l'Autorité*, they all shared the same concern to build a truly Catholic Belgium. Many were strongly influenced by the ideas of Maurras but his influence was declining by this time and many of these militants found their inspiration in the writings of Péguy, Claudel and even of Bergson. The spirit of these groups was both reactionary and revolutionary. They protested that their aim was to work within the modern world and they often admired the social achievements of Mussolini. But in many cases, their vision of an ideal society still retained a nostalgic, almost *ancien régime* character. At heart, they were often unwilling to accept the complexities and pluralism of an industrial, urban society and instead they took refuge in St. Augustine's vision of a harmonious Catholic city <sup>5</sup>.

Rex was, in origin, one of these movements for Catholic renewal. Its leader, Léon Degrelle, was the son of a prosperous brewer from the small town of Bouillon in the Belgian Ardennes where his father played a leading role in the local Catholic party <sup>6</sup>. Like many sons of the Catholic bourgeoisie, Léon attended the University of Louvain where he became a prominent figure in student politics and journalism. His energy and enthusiasm soon attracted the attention of the Catholic hierarchy and in 1930 the head of the ACJB, Mgr. Picard, invited him to take over the direction of a small Catholic publishing house <sup>7</sup>. Reflecting the popularity in student circles of the cult of Christ the King, this enterprise was called *Christus Rex* and, from the outset, Degrelle used it to build a popular Catholic press which reached out to a wider audience

than the existing rather pious middle-class titles. Thus, during the subsequent years, he published with some success a number of popular periodicals as well as sensationalist pamphlets and cheap editions of novels <sup>8</sup>.

At the offices of *Christus Rex* in Louvain, Degrelle surrounded himself with young men who, like him, had been active in Catholic student life and who shared his desire to construct a more heroic and engaged Catholic faith in Belgium. These Rexists (as they soon came to be known) used the publications of *Christus Rex* to preach their ideas of spiritual renewal. By 1933, Degrelle had assumed sole control of the publishing house and it was at this stage that his ambitions began to expand. He started to hold public meetings and the Rexist periodicals took on a more political character. Concerned by these developments, the Catholic Church withdrew from all official sponsorship of Rex, though it continued to look with sympathy on the activities of these young enthusiasts. Nevertheless, Degrelle became more outspoken in his criticisms of the Catholic Party and in 1935 he decided to challenge its leaders directly. In November, Degrelle accompanied by a group of enthusiastic young supporters burst in to a meeting in Courtrai of the leaders of the Catholic party and harangued them on their complacency and corruption <sup>9</sup>.

This *coup de Courtrai*, as it became known, brought Degrelle wide publicity but he had not yet decided to break with the Catholic party. Rex remained no more than a dissident group *within* the Catholic world and its support was drawn almost exclusively from young Catholics who shared his belief that the leadership of the party was in need of renewal <sup>10</sup>. The decisive break with the Catholic hierarchy only took place during the subsequent winter. Pierlot, the head of the Catholic party, refused to enter into negotiations with the young rebels and, although at a local level there were many examples of Rexists continuing to receive encouragement from priests and Catholic

politicians alike, no national compromise between Rex and the party proved possible. Thus, with a general election imminent in May 1936, Degrelle belatedly decided to contest these elections as an independent political force '1.

This decision brought about a substantial transformation in Rex. Though its leaders and many of the militants who ran the local Rexist sections which sprang up during the winter of 1935-36 were still young Catholics, the movement also experienced an influx of more seasoned right-wing politicians who had lost patience with the ability of the Catholic party or the small patriotic leagues to articulate their demands. In addition, the Rexistists acquired the support of a number of lower-middle-class pressure groups, composed mostly of tradesmen and independent professionals who had felt the full weight of the Depression and who were anxious to obtain redress for their essentially economic grievances '2.

The ideology espoused by this rapidly expanding movement was, not surprisingly, an amalgam of diverse and even contradictory ideas. In essence, the Rexistists stood for a vaguely defined political and moral transformation of Belgium. The secret of Degrelle's success at this time lay in his skilful exploitation of a series of financial scandals which had shaken public confidence in the probity of politicians and which Degrelle used to launch a wide-ranging critique of the Belgian political system. Parties, he insisted, were corrupt cliques which served their own interests rather than those of "le pays réel" and he called for a flexible and "depoliticised" system of government which would be more responsive to the wishes of the people. Thus, far from advocating a statist authoritarian regime, the Rexistists wished to establish a network of devolved corporations through which the people would be able to exert effective control over their lives. Central power would be exercised by

the King who would act as the symbol of authority and as the guardian of the national interest <sup>13</sup>.

These political demands were complemented by a number of social and economic policies. Reflecting their intellectual origins in the social Catholic movements of the late-19th century, the Rexists were intensely conscious of the injustices in modern industrial society and advocated social reforms which, while retaining intact private property, would, they hoped, resolve the deep sense of alienation felt by the Belgian working class. Hypercapitalism, as represented by the financial trusts and economic conglomerates, was another *bête noire* of Rex. They were held responsible both for much of the corruption in public life as well as for the sufferings of small businessmen and the Rexists advocated economic reforms which would guarantee the rights of small traders against the rapacious practices of the economic elite <sup>14</sup>.

But beyond these specific policies, the Rexists still saw their final goal as the moral and spiritual transformation of Belgium. Thus, they called for a "révolution des âmes" which would create a new era of justice and social reconciliation. Selfish individualism and class war would be abolished and the spiritual influence of the Church liberated from its partisan ghetto in order to become the guiding spirit for the entire population <sup>15</sup>.

Whether this utopian and insubstantial ideology qualified Rex as a fascist movement remains open to question. Definitions of fascism, like the proverbial crock of gold at the end of the rainbow, always seem to evade the grasp of historians anxious to give clear form to what is perhaps the most over-used term of the 20th century political vocabulary. In fact, no single satisfactory definition will ever prove possible as, far from being a monolithic political movement, fascism was a complex and highly diverse amalgam of divergent social and intellectual trends. There was no clear division between

fascism and traditional conservatism or, for that matter, between certain elements of fascist ideology and mainstream socialism. Thus, no convenient litmus test can be devised which would enable a movement to be categorised as fascist or democratic and fascism is perhaps best regarded as an all-pervading spirit which influenced to varying degrees wide areas of the inter-war political and intellectual life of Europe.

Perhaps not surprisingly the supporters of Rex generally denied that it was a fascist movement. But the Rexists certainly were much influenced by various foreign political and intellectual trends. Though the reputation of Mussolini in Catholic circles had declined somewhat by the 1930s, his social and corporatist ideas were much admired by the Rexists and both Fascist Italy and Franco's Spain were the object of much uncritical praise in the Rexist press. In addition, representatives of Rex - including Degrelle - visited both Spain and Italy and in 1936 Rex received considerable financial assistance from the Italian government <sup>16</sup>. Links also existed between Rex and the Nazi leaders and in the summer of 1936 Degrelle was able to visit Germany where he was received by Hitler. Little of substance resulted from their meeting, though Degrelle remained in intermittent contact with the German leaders and received a small amount of financial support from them. None of this contact did, however, have much impact on Rexist attitudes towards Nazism. It remained in the mid-1930s an alien Germanic creed of which they knew little and which they looked on as the product of a culture entirely different from their own <sup>17</sup>. Instead, like all francophone Belgians of the era, the Rexists turned instinctively towards Paris. The ideas of Maurras as well as of other French Catholic and nationalist writers had an enormous impact on Rex. The language of Rex was saturated with concepts borrowed from French political thought and these ideas clearly did much to define the movement's early character <sup>18</sup>.

The Rexists themselves were, however, always at pains to stress their specifically Belgian character. And, ultimately, the greatest influence on Rex was the intellectual life of inter-war Belgian Catholicism and, in particular, the consensus amongst the young that parliamentary democracy was an outmoded, ineffectual system. Thus, when they looked to the international scene, the Rexists regarded themselves not as the agents of fascism but as a movement of Catholic renewal which had many affinities with other groups elsewhere in Catholic Europe, notably in Austria, Slovakia, Spain and Portugal. Thus, it is impossible to characterise the Rexist movement of 1936 as simply fascist. Certainly, many of the ideas now associated with fascism were to be found in Rex but, like many other inter-war political movements, it fell into a "no man's land" between fascism and democracy. Indeed, Rexists such as José Streel insisted that they were the advocates of a third way between fascism and democracy and it is perhaps such a definition which best does justice to the volatile fusion of simple populism, authoritarian nationalism and Catholic idealism which characterised the Rexist movement of this period <sup>19</sup>.

Whatever the exact nature of its ideology, there is no doubting the appeal which Rex held for certain sections of the population in May 1936. After a hectic, improvised election campaign, Degrelle's movement astounded observers by winning 11.49 % of the popular vote and 21 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In the largely static world of Belgian electoral politics, this result was nothing less than an earthquake and in the francophone provinces of southern Belgium - notably the Luxembourg - as well as in certain Brussels *quartiers* the Rexist vote was as high as almost 30 %. All of the principal parties were effected by the success of Rex but it was clear that most of their support had come from the Catholic party, whose vote slumped from 38.5 % in 1932 to only

27.6 % in 1936. These disaffected voters seem to have been drawn largely from the young as well as from rural and small town Catholics, notably farmers, *commerçants* and other members of the large lower middle class and, although its impact was enormous, the importance of the result should not be exaggerated. Those who voted for Rex were not - as the Rexists admitted - committed to a profound social and political revolution. It was essentially a protest vote by a population exasperated by the well-publicised cases of corruption and by the apparent failure of the politicians to cope adequately with the economic and political problems of the country <sup>20</sup>.

During the summer and autumn of 1936, the Rexists attempted to capitalise upon their unexpected success. Catapulted to prominence, they hastily established local branches and held a considerable number of public meetings. Yet, despite Degrelle's remarkable oratorical skills, they did not succeed in sustaining their electoral breakthrough. Events seemed to conspire against them and the sense of momentum so essential to any radical fringe grouping rapidly evaporated. A number of these difficulties were of the Rexists' own making. Publicity stunts such as the anti-communist "Rex ou Moscou" campaign fell flat and in October 1936 a March on Brussels, modelled on Mussolini's March on Rome, turned into a fiasco when only a few militants braved the government's ban on demonstrations and appeared on the streets of the capital. Moreover, activities such as these led many of those who had voted for Rex in May to look on the Rexists as disruptive demagogues who, far from offering a solution to the problems of Belgium, only increased the danger of political turmoil <sup>21</sup>.

This negative impression was confirmed when the Rexists signed an alliance with the Flemish Nationalist movement, the VNV. This union of outsiders possessed a certain logic, especially as both parties advocated largely authoritarian political reforms. But it had a disastrous impact on the Rexist

electorate who feared that it threatened the unity of the Belgian state which had played such a prominent role in Rexist rhetoric <sup>22</sup>. During the winter of 1936-1937, the problems of Rex deepened as the government sought to counter the Rexist challenge. There was no shortage of Catholic politicians willing to meet Degrelle and to flirt with the idea of an alliance with Rex but the consensus within the party was that it should remain faithful to the tripartite Socialist-Liberal-Catholic government headed by Paul Van Zeeland. And, whatever their other differences, the members of this cabinet could at least agree on their hostility to the Rexist trouble-makers who disrupted parliamentary proceedings and openly declared their intention of destroying the power of the politicians. Thus, from the autumn of 1936, the government enacted a series of measures intended to combat Rex, including banning it from the radio, outlawing uniformed militias and initiating modest constitutional reforms <sup>23</sup>.

In the spring of 1937, Degrelle attempted to recapture the political initiative by instigating a by-election in Brussels. One of the Rexist deputies resigned and Degrelle (who in 1936 had not stood for parliament) put himself forward as the Rexist candidate. Unfortunately for him, the three governmental parties decided to present a single candidate : the prime minister Paul Van Zeeland. The outcome of the highly spirited and eventful by-election campaign seemed in doubt until its final days when the *Chef de Rex* made the mistake of declaring at a rally that the silence of Cardinal Van Roey, the head of the Catholic Church in Belgium, indicated that the Church hoped for a Rexist victory. In fact, Van Roey had always been reluctant to condemn Rex publicly and, despite various warnings to the faithful to keep their distance from Rex, he had consistently sought a reconciliation between the Catholic party and Rex. But Degrelle's public assertion went too far and the Cardinal announced his support for Van Zeeland. This declaration must have influenced many Catholic



waverers and, when the result of the election on 11 April was declared, Degrelle had obtained only 19 % of the vote <sup>24</sup>.

This defeat marked the decisive turning-point in the fortunes of Rex. It exacerbated the tensions within the movement prompting a number of important resignations and, perhaps most significantly, it destroyed all hope of an alliance between Rex and the Catholic party. Rex no longer inspired the same fear and a final attempt by Van Roey to achieve some form of reconciliation between the two parties was unsuccessful <sup>25</sup>. Henceforth, Rex was in the political wilderness. As its membership and financial resources slumped, only its unconditional supporters remained loyal to the cause and, under Degrelle's impulsive leadership, the movement drifted rapidly towards a more explicitly pro-fascist stance. Its initial Catholic spiritual mission gave way to banal imitation of the policies and gestures of authoritarian movements elsewhere in Europe. Uniforms and highly-disciplined rallies were increasingly prominent and the Rexists boasted that they were "une minorité révolutionnaire fermement décidée" whose attitude was one of categorical opposition to the existing social and political order. This radicalization brought Rex closer to other fascist groups and, instead of talking of a third way between democracy and fascism, its propagandists foresaw an apocalyptic struggle in Europe between the forces of healthy regeneration and those of decadence <sup>26</sup>.

This extremist stance ensured that electoral support for the movement declined markedly. In the April 1939 general election, Rex received 4.43 % of the vote and in Flanders where, as a predominantly francophone grouping Rex had only ever received the support of a small patriotic middle class, its support disappeared almost entirely. Thus, Rex had become a movement limited to the francophone southern provinces of Wallonia, where in 1939 it obtained 7.58 % in Liège and 12.74 % in the Luxembourg <sup>27</sup>.

Thus, through a combination of its own errors and the pressure of the political and international climate, Rex had become by the pre-war years a fringe grouping which posed little real threat to the established order. Yet, the defeat of the Rexists was anything but a heroic victory for democratic values. The mood of dissatisfaction with the existing political regime, which had given Rex its initial impetus, did not disappear and even deepened during these years. The party-dominated parliamentary system was regarded by almost all sections of the political spectrum as an outmoded 19th century relic incapable of responding to the challenges of the modern era. A galaxy of revues and study groups bemoaned its failings while projects for constitutional reform abounded. Politicians from the Catholic, Liberal and even Socialist parties shared in this belief in the inevitability of change and both the Van Zeeland government and its successors dabbled with reforms which were intended to make the political system more efficient, hierarchical and even authoritarian <sup>28</sup>.

These initiatives received strong encouragement from King Léopold III. The Belgian kings, although constitutional monarchs, have always enjoyed substantial formal and informal powers and, when Léopold III succeeded his father after Albert's sudden death in 1934, he was determined to use his authority to the full. A young man with a strong sense of duty, Léopold shared in the general alienation from the parliamentary system. Rather like Edward VIII in Britain, he had little time for what he regarded as the petty squabbles of politicians and surrounded himself with advisors, such as Henri De Man, the President of the Socialist party, who were of the same opinion. Hence, Léopold made little secret of his desire to bring about substantial political reforms which would both expand his personal powers and enable Belgium to confront the social and economic challenges of the modern era <sup>29</sup>.

Given this broad consensus, there seems little doubt that, had the war not intervened, there would have been some measure of constitutional reform. Belgium was, of course, far from unique in this respect. The resurgence of liberal democratic ideas since 1945 has disguised the extent to which during the previous twenty years the tide had run in the opposite direction. The views expressed by the Belgian political elite were shared by many others throughout Europe who were convinced that only more authoritarian and "depoliticized" governmental structures could meet the needs of complex modern societies <sup>30</sup>.

But, as the possibility of war increased, attention was diverted from projects of political reform to issues of national defence. In the mid-1930s, Belgium had broken with the western powers and declared its neutrality. This move attracted wide public support and during 1938 and 1939 there were many, including Léopold III, who hoped that this neutral stance would save their country from becoming embroiled in a second disastrous war. Belgium had no grievances of substance with any of the Great Powers and, when Britain and France declared war on Germany after the latter's invasion of Poland in September 1939, the government reiterated its neutrality. Although the sympathies of many Belgians lay with the Allies, a broad majority remained committed to the government's policy and during the subsequent winter they waited anxiously to see if the "phoney war" would develop into something more substantial. There was little patriotic fervour during these nervous months. The events of the First World War, when almost all of Belgium had suffered a harsh German Occupation, remained a vivid memory and the desire for some form of negotiated peace was substantial. It did, however, soon become apparent from intelligence sources that the German armies were preparing an invasion of France through Belgium and the army, which had been mobilized in September

1939, was deployed along the eastern frontier while the King and his ministers attempted by diplomatic initiatives to preserve their country's neutrality <sup>31</sup>.

Throughout this period, the Rexists remained an isolated group. Their press was noisy in its support for the policy of neutrality and the members of Rex were far from being the agents of the Third Reich. Nevertheless, although contact with Nazi Germany was always limited, the radicalization of Rex since 1937 did lead some within the movement to look sympathetically upon certain of Hitler's territorial ambitions. Thus, while remaining essentially patriotic, Degrelle and the Rexist press condemned the Versailles settlement as unjust and blamed the war atmosphere on the bellicose behaviour of the Western Allies. Moreover, in private, Degrelle unsuccessfully approached the German embassy in Brussels in January 1940 to seek finance for a new newspaper which he claimed would defend the policy of neutrality against its pro-Allied critics. The *Chef de Rex's* pronouncements caused a number of his erstwhile supporters to resign and, when in the spring of 1940 he justified the German invasion of Denmark and Norway as a necessary defensive move, there was a further flood of resignations from the movement <sup>32</sup>.

Thus, by May 1940 the Rexists had become no more than a marginal grouping lacking in supporters, funds and, above all, optimism. Only a dedicated band of loyalists remained faithful to the cause and, in the difficult circumstances of the winter of 1939-1940, few local Rexist groups continued to operate. Their adventure appeared to have ended and, if the political life of Belgium had not been abruptly transformed by the German invasion, it would seem highly unlikely that Rex would ever have recaptured the mass support it had enjoyed in 1936.

Before passing on to consider the changes wrought by that invasion, it is, however, worth considering how far the pre-war history of Rex determined

its subsequent pro-German stance. Those historians and others who consider wartime collaboration to have been essentially a product of the exceptional character of those years are reluctant to seek any pre-war origins for the phenomenon. Collaboration, whether it was a mental aberration or the work of unscrupulous opportunists, is assumed to have had no history outside of the war years. Nevertheless, in Belgium, as elsewhere in Europe, the years of the German Occupation cannot be treated separately from those which preceded and followed them. The history of Belgium did not stop in May 1940 to be resumed on the departure of the German armies in September 1944. The intervening years were indeed in some respects exceptional but collaboration, like Resistance, was a phenomenon which, though its form was determined by the circumstances of the war, expressed the political and social tensions of pre-war Belgium.

Thus, it is both justifiable and necessary to seek in the 1930s the "pre-history" of collaboration <sup>33</sup>. In the case of Rex, although it seems possible that had the Occupation been somewhat different in character Rex might not have come to identify so totally with the Nazi cause, there were several aspects of its pre-war history which did encourage the movement to lean towards support for the German forces. The first of these was its position as a marginal group categorically opposed to the existing political regime. The rather ambivalent attitudes of 1936 had given way to a root and branch hostility to the liberal democratic order and, though their protestations of patriotism were sincere, the Rexists were inclined to look on any event which brought about the destruction of the regime as a liberation.

The second, and perhaps most important, pre-war explanation for their espousal of collaboration was their attitude towards the European conflict. Not only did the Rexists place much of the responsibility for the war on the Western governments but they also saw it as being essentially ideological in

nature. Of the many political groupings in inter-war Europe opposed to the democratic order, only a small minority subsequently became involved in collaboration. The process by which these few came to support the Germans while the others remained neutral or even joined the Resistance was often largely arbitrary but in many cases the determining factor was their attitude towards the international conflict. Those groups which, whatever their hostility towards their own government, saw the conflict as one between nations tended to place loyalty to their country above their political sentiments ; while those movements which already before the war had come to see their actions as part of a broader European struggle leaned towards support for the Axis powers. Thus, while in France and Belgium authoritarian leagues such as the *Légion Nationale* or the *Croix de Feu* opted for Resistance, other more internationalist groups such as Rex or Doriot's PPF opted for collaboration <sup>34</sup>.

But the third essential reason for the Rexist espousal of collaboration was the character of Léon Degrelle. The *Chef de Rex* had many qualities as a political leader. Aged only 30 at the moment of his greatest success in 1936, his youthful good looks contrasted markedly with the solidly bourgeois character of most Belgian politicians. The French writer, Robert Brasillach, visiting Belgium in the mid-1930s, heralded Degrelle as the incarnation of the spirit of the New Europe and the *Chef de Rex* did seem to many to symbolise the new era of mass politics. In private, he was a man of easy charm and conviviality while his remarkable talents as an orator made him a formidable public speaker. Widely regarded as the most skilful political orator of his generation, Degrelle used an earthy, colloquial language full of Belgian *mots sauvages* to heap scorn on the political elite while holding out his own vision of a new era of purity and strong leadership <sup>35</sup>.

Thus, Degrelle was without doubt a highly charismatic leader who, rather in the manner of a revivalist preacher, inspired "une confiance aveugle" in many of his followers <sup>36</sup>. But the Faustian pact which had given the *Chef de Rex* these talents also had a darker side. Degrelle was obsessed with his own sense of destiny and his conviction that he alone could lead Belgium caused him to conflate his personal interests with those of his country. Degrelle was in many respects a highly skilful politician with a keenly developed machiavellian sense of political realities but these qualities went hand in hand with an incorrigible tendency to fantasise about his own importance. He lacked any sense of proportion and, with time, his volatility increased. Never a man to concern himself with prosaic matters of organisation, he became more and more impulsive in his political initiatives. He believed that his defeat in 1937 had been the result of his own failure to seize the initiative and was convinced that he must grasp immediately any new opportunity which presented itself. Success, he believed, came from being the first to recognise the future and this conviction together with his own vanity and sense of personal destiny formed a fateful combination which goes far towards explaining the subsequent history of Rex <sup>37</sup>.

Study of such a recent and controversial period of history creates unique difficulties and challenges. This thesis is not an apologia but nor is it intended to serve as a condemnation of the Rexists. The time for judgements - be they judicial, political or even moral - has passed and, more than forty years after the end of the war, it is appropriate to adopt a more dispassionate and - so far as that is ever possible - objective approach. After the war, nearly all Rexists were prosecuted under a system of military justice established by the Belgian government on its return from London. A few,

including some of the principal leaders of Rex, were executed while many others were sentenced to long periods of imprisonment. On their release, some chose to settle abroad while others live in retirement in Belgium. All paid dearly for their crimes and only a small minority still choose to glorify their wartime activities. A few who evaded prosecution - including Léon Degrelle - live on in exile as the irrelevant relics of a historical process which has long since passed them by. Some of these seek to justify their past adventures but, for the most part, they too accept that a page of history has been turned and wish only that their deeds and motives be recorded.

Sincerity, as some of those who fought in the Resistance have long been willing to recognise, is not always the monopoly of the victors <sup>3e</sup>. There were in Rex many cynical opportunists as well as a number of brutal, evil men ; but there were also - especially amongst those *rexistes de la première heure* who had supported the movement since its beginnings - many well-intentioned men and women who did believe that Rex offered the best hope for their country. They were profoundly mistaken in rallying to the cause of a conqueror responsible for some of the darkest actions in human history. But bewilderment, ignorance and prior loyalties all played a part in their choice and it is all too tempting for historians and others to impose a false clarity on events which at the time seemed complex and confusing. Thus, as a foreigner belonging to a generation too young to have experienced the war at first hand, I have sought to treat Rex like any other historical subject. By doing so, I intend neither to rehabilitate or condemn those involved but to provide an accurate record for those who may wish to understand the Rexist phenomenon.

This thesis could not have been completed without the generous assistance of a number of people and institutions. Wadham College and Christ Church, Oxford, the British Academy, the Commissariat for International



Relations of the Belgian *Ministère de l'Education Nationale* and the Institute for Historical Research of the University of London have all provided financial assistance. In Belgium, I have benefited from the guidance of a considerable number of individuals who helped an all too ignorant foreigner to understand something of their country's complex history. The staff of the *Auditorat Général près la Cour Militaire* of the Palais de Justice in Brussels generously allowed me to consult the documents in their possession and I am especially grateful to Colonel Maes and his colleagues for making my visits to their archives such a pleasure. Francis Balace of the University of Liège, Paul Jamin and Pablo and Sara Layson have all helped my work in various ways. The *Centre de recherches et d'études historiques de la seconde guerre mondiale* in Brussels has provided me with innumerable forms of assistance and I am especially grateful to Albert De Jonghe, Alain Dantoing, Rudi Van Doorslaer, José Gotovitch and Lut Van Daele of the *Centre* for their advice. Madame Hepp of Jemeppe-sur-Meuse kindly allowed me to consult documentary material belonging to her late husband José Streel, while Léon Degrelle in Spain gave generously of his time and hospitality to assist me with my research.

My supervisor, Professor Richard Cobb, has been throughout my research a source of advice and inspiration. In addition, my parents, A.F. Thompson of Wadham College, Tom Buchanan, Katya Andreyev, Anna Evans, Robin Gable and Denise Cripps have all at different stages given me invaluable help and encouragement. During my research I have become conscious of the profound differences which the events of the war continue to stimulate and none of those whom I thank will entirely agree with the opinions which I express. Nevertheless, I hope that they will accept my heartfelt thanks. This thesis is dedicated to the memory of all of the victims of the events which form its subject.

### Footnotes - Introduction

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## CHAPTER ONE : MAY - DECEMBER 1940

It was at dawn on the morning of 10 May 1940 that the German offensive in the west, so long anticipated and so long dreaded, eventually occurred. Striking simultaneously at Belgium and the Netherlands, the German armies launched a heavily motorised assault similar to that which had conquered Poland. The Belgian army, well equipped and well trained, was no easy challenge for the German forces but from the very first hours of this war the Belgian commanders and their troops were aware of the superior power of the enemy. The reinforcements provided by the French and British armies did little to right this imbalance and the Belgians were forced into a steady and demoralising retreat. On 17 May the German armies entered Brussels and the remaining Belgian forces were soon confined to a small area of north-west Flanders. King Léopold III who, in accordance with the constitution, had assumed direct command of the Belgian armies, was forced to accept the necessity of capitulating to the Germans to prevent further pointless loss of life. Thus, on 28 May, a mere 18 days after the declaration of hostilities, the exhausted Belgian troops laid down their arms <sup>1</sup>. The war, it seemed, was over almost before it had begun but, in reality, the campaign of May 1940 proved to be merely the prelude to a German Occupation which was to last more than four years.

The mood of the Belgian population in the weeks which followed the capitulation was one of confusion and disorientation <sup>2</sup>. For most Belgians, foreign occupation was hardly a novel experience and they retained vivid memories of the events of the German Occupation of 1914-1918. But on this occasion circumstances seemed very different. During the First World War the Belgian armies had been able to fight on from a small salient of Belgian territory but in 1940 the remorseless speed of the military defeat followed

shortly afterwards by the collapse of France and the inglorious evacuation of the remnants of the British forces at Dunkirk convinced almost everyone that this time there could be no hope of recovery.

In addition, the campaign of May 1940 had brought to a head the long latent tensions between King Léopold III and his ministers. Relations between the government headed by the prime minister Hubert Pierlot and the King, who made little secret of his contempt for the weakness and incompetence of the Belgian political parties, had never been good but during May 1940 they deteriorated rapidly. The King, as head of the armed forces, was reluctant to allow the government any role in the conduct of military operations preferring to rely on his own circle of personal advisors. Above all, the King and his ministers disagreed fundamentally as to what should happen if it proved impossible to continue the military struggle on Belgian territory. In the opinion of the government, the King should emulate the example of the Dutch queen and continue the struggle from abroad alongside France and Britain ; but Léopold III, who like his father Albert during the First World War had long been an ardent defender of his country's neutrality, had no wish to become the pawn of the Western allies. For him, defeat within Belgium would mark the end of the conflict and he was determined to remain on Belgian soil, if necessary as a prisoner of the Germans. With the retreat of the Belgian armies, this unresolved conflict became ever more acute and at a last dramatic meeting at the Château of Wynendaele on 25 May, the King and his ministers proved unable to resolve their differences.

Thus, while the King remained with his troops and was subsequently imprisoned by the Germans in his palace at Laeken outside Brussels, the ministers fled to France intending to continue the struggle. The French capitulation did, however, transform the situation. Convinced that Germany had

won the war, the members of the government accepted the necessity of coming to terms with the German authorities and they therefore attempted to effect a reconciliation with the King. But Léopold III, who was anxious to keep his political options open and had been angered by the declarations made by the government in France, repulsed their advances. Thus, during the summer of 1940, the Pierlot government remained isolated in France, unable to return to Belgium and yet unwilling to continue the military struggle. But with the failure of the German forces to defeat Britain in September, the attitude of the government began to change. It seemed that the war might not after all be over and in the autumn a small group of ministers headed by Pierlot escaped from France and made their way to London where in December they established a government-in-exile. Their relations with the King did, however, remain unresolved. While the ministers regarded themselves as the legitimate Belgian authorities, they did not have the support of the King in Brussels who not only ignored their existence but seemed anxious to reach an understanding with the German authorities. Thus, the events of May 1940 had laid the basis for a political conflict which was to endure throughout the war and would also overshadow much of post-war Belgian history <sup>3</sup>.

For most Belgians such political conflicts were, however, very remote from their more immediate material problems. Not only had much of the country been devastated by the military campaign but as many as 2 million Belgians, more than one fifth of the total population, had fled into France <sup>4</sup>. The repatriation of these evacuees as well as the restoration of supplies of food and power and the re-establishment of means of communication were all problems which had to be confronted urgently. Moreover, many local councils had ceased to operate and, in their absence, *ad hoc* committees of notables had to be established to accomplish this work <sup>5</sup>.

Yet, despite these difficulties, a semblance of normality was gradually restored throughout the country. And, as the Belgian population returned to their homes, families and jobs, so they attempted to adjust to the circumstances of the German Occupation and to assess the position of their country. In doing so, almost all Belgians, regardless of their linguistic or political grouping, were agreed on one point : namely that the German military victory on the European continent was incontrovertible. While many hoped that Britain would fight off the German assault, only a very few rather foolhardy spirits were willing to predict that the British, who had been so rudely expelled from Europe earlier in the summer, would prove able to challenge the Nazi hegemony on the continent <sup>6</sup>. Thus, for most Belgians, the principal priority was to salvage what they could from the wreckage of military defeat. Above all, a broad consensus existed within Occupied Belgium on the need to maintain national unity. The spectacle of the French collapse as well as the accusation made by the French foreign minister, Reynaud, that by capitulating the Belgian armies had betrayed the Western Allies provoked an instinctive patriotic reaction within Belgium of which the King was the principal beneficiary. Thus, while the members of the government were widely regarded as having deserted their country, the King detained in his palace at Laeken was the recipient of innumerable expressions of loyalty <sup>7</sup>.

These spontaneous and unprecedented declarations of support for the King were much less an expression of positive support for his political stance than a gesture of loyalty to the monarchy as a symbol of national unity. Nevertheless, there were few Belgians at this time who felt any great affection for their former democratic political system which, even if unlike in France it was not held responsible for the military defeat, was generally deemed to be discredited and irrelevant. Thus, the summer of 1940 was a unique moment in

modern Belgian history when a majority of the population appeared willing to contemplate the introduction of an authoritarian form of government <sup>8</sup>. At the root of this brief but profound transformation in political attitudes was the widespread belief that the military events of 1940 had destroyed for ever a parliamentary system which it had become commonplace in the 1930s to criticise as antiquated, ineffective and divisive. Instead, it was widely felt that the realities of the modern age required that Belgium introduce a form of limited political authoritarianism similar to the changes which had taken place in so many European countries during the previous twenty years. Such a regime, it was hoped, would be both more effective in representing the "real" wishes of the people and more efficient in confronting the social and economic problems of the contemporary era. Thus, as also proved to be the case in the Netherlands <sup>9</sup>, the military defeat gave a great impetus to those manifold projects for authoritarian constitutional reform which had been fashionable in certain intellectual circles throughout the previous decade. Suddenly in 1940 these ideas found for the first time a more general resonance and became an integral element of "l'air du temps".

At a national level, the disorder evident in the aftermath of the military defeat soon gave way to a new network of administrative institutions which, although intended to be only temporary, would in fact remain in place largely unaltered throughout the German Occupation. On 1st June a German decree announced the creation of a military administration (*Militärverwaltung*) in Brussels to administer both Belgium and the neighbouring French *départements* of the Nord and Pas-de-Calais which were regarded as of particular strategic importance <sup>10</sup>. As the governor of this area, Hitler appointed an aristocratic, anti-Nazi *Wehrmacht* officer General von Falkenhausen but he played little role in day to day matters preferring to devolve many of his responsibilities to his



head of administration, Eggert Reeder. Also a *Wehrmacht* officer, Reeder proved to be a diligent and skilled administrator who as *Militärverwaltungschef* would be the *de facto* ruler of Belgium for more than four years.

The fact that Belgium, unlike most of the territories conquered by the German armies in 1940, was placed under the control of the *Wehrmacht* rather than of a civilian German administration would prove of great importance for the future development of German policies within the country. Yet, when it was created, Hitler intended that the *Militärverwaltung* should be a temporary body which would administer Belgium until the political future of the country was resolved at the end of the war. Nevertheless, he did issue general guide-lines to the *Wehrmacht* administrators in July and as, contrary to all expectations, the war did not end in 1940, these orders would remain the principal determinants of German policies in Belgium for much of the Occupation. They made clear that the *Führer* had made no decision regarding the future of the Belgian state and that it was not the purpose of the *Militärverwaltung* to make any such political choices. Thus, the task of the *Wehrmacht* officials was - and would remain - to administer the country as efficiently as possible with the minimal deployment of German manpower while ensuring that the Belgian economy operated to the maximum benefit of the German war effort. But, von Falkenhausen and Reeder were in no sense apolitical administrators. They were to execute all instructions received from Berlin including those - on matters such as Jewish policy - which prejudiced their other goals. In addition, Hitler like many other Nazi leaders, believed that the Flemish were a "lost" germanic nation. He therefore ordered that they should be assisted in every possible way while the francophone Belgians were to be accorded no such favours. This instruction formed the basis of the "Flamenpolitik" which would be a prominent feature of the activities of the *Militärverwaltung* ' '.

From the outset, it was intended that much of the internal administration of the country would remain in Belgian hands and a working relationship soon developed between the Occupying forces and Belgian officials. Indeed, under the terms of a law hastily passed by the Belgian parliament on 10 May 1940, it had been foreseen that, in the event of a German Occupation, the Belgian civil service would remain in place to protect as far as possible the material interests of the civilian population. The conduct of this enforced partnership with the German authorities was the responsibility of the *secrétaires-généraux*. They were the permanent civil servants who headed each of the ministerial departments and during the Occupation they acted collectively as a cabinet assuming many of the powers formerly exercised by their political superiors. On the whole, the *secrétaires-généraux* represented the interests of the established social and political elite and they collaborated closely with the other principal institutions of Belgian life including the judiciary, the financial and industrial elite and the Catholic Church. Their rule, like that of the *Militärverwaltung*, was originally intended to be a temporary phenomenon but the continuation of the war deferred the enactment of any political solution and in the event the *secrétaires-généraux* pursued their difficult dual role as the executors of German orders and the guardians of the interests of the Belgian population until the liberation of 1944 <sup>12</sup>.

The King was conspicuously absent from this nascent institutional framework. He had been confined to his palace at Laeken outside Brussels after his surrender to the German forces and, under the terms of Hitler's orders of July 1940, he was forbidden from engaging in any form of political activity <sup>13</sup>. Léopold was, nevertheless, anything but idle. He was able to receive a number of select visitors and his entourage of advisors were an active presence in the social and political life of the Belgian capital throughout the German

Occupation. Léopold III shared in the general belief that the German victory in Europe was assured and he was therefore anxious to reach an understanding with the leaders of the Third Reich that would enable Belgium to retain some form of political independence within a German-dominated Europe. Thus, throughout the summer and autumn of 1940, the King made a series of efforts to enter into a dialogue with the German leaders. All of these met with failure until his sister Princess Marie-José, the wife of the Crown Prince of Italy, intervened directly with Hitler. As a consequence of her efforts, Léopold was invited to Berchtesgaden where he was received by the *Führer* on 19 November. Much of the conversation was dominated by the King's efforts to ensure the release of Belgian prisoners of war as well as other humanitarian concerns but Léopold also pressed the *Führer* to give assurances as to the future unity and independence of Belgium. Hitler was, however, non-committal. He was intent upon awaiting the end of hostilities before determining the future structure of Europe and, apart from reassuring the King that the royal family would be protected, the German leader was not willing to make any promises about the future of Belgium. Thus, the interview proved inconclusive and Léopold returned to Brussels where he was to spend the remainder of the Occupation in genteel detainment in the Palace of Laeken <sup>14</sup>. Subsequent military events, including the German attack on the Soviet Union, caused the chances of any political initiative to recede still further. Nevertheless, the King remained estranged from both the government-in-exile and the Western Allies and for the remainder of the Occupation his very presence within Belgium would have a major influence over the political life of the country.

The final element in the political and institutional structure of Belgium in 1940 was the Flemish nationalist movement, the *Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond* (VNV). Since the turn of the century, Flemish nationalism had been an

important political and emotional force within Belgium. Support for Flemish nationalist political groupings had grown steadily and in the 1939 elections the VNV won almost 8 % of the national vote <sup>15</sup>. Flemish nationalist attitudes towards Germany were dominated by the events of the First World War when some Flemish militants had helped the Germans to administer Occupied Belgium in the belief that the Germans would in turn assist the Flemish to achieve self-determination. Such hopes proved, however, to be misplaced. The Germans did almost nothing to favour the Flemish cause and this so-called "activism" led to the prosecution of a number of Flemish nationalists by the Belgian authorities after the Allied victory of 1918.

Memories of these events cast a long shadow over Flemish nationalism during the inter-war years. A strenuous campaign was conducted for the release of the imprisoned "activists" but many Flemish Nationalists subsequently came to regard the activism of 1914-1918 as a mistake which they were in no hurry to repeat. Nevertheless, they did continue to consider themselves a germanic nation and some still looked upon Germany as a historical ally in their struggle for independence. In addition, the Flemish nationalist movement drifted towards the right of the political spectrum during the 1930s. A small radical fringe made no secret of its admiration for the Nazi regime and, although many others in the VNV were willing to work within the democratic structures of the Belgian state, the movement as a whole did reflect the general popularity of authoritarian political ideas.

In the summer of 1940, the leaders of the VNV appeared to be the great beneficiaries of the new political situation. They were energetically courted from all sides and, although mindful of the mistakes of the first Occupation, the dramatic military events of 1940 were sufficient to convince even the more cautious amongst them of the need to co-operate with the German

authorities. Thus, the head of the VNV, Staf de Clercq, met German officials in June 1940 and members of his movement were subsequently appointed by the Germans to key posts within the Belgian administration. Such actions did not amount to a formal policy of collaboration but they did set the VNV on a course which would lead them before the end of the year to a clear declaration of support for the German cause. Henceforth, the VNV would be the principal partner of the *Militärverwaltung* in its administration of Occupied Belgium <sup>16</sup>.

Rex was almost entirely absent from the political structure which emerged in the summer of 1940. The Rexist organisation had been decimated by the invasion and, during these first crucial weeks of the Occupation, the movement gave few signs of life. Hardly any of its principal leaders were in Belgium at this time. Rex had always been dominated by young men and already during the previous winter the general mobilisation had deprived the movement of many of its most experienced local and national figures <sup>17</sup>. After the defeat, they remained scattered over a wide area, many having been captured by the German armies and deported to prisoner of war camps in the Reich, where, despite the subsequent efforts made on their behalf, most would remain for the entire duration of the war <sup>18</sup>.

In addition, a number of those Rexist leaders - including Léon Degrelle - who were not serving in the army had been arrested by the Belgian authorities on 10 May. The long period of anxious vigil during the previous months as well as the role allegedly played by Quisling and his supporters during the German attack on Norway had led the government to fear that a fifth column of pro-German sympathisers was present within Belgium ready to assist the enemy at the moment of invasion. Thus, in April 1940, the Minister of Justice, Paul-Emile Janson, commanded that lists be drawn up of all such

suspects and on 10 May the order was given that these fifth columnists be taken into administrative detention under the terms of laws passed during the First World War which allowed for the suspension of individual rights during wartime. Amidst the general disorder, there was inevitably little logic to these arrests. Amongst those taken into custody were many German and Jewish refugees from Nazism as well as members of pro-German groups, Trotskyists, anarchists, Flemish Nationalists and a large number of Communist militants faithful to the policy of neutrality adopted by the Soviet Union <sup>19</sup>.

In all, some 2,000 to 3,000 Belgians as well as an equivalent number of foreigners resident in Belgium appear to have been arrested <sup>20</sup>. Despite their claims to the contrary <sup>21</sup>, the Rexists constituted only a small minority of this total. They did, however, include some of the most important figures in the movement. Apart from Léon Degrelle, others arrested included the prominent journalists Victor Matthys and Serge Doring and some of the former Rexist parliamentary deputies as well as some rank and file Rexist militants who were merely swept up in the panic of the time <sup>22</sup>.

The suspicion that these Rexists would have assisted the German armies was in fact, as we have seen, largely unjustified. Whatever their limited contact with the Third Reich and Degrelle's expressions of sympathy for the German cause, for most Rexists Nazi Germany remained a distant land of which they knew little. Thus, during the military campaign of May 1940, Rexists serving in the Belgian army seem to have accomplished their patriotic duty to the full and on occasion with considerable distinction <sup>23</sup>. A number of those suspects arrested on 10 May were soon released but the majority - including the Rexist detainees - were kept in custody and, as the Germans advanced, they were transferred first to prisons in western Belgium and subsequently to France <sup>24</sup>. Amidst the panic engendered by the German successes, the Belgian prisoners were

considered by their French captors to be German agents and on 20 May at Abbeville in northern France, 21 of their number - including Joris Van Severen, the leader of the Flemish New Order movement *Verdinaso*, as well as an elderly Rexist - were executed by French soldiers <sup>25</sup>. The remainder escaped such summary treatment but they endured both beatings and unpleasant physical conditions as they were hastily moved from prison to prison throughout France in order to evade the German armies <sup>26</sup>. Indeed, both during and after the war, Degrelle has made much of these hardships telling and retelling exaggerated stories of his sufferings at the hands of the democratic authorities with the intention of justifying his subsequent espousal of collaboration <sup>27</sup>.

The Belgian detainees were eventually interned in camps in the south of France but news of their whereabouts was slow to reach Belgium and for a time it was widely believed that Degrelle had been amongst those suspects killed by their French captors <sup>28</sup>. His dynamic and impulsive personality had always dominated Rex to such an extent that - like, for example, Doriot's PPF in France - it seemed almost impossible for the Rexistists to conceive of a future for their movement without his leadership. Nevertheless, those few Rexistists who had remained in Brussels did do what they could to rebuild their movement. This responsibility fell principally upon the members of the *Conseil Général* of Rex which during the difficult winter of 1939-1940 had already been in charge of what remained of the national and local structures of the movement. An administrative body of no great political importance, its most important members were Francois De Meester de Heyndonck, the Rexist treasurer Maurice Vandavelde, an architect Camille Damman and the prosperous Brussels *notaire* Léon Brunet <sup>29</sup>. The *Conseil Général* met for the first time on 29 May, the day after the Belgian surrender to the German forces, and, assisted by a *comité*

*consultatif provisoire* composed of prominent pro-Rexist figures, it met at least twice a week during the subsequent two months <sup>30</sup>.

For these men, there was no question of launching Rex upon a policy of instant collaboration with the Germans, as occurred in certain other Occupied countries <sup>31</sup>. They were reluctant to make any decisions prior to the hoped for return of Degrelle and, together with members of his family, they devoted much of their energies to discovering the fate of their leader <sup>32</sup>. But the *Conseil Général* did take the first steps towards defining the political stance of the movement. Despite the German Occupation, they - like many others at this time - had no doubt that it was necessary to resume their political struggle and the *Conseil Général* called on all Rexist to assist in the rebuilding of the movement <sup>33</sup>. In addition, they gave their unconditional support to Léopold III. A letter addressed to the King on 7 June by the *Conseil Général* expressed their "sentiments de dévouement résolu et de fidélité totale" as well as stating their long-standing belief that only through an expansion in the King's legal and political powers would the reconstruction of Belgium be achieved <sup>34</sup>. Pro-royalist sentiments suffused all areas of Rexist activities during these first months of the Occupation and, in the absence of Degrelle, the King, with his supposed authoritarian tendencies, became the principal focus for Rexist hopes <sup>35</sup>. Conversely, a press release issued by the *Conseil Général* on 2 July accused Pierlot and his fellow ministers of having betrayed the nation and called for the punishment of those responsible for the arrests carried out on 10 May <sup>36</sup>.

There is no doubt that these political statements were greeted enthusiastically by the most members of Rex. They took no pleasure in the national defeat but, despite the Occupation of the country by German forces and their concern as to the fate of Degrelle, Rexist militants did feel that the



ignominious demise of the Belgian and French armies had vindicated their criticisms of the democratic political regime. The German Occupation was, they argued, a tragedy which could have been avoided had not Belgium been led by warmongering politicians intent upon embroiling the country in an unnecessary conflict. Nevertheless, they were optimistic that the Occupation would provide the opportunity they had long awaited to enact the Rexist revolution <sup>37</sup>. Thus, there was an undeniably exultant air to the behaviour of many Rexist during the summer of 1940. They behaved with the arrogant confidence of men who believed that their hour had come, daubing the walls of Brussels with slogans declaring that "Degrelle avait raison" and urging the *Conseil Général* to relaunch the movement without awaiting the return of the *Chef de Rex* <sup>38</sup>. It was imperative, declared the directory of Rex-Liège to the *Conseil Général* on 19 June, that Rexist should "sortir de notre réserve et savoir prendre nos responsabilités". The people, they claimed, were ready to rally to Rex and a propaganda campaign exploiting the mood of the population would meet with unprecedented success <sup>39</sup>.

Although anxious to exercise a controlling hand over these enthusiasts whose initiatives might prejudice the "patriotic dignity" of the movement <sup>40</sup>, the *Conseil Général* was also well aware of the need for action. The principal leaders of the Flemish nationalist movement, the VNV, had, as we have seen, already begun to establish a *modus vivendi* with the German authorities. Meanwhile, two other right-wing groups, the late Joris Van Severen's *Verdinaso* and the authoritarian paramilitary league, the *Légion Nationale*, signed an agreement in July which they hoped would form the basis of a new official political movement <sup>41</sup>. Finally, Henri De Man, the President of the powerful *Parti Ouvrier Belge* (POB) and one of the King's closest advisors at this time, issued a manifesto dated 28 June in which he declared that "pour les

classes laborieuses et pour le socialisme, cet effondrement d'un monde décrépi, loin d'être un désastre est une délivrance". The work of the POB was, De Man claimed, at an end and he too advocated the creation of an authoritarian *parti unique* loyal to the King <sup>42</sup>.

Thus, a number of different groups and individuals were anxious to exploit the vacuum left by the apparent demise of the old political regime and the Rexists were already concerned that they were being left behind by these initiatives <sup>43</sup>. Hence, on 9 July the *Conseil Général* decided to create a new paramilitary grouping to be called the *Formations de Combat* <sup>44</sup> which they hoped would form the nucleus of the militia of any official political movement which might be formed. In addition, like many other groups, the Rexists were keen to be represented in the new government which it was widely believed the King intended to create and the names of potential ministers reputed to be favourably disposed towards Rex were circulating within the movement <sup>45</sup>.

These initiatives gathered pace with the return from detention in France on 11 July of two of Degrelle's closest colleagues, Victor Matthys and Serge Doring <sup>46</sup>. While expressing their support for the cautious policies of the *Conseil Général*, the two men gave new impetus to the resurrection of the movement <sup>47</sup>. In particular, they appear to have lent their support to those advocating the relaunch of the Rexist daily newspaper, *Le Pays Réel*. A number of newspapers, both national and provincial, had already appeared with German support <sup>48</sup> and many Rexists were enthusiastic that *Le Pays Réel* should also reappear in order to act as a mouthpiece for their views <sup>49</sup>. In fact, soon after arriving in Belgium, the Germans had apparently approached Raty, the administrator of the Rexist press, to invite him to relaunch the newspaper. At this stage the Rexist leaders thought it best to do nothing prior to the return of Degrelle <sup>50</sup> but their attitude subsequently changed and, despite the denials

of Degrelle and Matthys, it seems probable that Matthys did indeed discuss the reappearance of *Le Pays Réel* with the German authorities during July <sup>51</sup>. A German report stated that approval was given in principle for the publication of the Rexist daily on 30 July and Degrelle has tacitly admitted that some form of authorisation had been obtained from the German authorities prior to his return <sup>52</sup>.

Thus, by the end of July, two months after the arrival of the German armies, the Rexist leaders in Brussels had already taken the first steps towards defining the future stance of their movement. Although in no sense collaborationist, Rex had emerged as one of the groups advocating some form of accommodation with the victorious German forces. In addition, like many others, the Rexist had voiced their support for a reform of the constitution which would replace an outmoded parliamentarism by a more authoritarian political structure in which the King would play a prominent role. None of these ideas could be said to have placed Rex on the extremes of Belgian life. As we have seen, most Belgians in the summer of 1940 believed in the need to adapt to the German presence and to carry out political reforms. Nevertheless, there were from the beginning, in the manner of the Rexist espousal of these ideas, the germs of their future extremism. While most who advocated such ideas did so in the belief that they were the best means of salvaging some hope from the disaster of military defeat, the Rexist were enthusiasts for change sparing hardly a thought for the past and glorying in the possibilities of the future.

In this respect, the small Rexist minority was already divided from the majority of the Belgian population. But, if Degrelle had indeed perished in France in the summer of 1940, it is impossible to know how the Rexist would have subsequently acted during the Occupation. Their unambiguous enthusiasm for New Order ideas already defined them to a certain extent as "proto-

collaborationists" but there were many other groups and individuals in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe who in the early months of the Occupation appeared committed to an understanding with the Third Reich but who, as it emerged that the victory of Germany was not in fact assured, subsequently withdrew into an "attentiste" or even pro-Allied stance. Thus, it seems probable that, had Degrelle not returned, the Rexist movement would have fragmented into several pro-German and neutralist factions. Only loyalty to Degrelle enabled the movement to retain its unity and coherence and it would seem highly unlikely that without him Rex would have strayed so far and so dramatically into the mire of collaboration.

A group of Degrelle's friends led by Pierre Daye a journalist and former head of the Rexist group in the Belgian Chamber of Deputies, had set out to search for Degrelle, eventually discovering him in a detention camp in the south of France. With the assistance of von Ribbentrop's representative in France, Otto Abetz, they were able to obtain his release and the *Chef de Rex* returned with them to Paris <sup>53</sup>. *En route*, the party paused briefly at Vichy where Pierre Daye contacted the Belgian government in exile which, after many wanderings, had eventually established itself in the capital of the new *Pétainist* regime. Its morale at this time was very low. Few of the ministers saw any purpose in continuing the struggle against Germany and they had attempted in vain to submit their resignation to the King in Brussels. They were also anxious to contact the German authorities but, unknown to them, Hitler ordered that their advances should be ignored. Thus, it was in some desperation that the Pierlot government seized upon this opportunity for contact with Degrelle's supporters. Ironically, it was Paul-Emile Janson, who as Minister for Justice had been responsible for Degrelle's arrest, who met Pierre Daye on 25 July. He expressed his pleasure at the release of the *Chef de Rex* which he

hoped would contribute to a mood of national reconciliation within Belgium. Janson also stated his approval for the republication of Belgian newspapers under German censorship and he urged Daye to convey to Brussels and Paris the willingness of the government to resign and to retire from all political activity <sup>54</sup>.

For Degrelle, this contact with the Pierlot government could only have confirmed his belief that, having survived the rigours of detention, he was well placed to profit from the new political situation. Although he had lost weight and was suffering from various ailments contracted in prison, the *Chef de Rex* was in a euphoric mood <sup>55</sup>. He was soon planning the composition of the government he hoped to form and he was confident that Hitler, whom he had met briefly in 1936, would be willing to support his political ambitions <sup>56</sup>.

When Degrelle reached Paris on the evening of 25 July, he was promptly invited to the German embassy where he dined with Otto Abetz. It was this meeting which incontestably more than any other served to determine the pattern of Degrelle's activities during the subsequent months. Abetz in many ways personified the strange character of the summer of 1940. Aged only 37, he had been active since even before the Nazi seizure of power in organisations for Franco-German reconciliation. He spoke almost perfect French and in 1932 had married the secretary of Jean Luchaire, the future press baron of German-Occupied Paris. As a prominent member of von Ribbentrop's unofficial foreign affairs group, the so-called "Dienststelle Ribbentrop", Abetz spent much time in Paris during the 1930s and, when his patron was appointed as Foreign Minister, he became a member of the German diplomatic service. Abetz arrived in Paris in June 1940 as the representative of the Foreign Ministry and on 3 August Hitler appointed him as the German ambassador in Occupied France. This was in many ways a bizarre and anomalous position. Abetz directed an embassy unrecognised

by anybody in a city which had ceased officially to be a capital. Yet, in the summer of 1940, he became a focus for those who hoped that a New Europe could emerge from the ashes of the military conflict. A firm supporter of the reconstruction of a strong France which would leave Germany a free hand to expand towards the east, Abetz seemed to represent the new German spirit of understanding for French interests. Thus, the charming young ambassador was courted enthusiastically by all those anxious to play a role in the New Europe and his embassy in the rue de Lille immediately became an important centre for political and social intrigue <sup>57</sup>.

The wives of Abetz and Degrelle were apparently childhood friends but the two men met for the first time in September 1936 during the *Chef de Rex's* visit to Berlin <sup>58</sup>. Abetz travelled to Brussels frequently during the subsequent years and in the winter of 1939-1940 he was to be seen at the salon of Madame Didier which had become a focus for many of those Belgians who inclined towards sympathy for the German cause <sup>59</sup>. Thus, when the two men met in July 1940, Abetz seemed ideally suited to act as an intermediary between the *Chef de Rex* and the leaders of the Third Reich. Abetz stood then at the zenith of his prestige. Sedulously fostering the impression - in reality, largely unfounded - that he was a confidant of the German *Führer*, Abetz had already lent his support to the ambitions of Pierre Laval and, always ready to expand his influence, Degrelle now became the second of the ambassador's proteges <sup>60</sup>.

Little is known of the detail of their conversation but Degrelle apparently seized the opportunity to expound his idea of a Greater Belgium based on the former Burgundian Empire <sup>61</sup>. Although fanciful and unrealistic, this dream of a united Low Countries state incorporating both the Netherlands and large areas of northern France was to become a consistent feature of Degrelle's wartime rhetoric. After the First World War, some fringe right-wing

groups had hoped for the territorial expansion of Belgium and in the 1930s there had been some support amongst intellectuals for the Thiois idea of a united Low Countries espoused by Joris Van Severen <sup>62</sup>. In contrast, Degrelle's ideas were no more than a personal fantasy but the very fact that he advocated them to Abetz demonstrated his confidence. In that strange summer of 1940, everything seemed possible and Degrelle returned to Brussels after his encounter with Abetz apparently convinced that he was destined to play a major role in the New Order Europe.

Degrelle reached the Belgian capital on 30 July and immediately threw himself into a hectic series of political initiatives. In innumerable books, articles and interviews published since the war, the *Chef de Rex* has constructed a substantial mythology surrounding his wartime career. An integral element of all of these has been his claim that after his return to Brussels he waited several weeks before resuming his political activities and that he only did so after having received the approval of several figures including King Léopold III <sup>63</sup>. In fact, the inverse was true. Determined to make up for lost time, Degrelle sought no advice before immediately returning to the political fray <sup>64</sup>. The entire pace of Rexist activities was transformed as the caution of the *Conseil Général* gave way to the rash enthusiasm of Degrelle.

Even for those close to the *Chef de Rex*, it was frequently difficult to keep abreast of his initiatives during these weeks <sup>65</sup>. But, underlying this appearance of chaos, Degrelle did have at least two consistent aims. In the first place, he was determined to make contact with the leaders of the Third Reich including, if possible, Hitler himself. Whilst the Flemish Nationalists and others in Belgium were cultivating the German administrators in Brussels, the *Chef de Rex* wanted to go directly to the centre of political power and he was confident that in Abetz he had found the perfect means of doing so <sup>66</sup>.

Secondly, Degrelle wished to establish himself as the key political figure within Belgium. Rex, which he hoped to reconstruct as a mass political movement, had a role in this strategy but he also attached much importance to negotiations with those other figures, including the King, who were anxious to participate in the political life of Occupied Belgium.

Paris seemed to Degrelle to be the gateway to power in 1940 and he spent only a few days in Brussels before returning to the former French capital. On 7 August, he met Laval and De Brinon at the Hôtel Matignon but little of consequence was discussed <sup>67</sup> and the principal purpose of his visit to Paris was to meet Abetz who on 3 August had been received by Hitler and officially appointed as German ambassador in Occupied France <sup>68</sup>.

In the event, Degrelle's second meeting with Abetz proved both comical and important <sup>69</sup>. The *Chef de Rex* arrived at the German embassy laden with old maps and atlases with which he hoped to demonstrate the historical basis for his vision of a resuscitated Burgundian empire <sup>70</sup>. But to his great surprise, he found that he was not the only guest. Abetz had also invited the president of the Belgian Socialist Party, Henri De Man, who, as we have seen, had many political ambitions of his own in 1940. Degrelle and De Man hardly knew each other and both in character and political beliefs they could hardly have been more different. Degrelle was an extrovert instinctive demagogue while De Man was an academic rather awkward figure<sup>71</sup> who, after many years as a professor in Germany, had come to prominence in his native country through his advocacy of economic planning as the best means of overcoming the Great Depression. Much more so than Degrelle, who revelled in social and political intrigue, De Man had always been an outsider in Belgian politics whose experience of ministerial office in the Van Zeeland administrations of the 1930s had left him with a deep distaste for the democratic political processes.



Although appointed president of the Socialist Party after the death of Emile Vandervelde, De Man had largely withdrawn from political life in the latter 1930s and during the winter of 1939-1940 he had been one of the principal advisors of King Léopold III, whose neutralist and somewhat authoritarian views he closely shared <sup>71</sup>.

Abetz, acting entirely on his own initiative, hoped to effect an alliance between the two men, believing that their complementary talents would form the basis for a new pro-German regime in Belgium <sup>72</sup>. This would, however, be no easy task. Degrelle, supremely self-confident and ambitious, was reluctant to share power with anybody ; while De Man found it impossible to take the young Rexist leader seriously <sup>73</sup>. Nevertheless, Abetz did succeed in convincing De Man that political unity between the Belgian advocates of New Order ideas was essential <sup>74</sup> and with some reluctance he therefore agreed to a joint political programme with the *Chef de Rex* <sup>75</sup>. Delighted with this outcome to the evening, Abetz then telephoned Berlin with the news of the accord, apparently hinting to Degrelle - entirely erroneously - that he could soon expect to receive a summons from von Ribbentrop or even Hitler <sup>76</sup>.

Thus, the *Chef de Rex* returned to Brussels convinced that he would soon be invested with substantial political power <sup>77</sup> and it was presumably at his initiative that a few days later in Brussels Degrelle and De Man signed a more formal agreement detailing their political aims <sup>78</sup>. Yet, despite this document, nothing was to come of the somewhat unlikely alliance between the two men. De Man travelled to Berlin in late-August with the intention, so Degrelle believed, of advocating to the German leaders the creation of a new Belgian government which they would head <sup>79</sup>. But he returned empty-handed and by September De Man seemed to have lost all interest in working with the *Chef de Rex*. Indeed, judging by remarks he made to others, De Man appears from the

outset to have considered his dealings with the Rexist leader to be of no great consequence <sup>80</sup>. He regarded Degrelle as a marginal figure of no great value and his agreement with him was only one of many which he entered into during the summer of 1940. With manifold contacts at court, in Berlin, as well as within the Belgian political elite, De Man was confident that he was destined to play a major role in the New Order Europe and he looked on his negotiations with the *Chef de Rex* as no more than a minor tactical manoeuvre.

His fruitless efforts to build an alliance with De Man demonstrated the underlying weakness of the Rexist leader's position. Despite the German invasion, he remained an isolated figure who desperately needed to prove his political importance. Degrelle was therefore willing to meet anybody whom he felt might assist his ambitions and during August he engaged in a ceaseless round of private meetings. There was, moreover, for once no shortage of people anxious to meet the *Chef de Rex*. During the summer Degrelle claims to have been inundated with approaches from individuals who believed that they were destined to act as the saviours of Belgium in its moment of great peril <sup>81</sup>. In Brussels, it was a summer of innumerable intrigues, of accords between unlikely partners and of meetings between former adversaries. The events of 1940 had lifted the lid on many frustrated personal ambitions and, as Degrelle has recalled, there were so many potential prime ministers anxious to lead Belgium in 1940 that it would have been possible to have formed as many as ten new governments <sup>82</sup>.

The *Chef de Rex* entered enthusiastically into this political manoeuvring. The powerful, the self-important, the naïve and the simply comical were all received by him at his home in the drève de Lorraine. Leading businessmen such as Coppée and Raymond Delhayé as well as idealistic aristocrats like Charles De Croy all met Degrelle during August in the hope of winning his support for their personal project for national reconstruction <sup>83</sup>.

More significantly, a number of right-wing politicians who before the war had flirted somewhat cautiously with projects for constitutional reform now felt confident enough to advance their ideas more openly. Albert Devèze, a former minister, apparently discussed his plans for a royalist government with Degrelle <sup>84</sup> ; but incontestably the most important of those who approached the *Chef de Rex* at this time was Comte Maurice Lippens. A member of one of the most powerful Belgian families, he was a Liberal senator and Minister of State who directed a private study-group, the *Centre pour la Réforme de l'Etat* (C.E.R.E.). After the invasion, Lippens energetically advocated the creation of a new government loyal to the King and, believing that the democratic era was at an end, his C.E.R.E. resumed its work with the intention of devising a more authoritarian constitution for Belgium. Like De Man, Lippens had no great respect for Degrelle but he was anxious to associate groups such as the Rexists with the work of the C.E.R.E. and he approached the *Chef de Rex* to invite him to participate in its deliberations <sup>85</sup>.

Degrelle, however, refused to do so. Although anxious to be involved in the political initiatives of this time, he had no intention of becoming the pawn of these establishment figures. His meetings with Abetz had convinced him that he was well placed to emerge as the leader of Occupied Belgium and he saw his meetings with Lippens and others as the prelude to the creation of his own government <sup>86</sup>. But, like all of the other contenders for power in 1940, Degrelle was well aware that his plans would require at least the passive acquiescence of Léopold III. Thus, immediately upon his return to Brussels at the end of July, he sent Pierre Daye to inform the King's secretary, Comte Capelle that he was anxious to meet the King and stood ready to form a government in Occupied Belgium. In reply, Capelle stressed - as he did to many others at this time - that as a prisoner the King was unable to receive politicians. Capelle was,

however, careful not to reject out of hand the idea of a government headed by Degrelle, leading Daye to believe that, although the King could do nothing before the war ended, he would not necessarily disapprove of the creation of an "unofficial" government <sup>27</sup>. Quite what the King's secretary intended by this ambiguous phraseology remains unclear. The formation of a government was one possibility being contemplated by the King at this time but Degrelle was not amongst the candidates under consideration and a premature initiative by the *Chef de Rex* would only have hindered the King's own attempts to reach an agreement with the Germans. Thus, it would seem likely that in his anxiety not to alienate the Rexist Capelle went further than he had intended in his comments. Indeed, the next day he wrote to Daye "clarifying" the sense of his remarks and stressing that the King would remain entirely aloof from any political initiatives <sup>28</sup>.

Capelle's comments undoubtedly encouraged Degrelle to believe that he might receive royal support for his political ambitions. He therefore repeated his request to be received by Léopold III and, in response, the King's secretary agreed to meet the *Chef de Rex* discreetly at Daye's home in the Avenue de Tervuren on 21 August <sup>29</sup>. This meeting was the only one between Degrelle and a representative of the King during the Occupation and it has played an important role in his post-war justifications of his actions. According to the Degrellian account, the King's secretary, speaking in the name of Léopold III, gave his full support to his proposals and encouraged Degrelle to resume his political activities <sup>30</sup>. In fact, the consequences of the meeting were much less dramatic. As we have seen, the Rexist leader was already fully committed to political action and to his disappointment his meeting with Capelle did little to further his ambitions. Degrelle described in some detail his sufferings at the hands of his French gaolers and, according to Daye, seemed anxious to discover the King's

personal opinion of him. But Capelle was more concerned to learn what Degrelle knew of German intentions towards Belgium and, although the two men found it easy to agree on denouncing the behaviour of the Pierlot government, their discussions soon revealed significant differences of opinion. Degrelle enthusiastically recounted his meetings with Abetz and, boasting that he imminently expected a summons from the German leaders, he requested the King's approval for the formation of a government in Occupied Belgium. Capelle's reply, however, fell far short of what Degrelle had hoped. He was more cautious than he had been in his original interview with Daye and, far from endorsing Degrelle's plans, he seems to have gone no further than to agree with the *Chef de Rex* that the resumption of political activity was a patriotic necessity <sup>21</sup>.

Such modest encouragement was in itself significant but, far from providing the *Chef de Rex* with a *carte blanche* for his activities <sup>22</sup>, this meeting demonstrated how Degrelle's lack of credibility still hindered his attempts to profit from the confused political situation. Léopold III and his entourage remained committed to reaching some form of accommodation with the German leaders which would enable Belgium to recover its independence. But if a new government was eventually to be formed within Belgium, the King intended that it should be dominated by political and military figures drawn from within the traditional elite and Degrelle could only have hoped to be accorded a very subsidiary role in such an administration. Thus, it was inconceivable that Léopold III would have given his support to a government headed by the *Chef de Rex* <sup>23</sup>. Only if Degrelle had been able to demonstrate clear German support for his candidature might the attitude of the King have been different.

Such support was not, however, forthcoming and Degrelle's lack of credibility as a contender for power was similarly evident in his attempts to reach some form of agreement with the Catholic Church in Belgium. The history

of relations between the Rexists and the Church was long and tortuous. Rex had begun as a revolt by a group of young Catholic students and intellectuals unhappy at the lack of coherence and dynamism displayed by the powerful official Catholic party but there was no sudden or total rupture between the Church and Rex. The Rexists remained essentially a dissident movement within the Catholic world and even at the time of their great electoral successes in 1936 they had retained close links with sections of the Church hierarchy <sup>94</sup>. By 1940, however, the ties between the Rexists and the Catholic Church had become much looser. The decline in the fortunes of Rex and its drift in the pre-war years towards an explicitly fascist stance had ended all hope of a reconciliation with the Church and, although many Rexist militants still considered themselves to be good Catholics, the movement as a whole had become much more strident in its criticisms of the Church hierarchy.

The stance of the Catholic Church after the German invasion was dominated by two factors. On the one hand, the Cardinal and the majority of the bishops gave their full support to the King. Van Roey was a regular visitor to the palace at Laeken and the pastoral letters issued by the Church in 1940 called on the population, in tones vaguely reminiscent of Pétain, to accept the inevitability of the defeat and to work with the King for the reconstruction of the country. On the other hand, the Cardinal always saw his principal responsibility as the defence of the spiritual and material interests of the Church. Indeed, in this respect, the German invasion had made no difference to the Church. Before, during and long after the Occupation, the guiding principle of Van Roey was to protect the Church and the faithful in a hostile modern world. Hence, throughout the Occupation and to the disappointment of many who recalled the more combative stance adopted by Cardinal Mercier during the first German Occupation, Van Roey refused to depart from a cautious *attentiste* policy.

He certainly felt no sympathy for the German cause but he could see no purpose in making political declarations which might prejudice the interests of the Church preferring instead to build a working relationship with the *Wehrmacht* administrators of the *Militärverwaltung* <sup>95</sup>.

Thus, where possible, Van Roey had no wish to alienate those who appeared to be the beneficiaries of the new political situation created by the German invasion. Hence, when in mid-August Degrelle requested an audience with the Cardinal, Van Roey agreed. Preparations were made by an intermediary but for reasons which remain unclear the *Chef de Rex* twice postponed the meeting and it was only on 6 September that he was received by Van Roey at his palace in Malines <sup>96</sup>. This encounter between the cautious, uncommunicative Cardinal and his most strident critic was not, however, a success. Degrelle once again recounted his sufferings during his detention in France and asked for Van Roey's support for *Le Pays Réel*, which had resumed publication a few days previously, and which he intended to make a mouthpiece for patriotic and Catholic sentiments. In reply, the Cardinal remarked that, if this did prove to be the case, the newspaper would of course receive his approval but he would make no specific commitment. In addition, Degrelle proposed the creation of a new unified youth movement operating under the aegis of Rex and incorporating the former Catholic youth groups. This was an idea hardly inclined to appeal to Van Roey. The Cardinal was undoubtedly anxious that Catholic social organisations should be able to operate without German interference but he had no wish to see the large well-organised Catholic youth movement pass under the control of those who before the war had done so much to lure young Catholics away from loyalty to the Church <sup>97</sup>.

Thus, Degrelle's crude attempts to commit Van Roey to some form of support for his activities were entirely unsuccessful <sup>98</sup>. The Cardinal had no

reason to support the political ambitions of the *Chef de Rex* which, if successful, would probably have led to the dismantlement of the formidable network of Church institutions which had long been a feature of Belgium. Degrelle and his colleagues argued that such a "deconfessionalization" of Belgian society would enable the Catholic religion to escape from its ghetto but Van Roey saw in such ideas only a threat to the established position of the Church and from 1940 onwards he maintained only very distant contact with Rex. Though individual priests might occasionally look indulgently on the Rexists, there was at an institutional level a complete divergence of interests and what had begun as a separation would soon become a divorce <sup>99</sup>.

His meeting with Van Roey once again illustrated Degrelle's failure to emerge as the central figure in the political life of Occupied Belgium. Despite spreading extravagant rumours about how he enjoyed the support of the German leaders and had been received in person by Léopold III <sup>100</sup>, the *Chef de Rex* remained an isolated figure ignored by the German authorities as well as by most of the Belgian political and social elite. His attempts to woo the leaders of the VNV were rebuffed <sup>101</sup> and his name never seems to have featured on the lists of potential prime ministers circulating amongst the King's advisors <sup>102</sup>. Thus, unlike the Flemish Nationalists, whose gains from the German invasion had been swift and dramatic, Degrelle and his Rexist followers seemed doomed to remain a noisy, heretical force unable to exercise substantial power.

One reason for this failure was that Degrelle had returned too late to the Belgian political scene. By the time that he was released from detention and the Rexists had resumed their political activities, others - notably the VNV and De Man - had already established themselves and there was little that Degrelle could do to dislodge them <sup>103</sup>. But his failure was also simply the consequence of his lack of credibility as a contender for power. Despite the



German invasion, the *Chef de Rex* was powerless to change the popular perception of him as a turbulent extremist unsuited for political office. Thus, even amongst those sympathetic to New Order ideas, there were many who regarded Degrelle and his followers with great distrust <sup>104</sup>. In the words of one of the King's advisors, Degrelle was "une outre gonflée de vanité" whose pretensions were in inverse proportion to his capacities <sup>105</sup>.

Unable to impose himself on his rivals, Degrelle turned away from the intrigues in the salons and offices of Paris and Brussels and instead resumed his political campaigning. Since his return to Belgium, Degrelle had paid little attention either to public activities or to the re-establishment of Rex as a political movement preferring to devote himself to private negotiations. But, with his failure to win the German and Belgian authorities over to his cause, the *Chef de Rex* returned at the end of August to the role for which he was much more suited : that of a demagogue heaping scorn on those who opposed his ideas.

The press was central to this new strategy. Degrelle had always been a journalist first and foremost and he was well aware that, if he was to reach the public, he must control a mass circulation newspaper. On his return to Belgium, Degrelle had dreamt of establishing a vast press empire <sup>106</sup> but these plans came to nothing. The German authorities were more inclined to support more dependable figures and negotiations between Degrelle and the Rossel family who owned the most influential pre-war newspaper in Belgium, *Le Soir*, proved unfruitful <sup>107</sup>. Thus, the *Chef de Rex* had to be satisfied with relaunching the former Rexist daily *Le Pays Réel* which reappeared for the first time on 25 August. After an initial *succès de scandale* in 1936, this newspaper had had only an insignificant circulation before the war and Degrelle recognised that it would be necessary for it to break with its former sectarian image. Thus, despite modest financial resources and a circulation limited by the Germans to

francophone Belgium, the new *Le Pays Réel* presented itself as a "national" newspaper which, unlike those titles launched by opportunists during the first months of the Occupation, would reflect the patriotic sentiments of the population <sup>108</sup>.

The second facet to Degrelle's new strategy was to re-establish Rex as a political party. If he could not acquire power through private negotiations, Degrelle hoped to impose himself upon the political situation by establishing Rex as a mass movement which could subsequently become the official political party of a New Order Belgium. Thus, Degrelle toured Belgium in September inspecting local Rexist groups and encouraging his militants to complete the reconstruction of the movement <sup>109</sup>.

At the end of August and in the first days of September, Degrelle selected the key personnel whom he intended should direct the revived Rexist movement. Although appreciative of the work accomplished by the *Conseil Général*, he demoted it to a purely consultative body which rapidly lost all importance <sup>110</sup>. In its place, Degrelle characteristically established a much more flexible structure gathering around him a group of friends and advisors to whom he delegated particular tasks. Some of these, such as Serge Doring who was appointed to the new post of *Secrétaire-Général* of Rex <sup>111</sup>, were veterans of the Rexist struggle ; but others were new men who had either joined Rex in the summer of 1940 or who had formerly played no significant role in the movement.

One such newcomer was Félix Francq. A member of a prominent Brussels family as well as a long-standing personal friend of Degrelle's, Francq acted as his personal secretary and aide-de-camp throughout the Occupation <sup>112</sup>. Another new figure was Rutger Simoens who was appointed as the *Commandant Général* of the Rexist militia, the *Formations de Combat* <sup>113</sup>. Under his leadership, the *Formations* expanded rapidly and Simoens became one of the few Flemish to

acquire a position of national importance within Rex. He claimed to be a former Communist who had attended a training-school for cadres in Moscow as well as having participated in the riots in Rotterdam in the mid-1930s <sup>114</sup>. But no evidence exists to substantiate these claims and it seems that by 1937 Simoens had already become active in New Order organisations <sup>115</sup>. He was a violent and controversial figure <sup>116</sup> who appears to have consistently advocated direct action by the Rexist militia against its many enemies.

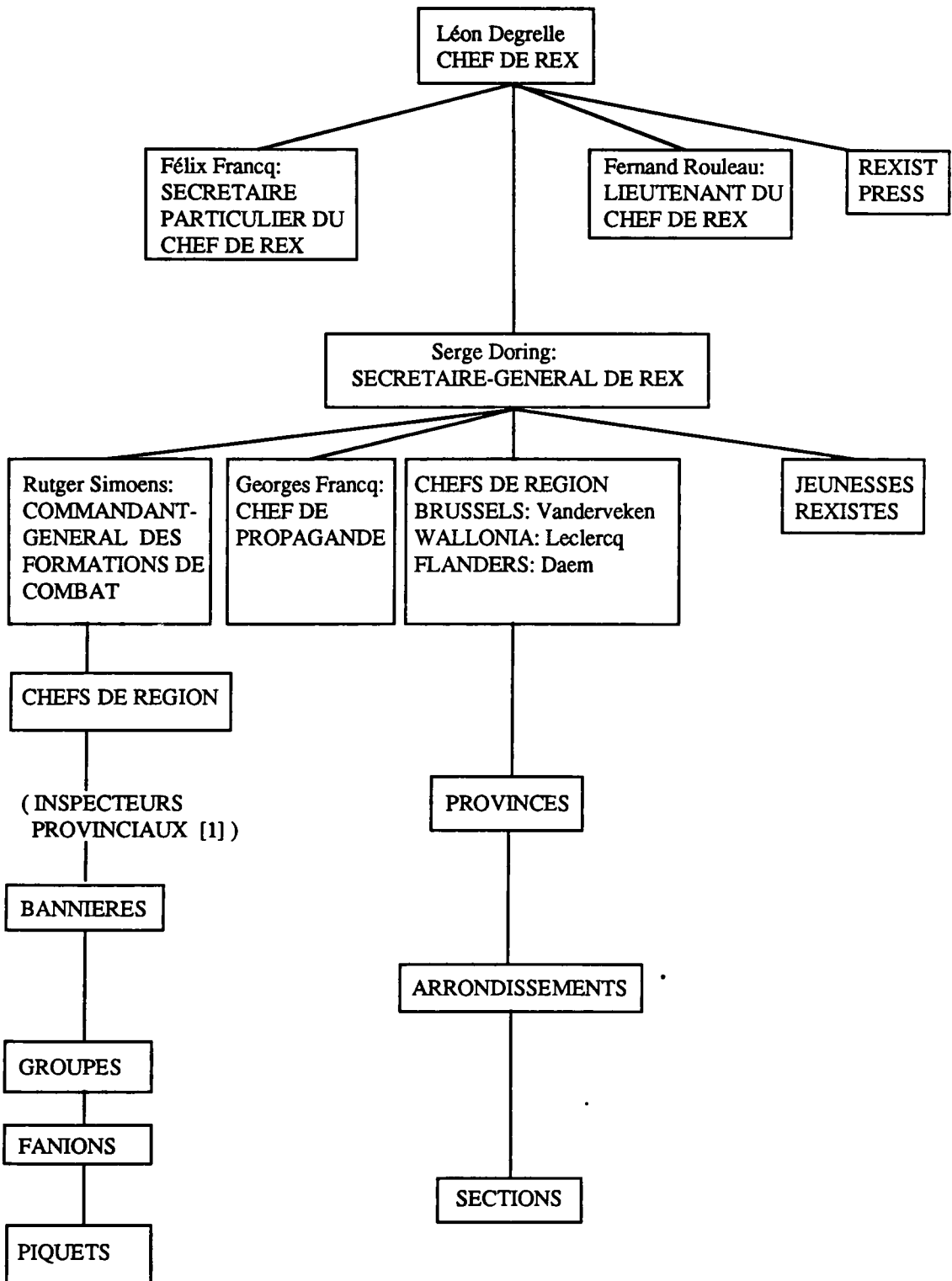
However, indisputably the most important of these new men was Fernand Rouleau who in the summer of 1940 was appointed as *Lieutenant du Chef de Rex* <sup>117</sup> and soon became Degrelle's most influential advisor. Yet, despite his importance, Rouleau always remained a rather mysterious and elusive figure. Aged 36 in 1940, he was an engineer who lived in some style at Uccle just outside Brussels with servants, horses and a Bentley car <sup>118</sup>. In the words of one Rexist veteran, Rouleau "est tombé de la lune" in 1940 <sup>119</sup>. No Rexist could recall having met him before the war and he only became involved in the movement as a result of a chance encounter with Degrelle shortly after the *Chef de Rex's* return from detention in France <sup>120</sup>. Rouleau's pre-war activities remain cloaked in some mystery. Some German documents - possibly confusing him with Simoens - state that he had been a Communist, a claim strenuously denied by one of his surviving relatives <sup>121</sup>. It does seem, however, that he was in Spain during the Civil War where he claimed to have fought for Franco's Nationalist cause <sup>122</sup>. Others allege that Rouleau supplied arms to the Nationalists or that he was an intermediary between the Germans and Franco's forces <sup>123</sup>. Yet Rouleau was heartily distrusted by the representative of Nationalist Spain in Brussels and it has been suggested that he did in fact sell weapons to the Republicans, possibly while working at the same time as a German agent <sup>124</sup>. The truth of these rumours is unlikely ever to be established

but Rouleau's appearance and character appear to have been in sympathy with his murky past. He struck those who met him as a ruthless and immoral "aventurier de grande envergure" motivated only by a single-minded desire for personal advancement <sup>125</sup>.

Despite or perhaps because of his past, Rouleau rapidly established himself as Degrelle's principal political advisor, ousting those others - notably Pierre Daye <sup>126</sup> - who also wished to play such a role. As early as August, Rouleau seems to have been an almost continual presence at the *Chef de Rex's* home and was frequently to be seen at Degrelle's side at public events <sup>127</sup>. Quite why Degrelle had such confidence in Rouleau has excited considerable speculation. It has been alleged that Rouleau was supplying Rex with money or that he was acting as a secret intermediary between the Germans and Degrelle. But Degrelle denies such extravagant theories and the truth was in all likelihood much more prosaic. According to the former Rexist leader, he looked on Rouleau, who in contrast to himself spoke fluent German, as no more than a useful somewhat ruthless figure to assist his already well-defined ambition of leading Belgium within a German-dominated Europe <sup>128</sup>.

Assisted by this new network of assistants, Degrelle devoted himself to the re-establishment of the Rexist movement. By October, the dislocation caused by the German invasion had been largely overcome and groups of Rexist were active in the principal centres of population. This structure was presided over by the *Secrétaire-Général* of Rex Serge Doring <sup>129</sup>, assisted by three *Chefs de Région* (Louis Vanderveken in Brussels, Antoine Leclercq in Wallonia and Odier Daem in Flanders) who directed regional secretariats established in Brussels, Liège and Antwerp <sup>130</sup>. Beneath them was a local hierarchy composed of provinces, *arrondissements* and sections <sup>131</sup>. Of these three levels, it was the *arrondissements* which soon emerged as the principal foci for the political

FIG. 1 THE STRUCTURE OF REX: SEPTEMBER 1940 TO FEBRUARY 1941



Note: [1] Established only to co-ordinate activities. They were not part of the formal hierarchy.

activities of Rex while the sections remained the basic unit of local Rexist organisation. The total number of such sections is difficult to assess but a list compiled by the Walloon secretariat of Rex in February 1941 listed some 132 *chefs de section* in Wallonia alone <sup>132</sup>. Alongside this civilian hierarchy, there were also the local units of the Rexist militia, the *Formations de Combat*. The commander of the militia, Rutger Simoens, was responsible to the *Secrétaire-Général* but in general the *Formations* jealously guarded their autonomy and this occasionally led to tensions between the militia and civilian Rexist officials <sup>133</sup>.

The pre-war Rexist movement had always been a rather chaotic organisation and in 1940 much emphasis was placed on the need for Rex to shake off this heritage <sup>134</sup>. Henceforth, so Doring and others proclaimed, the movement must be based on the principles of order, authority and discipline symbolised by its new slogan : "Croire, Obéir, Combattre". While the pre-war Rexist movement had been oppositional in nature, its tasks were now very different. Its role was to construct the New Order and, in order to equip their militants for this work, it was intended to create a network of local training-schools <sup>135</sup>.

These ambitions were, however, handicapped by the limited number of militants at the disposal of the Rexist. The movement of the immediate pre-war years had been little more than a rump dependent upon the loyalty of a small group of unconditional supporters. Thus, if Rex was to emerge as a mass political movement, it would need to win back those who had initially supported the movement in the mid-1930s as well as gaining new recruits from the ranks of its former opponents. Propaganda and recruitment therefore dominated these early months of the Occupation as the Rexist tried to capitalise on the popular mood of bewilderment and disenchantment with the old political regime.

The principal vehicle for this propaganda was the newly-relaunched *Le Pays Réel*. In a movement so dominated by journalists, the Rexist newspaper had always enjoyed an important role and at no time was this more so than during the early months of the Occupation when it was almost the only means of making their views known. These early issues of *Le Pays Réel* were dominated by calls for realism and national unity. The past, Degrelle declared in his first contribution to the paper, was dead and all Belgians must now turn their attention to the future <sup>136</sup>. The situation of Belgium in 1940 was, they stressed, in no way similar to that in 1914. The outcome of the military conflict was on this occasion beyond doubt and all that remained was for Germany to conclude a war which they had already won <sup>137</sup>. Thus, it was absurd for Belgians to place any hope in England and the Rexist confidently predicted that the war would end within "quelques semaines ou mois" <sup>138</sup>.

This German military victory was, they insisted, a turning-point in history as important as the French revolution of 1789. It marked the end of the era of liberal nationalism and had inaugurated an immense revolution which would transform both Europe and the entire world <sup>139</sup>. Belgium, the Rexist newspaper repeatedly proclaimed, must exploit the enormous possibilities which this revolution offered. The future was dramatically open and for Belgians to abstain at this critical juncture in history would be disastrous <sup>140</sup>. As José Streeel, the principal leader writer of *Le Pays Réel* and one of the most persuasive exponents of Rexist views, declared :

"S'il fut jamais un temps où les événements parlaient avec la clarté des évidences, c'est bien celui que nous vivons. Le livre est ouvert ; nous n'avons qu'à lire. Le sens de ce qui se passe est très clair" <sup>141</sup>.

Thus, Streeel and other Rexist journalists called on their compatriots to shake off their old nationalistic prejudices and participate in the new unified Europe

which would emerge in the wake of the German victories <sup>142</sup>. Standing at the commercial and cultural crossroads of Europe, their country was well placed to benefit from this European integration. A new Renaissance, Degrelle declared, was in the making and Belgium would recover the prosperity and splendour which it had enjoyed during the Burgundian era of the 15th and 16th centuries <sup>143</sup>.

But in order to participate in this brave, new world, it would first be necessary for the Belgians to accomplish their own revolution. "C'est l'heure de la révolution" declared the first edition of *Le Pays Réel* in August 1940 and the unavoidable necessity of a profound revolution featured prominently in all Rexist propaganda during 1940 <sup>144</sup>. This revolution, Degrelle thundered with his usual verve, would destroy the power of those cliques - notably the Freemasons, Jews, financiers and politicians - who had sought to corrupt and pervert Belgium for their own ends <sup>145</sup>. The rhetoric used by the Rexist press was frequently violent and this was especially so in their attacks on the political elite of the old regime. As had been the case during the great days of Rexist success in 1936, the journalists of *Le Pays Réel* heaped scorn on the corruption and incompetence of these political figures. The events of May, when many dignitaries had fled into France, were subjected to particular criticism. The politicians, *Le Pays Réel* never tired of proclaiming, had deserted the people in their moment of need placing their own security above the interests of the country <sup>146</sup>. There could be no place for such "venin politique" in the New Order Belgium of tomorrow and the Rexistists were quick to denounce efforts by *ancien régime* politicians to return to power <sup>147</sup>.

Yet, although this violent, destructive tone frequently dominated their propaganda, the Rexistists did possess a vision of the new Belgium which they were striving to create. Once the corrupting influences of politicians and others had been destroyed, they were optimistic that it would be possible to



build a harmonious society in which the anarchy of individualism would give way to a spirit of common service for the benefit of the entire community <sup>148</sup>. Hence, they advocated a rationalised, federal state in which power would be devolved from the centralised bureaucracy to each of the linguistic communities as well as to self-governing economic and social corporations <sup>149</sup>. At the heart of Rexist propaganda was a simplistic, somewhat nostalgic vision of a "pur, fier et propre" Belgium cleansed of the alien cosmopolitan influences of the modern world <sup>150</sup>. Material reforms and a vaguely defined sense of social justice were an integral element of the Rexist programme <sup>151</sup> but they took second place to an essentially moral vision of the revolution which owed much to the origins of Rex in the Catholic intellectual world of the inter-war years. Despite Degrelle's crude demagogy and the vicissitudes in their fortunes, for many Rexist this remained the basic inspiration of their political crusade and it was once again José Streeel, writing in *Le Pays Réel* early in September 1940, who best expressed these ideas :

"La révolution de l'ordre nouveau recrée les possibilités d'une humanisation authentique en restituant à l'homme son unité et sa dignité, en lui rendant le goût du travail et de l'effort, en le remplaçant dans les cadres naturels de la famille, de la profession, de la région et de la communauté populaire. C'est un remembrement de la société qui s'opère, c'est l'ordre et la hiérarchie qui sont réintroduits, c'est la discipline de l'esprit et de l'action qui s'impose" <sup>152</sup>.

This Rexist propaganda enjoyed some success in 1940. Crude and violent though it frequently was, it did to some extent match the mood of the many ordinary Belgians who believed that their country must adapt to the reality of the German military victory and build a new political system more appropriate to the needs of the future. Thus, Rex did win back some of those who had deserted the movement before the war, though the return of these prodigals was occasionally resented by the Rexist veterans <sup>153</sup>. In addition, Rex

gained the support of a certain number of patriotic conservatives anxious to express their loyalty to the King and to the political ideas which he was seen to represent <sup>154</sup>. Conversely, the Rexists boasted - though apparently without much justification - that many former supporters of left-wing organisations had rallied to their cause in the belief that Rex now offered the best hope of achieving their revolutionary goal <sup>155</sup>. More importantly, a number of local *bourgmestres* and *échevins* - from all political camps - developed links with Rex after the German invasion. A few of these were true converts to the Rexist cause but many seem to have hoped to adapt to the changed times by developing links with the advocates of New Order ideas <sup>156</sup>.

Thus, there was a confident, exultant air to Rexist activities during the first months of the German Occupation. They boasted of the large crowds attending their meetings and the columns of *Le Pays Réel* were filled with reports of new sections, local offices being opened and of successful recruitment campaigns <sup>157</sup>. Some of those groups affiliated to Rex - such as the *Corporation Nationale de l'Enseignement et de l'Education* <sup>158</sup> - shared in this expansion but indisputably the most striking example of Rexist success at this time was the *Formations de Combat*. Since it was established by the *Conseil Général* in July, this militia expanded rapidly and as early as the end of September Degrelle inspected more than 500 Brussels members of the *Formations* <sup>159</sup>. Units were subsequently established in most areas of Wallonia and Flanders <sup>160</sup> and, according to estimates which for once seem fairly reliable, its total membership had reached approximately 4,000 by the end of 1940 <sup>161</sup>.

Many of these militiamen were new recruits to the Rexist cause and they contributed significantly to the general expansion of the movement during these early months. It is, however, impossible to assess with any certainty the

total membership of Rex in 1940. There are no surviving membership lists and the Rexists were always reluctant to reveal to those outside the movement the number of their supporters. It is, nevertheless, clear that, despite its modest success in 1940, it always remained a relatively small organisation and the major national rally organised by Rex at Liège in January 1941 was attended by only 5,000 or so supporters <sup>162</sup>. For their part, two historians of Occupied Belgium have estimated that Rexist membership totalled approximately 15,000 to 20,000 in 1940 <sup>163</sup> and, although based on no more than supposition, this figure would seem to be roughly correct as an indication of the number of committed, active members of the movement. In addition, there were perhaps an equivalent number of Rexist sympathisers and members of organisations affiliated in some way to the movement.

Thus, Rex always remained a small, somewhat marginal political force. It did not establish itself, as Degrelle had hoped, as a mass movement and, even within the ranks of New Order organisations, Rex was never able to rival the strength of the Flemish VNV which increased its membership from 25,000 in May 1940 to 70,000 one year later <sup>164</sup>. The readership of *Le Pays Réel* reflected this failure to reach a mass audience. When it was launched in August, it had a circulation of 65,000 but this had declined to approximately 23,000 by the autumn of 1940 and, although this figure was still substantially higher than the circulation of the newspaper before the German invasion, it constituted only a very small proportion of the total readership of the francophone press within Occupied Belgium. Thus, far from emerging as a national newspaper, *Le Pays Réel* soon became a propaganda sheet read only by firm supporters of Rex <sup>165</sup>.

The cases of the Netherlands, of Slovakia and also of France demonstrate that it was possible in the early months of the German Occupation to attract mass support for political movements which rejected democratic ideas

and advocated some form of New Order '66. The failure of Degrelle and the Rexists to capitalise in the same way on the popular mood in Belgium seems to have been due largely to their discredited reputation amongst large sections of the population. Both the *Nederlandse Unie* and Pétain in France emerged as symbols of national unity untainted by association with the political conflicts and failures of the past. Thus, they were able to win the loyalty of those anxious to work in a spirit of common effort for national reconstruction within a German-dominated Europe. Léopold III, if he had wished to do so, might well have been able to mobilise similar support within Belgium but the Rexists, as a marginal extremist group, were completely unable to do so. Despite the profound changes in popular attitudes provoked by the German invasion, few Belgians were willing to abandon their distrust for a movement which in many ways seemed to typify the divisive conflicts of the old parliamentary regime.

But of much more urgent concern to Degrelle than the inability of Rex to establish itself as a mass political movement was his own failure to win the backing of the German leaders. Convinced that he was destined to play a leading role in the New Europe, he was intensely annoyed to find himself treated by the Germans as a "non-person", ignored - on Goebbels' orders - by the Nazi press '67 and shunned by those German officials with whom he came into contact. The sole exception was of course Otto Abetz. The support of the German ambassador in Paris had been Degrelle's only 'significant success during the summer of 1940 and the *Chef de Rex* remained optimistic that Abetz's supposed influence within the Reich would enable him to succeed. Abetz was, however, largely absorbed by his activities in France and, although he was clearly willing to encourage the ambitions of the *Chef de Rex*, there was in reality little that he could do to assist Degrelle.

Nevertheless, after his two meetings with Degrelle, Abetz does seem to have suggested to his superiors in the German Foreign Ministry that they should support the *Chef de Rex's* fanciful plan for a recreated Burgundian empire <sup>169</sup>. How seriously Abetz intended this proposal must remain open to question for he surely had no illusions as to the likelihood of such a project being adopted. Indeed, his suggestion would probably have had no effect had it not come to the attention of the officials of the *Militärverwaltung* in Brussels. They were intensely annoyed that a member of the Foreign Ministry was meddling in their affairs. *Militärverwaltungschef* Reeder wasted no time in explaining to his superiors the foolishness of supporting the Rexists and, according to Degrelle, Reeder summoned Abetz to Brussels to warn him not to interfere in matters outside of his domain <sup>169</sup>.

This intervention by the *Militärverwaltung* was a major reverse for Degrelle. Henceforth, Abetz would be much more circumspect in his actions depriving the *Chef de Rex* of his only obvious means of making contact with the Nazi leaders. Thus, Degrelle was more isolated than ever and his subsequent claim that Hitler only postponed at the last minute a meeting with him in October 1940 is no more than one of the *Chef de Rex's* many post-war fantasies <sup>170</sup>. The most formidable obstacle faced by Degrelle was the powerful position of the *Militärverwaltung*. With no end in sight to the military conflict, Hitler was uninterested in making any alteration to the *status quo* within Belgium preferring to leave such difficult decisions until some date in the distant future. Thus, the *Wehrmacht* administrators in Brussels were the sole determinants of German policies within Belgium and it was only in the latter years of the war when Himmler's SS began to take an interest in Belgium that their position would be eroded.

For the meantime, Reeder and von Falkenhausen were the *de facto* rulers of Belgium and the policies which they enacted left little room for Degrelle and the Rexists. By the autumn of 1940, the *Militärverwaltung* was working closely with the Flemish Nationalists of the VNV but, in accordance with Hitler's orders of July 1940, their activities in Brussels and Wallonia were limited to maintaining public order and ensuring that its industry contributed to the German war effort <sup>171</sup>. These goals implied that power would remain in the hands of the pre-war elite and on more than one occasion Reeder proved willing to make concessions in order to ensure the continued assistance of the Belgian civil service and local government. The turbulent activities of Degrelle and his followers could only prejudice this partnership. Thus, although the *Militärverwaltung* did apparently give some limited material assistance to Rex in 1940 <sup>172</sup>, there was - as Degrelle recognised - no question of it supporting the Rexist ambition of a political revolution within Belgium <sup>173</sup>. Peace, public order and stability were the goals of Reeder and his colleagues during the early years of the war and they had no reason to foster pro-German collaborationist groups in francophone Belgium. In addition, the German administrators had no great respect for Degrelle and the Rexists regarding them as opportunists whose "clerico-fascist" views made them unsuited for German political support. Thus, German assistance for Rex during the early years of the Occupation would never be significant and the *Militärverwaltung* exerted little influence over the development of the movement. Political collaboration in francophone Belgium was emphatically not a German creation.

By October 1940, Degrelle was profoundly demoralised by his failure to make any progress towards gaining power within Belgium <sup>174</sup>. In July, he had been convinced that he was destined for great things and his meetings with

political figures in Paris and Brussels had initially seemed to confirm his optimism. But everything had soon turned sour. While Abetz had proved unable to provide him with access to the German leadership, the Belgian political elite had shunned him as a turbulent extremist whom they treated with scarcely concealed disdain. These reverses were especially galling for Degrelle in view of developments taking place elsewhere in German-occupied Europe. In Norway in September, Quisling and his supporters had formed a pro-German government while in France the German authorities had abandoned their initial distrust and were providing substantial assistance to the *Pétainist* regime <sup>175</sup>.

Degrelle therefore felt with some justification that he was being left behind in the race to participate in the New Europe. His Rexist supporters, absorbed in their efforts to rebuild their movement, retained a boisterous, confident air which belied their failure to win German favour. But Degrelle and his close advisors did not share this optimism. The doors which had opened to him in the summer were already closing and, although he made several unexplained visits to Paris during the autumn <sup>176</sup> - presumably to meet Abetz - they brought him no success.

The fundamental problem facing Degrelle was the continuation of the war. Once Hitler had postponed the invasion of England in order to concentrate first on a peripheral war of attrition against the British and, subsequently, on the attack on the Soviet Union, the imminent end to hostilities which had been so widely predicted in the summer of 1940 disappeared into an uncertain and distant future. Belgium, as the obvious springboard for any German invasion of Britain, was obviously of much too great strategic importance for Hitler to contemplate allowing political control within the country to pass out of German hands. Thus, as Léopold III's visit to Berchtesgaden in November demonstrated <sup>177</sup>, no political initiative could be expected prior to the end of

the war and Degrelle was forced to warn his supporters during the autumn that the Rexist revolution could not occur until the military struggle was resolved <sup>178</sup>.

In these circumstances, Degrelle was convinced that he would only win the backing of the Nazi leaders if he was able to convince them of his sympathy for the German cause. Thus, from October 1940 onwards, Degrelle devoted much of his energies to a series of public and private initiatives designed to demonstrate his willingness to assist the German forces. This lurch towards collaboration was neither sudden nor dramatic. Indeed, the very concepts of collaboration and resistance remained in many ways inapplicable to the political situation which existed in Belgium throughout 1940. These two terms only gained their significance once attitudes towards the continuing military conflict had replaced all other issues as the principal dividing line within the Belgian population. But this division between a patriotic pro-Allied majority and a pro-German collaborationist minority only established itself gradually during the winter of 1940-1941. In late-1940, the political situation remained more confused and complicated. Though attitudes to Germany were rapidly hardening, the consensus which had existed in the summer of 1940 remained important and what political divisions there were - concerning the behaviour of the King and of his ministers as well as the nature of the political regime which should be established within Belgium - could not be reduced to a simple choice between resistance and collaboration. In a sense, the political situation within Belgium at this time could be described as being three-dimensional in that there were numerous and varied points of division and of agreement amongst the population. Only gradually would this complexity be replaced by a single two-dimensional division between those who opposed and those who supported the German cause.



Thus, unlike some Flemish Nationalists and the very small anti-semitic group, *La Défense du Peuple* <sup>179</sup>, the Rexists were in no sense instant collaborationists. Much ambivalence continued to surround their political stance and many of Degrelle's supporters still regarded themselves simply as royalist patriots. Yet the fact remains that - encouraged by Degrelle and by other radicals within the movement - Rex as a whole did move significantly closer to what might be termed a proto-collaborationist stance. Even at the end of the year, this process would remain far from complete but it would have driven a wedge between the Rexists and a majority of their compatriots.

The first issue on which the Rexists parted company with popular opinion within Belgium concerned England. With Degrelle to the fore, the Rexist press adopted an ever more virulently anti-English tone ridiculing the naïvety of those who retained any confidence in British military power. Britain, they claimed, was a decadent, imperialistic nation whose power had always been based on the exploitation and enslavement of other peoples <sup>180</sup>. Rexist use of such themes may well have been a consequence of Degrelle's frequent visits to France where a number of New Order figures - notably Doriot - were keen to profit from popular hostility towards the perfidious Anglo-Saxons <sup>181</sup>. Most Belgians, however, sincerely hoped that the British, whatever their failings in May, would be able to resist the German forces and the Rexist campaign of anti-English propaganda only served to distinguish them as an extremist group who seemed willing to dance to the tunes of the German propaganda machine <sup>182</sup>.

The increasing radicalism of the Rexists was also reflected in a hardening of their attitudes towards the pre-war political and social elite of Belgium. Abandoning any pretensions as a serious national newspaper, *Le Pays Réel* launched a campaign against those *ancien régime* figures who were attempting to recover their former positions of influence. The New Order, they

warned, was in danger of being hijacked by these discredited politicians who - thanks notably to the sinister power of freemasonry - had already succeeded in infiltrating a number of public institutions where they had reintroduced the corrupt practices of the past <sup>1e3</sup>. Decisive action, Degrelle ranted in the Rexist daily on 29 September, must be taken against these men :

"Nous les vomissons. Nous serrons les poings devant cette recrudescence des pires moeurs politiciennes. Mais ces poings, que la colere aura contractés, ne se planteront qu'avec plus de force en plein le but, au jour prochain où la Belgique nouvelle déblayera le terrain pour toujours. . . de la peste démocratique" <sup>1e4</sup>.

Nor was this tone confined to attacks on the former political elite. The small Jewish community in Belgium was also a frequent target of abuse in the columns of *Le Pays Réel*. The German administrators in Brussels did not give a high priority to anti-Jewish measures but in October 1940 they did issue decrees intended to limit the influence of Jews in public life <sup>1e5</sup>. *Le Pays Réel* welcomed these measures <sup>1e6</sup> and during the autumn of 1940 anti-semitic articles were a regular feature of the Rexist press. Many of these continued themes already present in pre-war Rexist publications where a certain anti-semitism, usually allied to attacks on the corruption of the political elite, had long been evident. There was, however, a novel virulence to Rexist attacks on the Jews in 1940. While a number of Rexist journalists - including Streel and even on occasions Degrelle - seemed anxious to play down the Jewish issue pointing out that groups such as the freemasons constituted a more serious danger <sup>1e7</sup>, other Rexist were much less restrained. Crude anti-semitic stereotypes, dire threats and, as we shall see, violent actions against the Jews become common currency amongst the Rexist <sup>1e8</sup> demonstrating once again the unscrupulous opportunism of the movement. Rex remained far removed from the pseudo-scientific racism of the Nazis but, conscious of the use being made of anti-semitism by other

extremist groups and hopeful that it might win them the support of certain sections of the population or, more importantly, of the German authorities, the Rexistists were enthusiastic to climb on the bandwagon of anti-semitism <sup>190</sup>.

Despite Degrelle's attempt to win the support of Cardinal Van Roey in August <sup>190</sup>, the Catholic Church was not entirely immune from the ire of the Rexist press in 1940. It is easy to make too much of these attacks. The Church - unlike the freemasons, politicians and Jews - was not regarded by the Rexistists as an irreconcilable opponent of the New Order ; but, with Degrelle once again to the fore, the Rexist press did become ever more intemperate in its attacks on the political stance adopted by the Church hierarchy. This was especially so after Degrelle sent a letter to Catholic priests on 23 November. For a number of weeks, Rex had been sending free copies of the Rexist newspaper to many priests and he now invited them to join those "Belges lucides et audacieux" who had chosen to subscribe to *Le Pays Réel*. Finally, in an apparent reference to his meeting with Van Roey in August, Degrelle concluded his letter with an assurance that the Church authorities had been consulted and had raised no objection to the Rexist newspaper being read by the Catholic faithful <sup>191</sup>.

This last flourish was a typical example of Degrellian effrontery. In a pastoral letter issued on 10 October Cardinal Van Roey had already condemned - albeit without naming them - those opportunists who were tempted to exploit the Occupation by engaging in political adventurism. All Belgians, Van Roey declared, should refrain from political activities and adopt "une ligne correcte et digne" towards the Occupying forces <sup>192</sup>. Thus, when a number of priests wrote to Van Roey to ask whether *Le Pays Réel* did indeed meet with the approval of the Church, the Cardinal's response was forthright. Degrelle's remarks, he informed them, were "un vrai abus et une duperie" and the Church had in no way approved the Rexist newspaper <sup>193</sup>. Degrelle soon learned of Van

Roey's comments and in *Le Pays Réel* on 8 December he made his first explicit attack on the Catholic hierarchy. No longer seeking to woo the Church, the *Chef de Rex* castigated "le chantage politique d'un certain clergé" who behaved as if they were agents of Churchill <sup>194</sup>.

This intemperate article was widely remarked upon <sup>195</sup> but it would be wrong to exaggerate its significance. Other articles in *Le Pays Réel* were more conciliatory and José Streel, in particular, was anxious to demonstrate the affinity between Catholicism and the New Order. In a profoundly Catholic land such as Belgium, he wrote, all authentic political regimes must base themselves upon the spiritual and moral traditions of the Catholic faith and the hysterical behaviour of certain priests should not be allowed to disguise the fundamental convergence of interests and beliefs between the Church and the advocates of a New Order <sup>196</sup>.

Thus, the divorce between Rex and the Church in 1940 was far from total. The Rexists remained in many ways dissident Catholics, hostile to the Catholic hierarchy but anxious to accept the spiritual role of the Church. As Degrelle declared in December :

"Que l'Eglise s'occupe de sauver les âmes, elle a suffisamment de travail dans ce domaine" <sup>197</sup>.

But battle had nevertheless been joined with the leaders of the Church ; and ordinary Rexist militants took up the lead given by Degrelle by enthusiastically denouncing to their superiors priests who expressed support for the English cause. Elsewhere, verbal and even on occasions physical conflict between Rexists and their fellow parishioners was increasingly common and as Rex moved towards a more explicitly pro-German stance so relations between the movement and the Church hierarchy would deteriorate still further during the subsequent years <sup>198</sup>.

The strong verbal attacks made by the Rexistists on those groups - such as politicians and Jews - whom they regarded as the implacable enemies of the New Order revolution were soon supplemented by acts of physical violence. Over a number of days in early-October 1940, militants in Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, Namur, the Borinage and no doubt elsewhere launched what the Rexist leaders admitted was a concerted campaign of violence against national and local politicians. Instigated apparently by Fernand Rouleau, these attacks were much more extensive than the few isolated incidents which had been reported during the summer 1939. In Brussels, one politician was "déculotté" in the street while in several towns hostile crowds of Rexistists gathered outside the homes of politicians to break windows, daub slogans or assault their victims. In the Brussels *quartier* of Schaerbeek, a large squad of Rexist militiamen who attempted to disrupt a meeting of the *conseil communal* had to be dispersed by the local police 200.

Direct action of this kind enjoyed a long tradition within the Rexist movement. In the mid-1930s, Rexistists had frequently attacked or ridiculed politicians whom they accused of corruption 201. A more novel and sinister feature of the violence in October was, however, the attacks on Jewish businesses. In Brussels, Antwerp and Liège, units of the *Formations de Combat*, sacked Jewish shops and daubed slogans. In Brussels, the police once again intervened and a number of Rexistists were arrested 202.

Degrelle gloried in these various forms of direct action. Declaring "Ce sont des comptes à régler entre Belges !", he portrayed the Rexist acts as a long overdue punishment of those who had betrayed the country 203. In reality, though, they demonstrated more the mood of frustration which was already pervading sections of the movement. Faced with an immobile political situation, the Rexistists were forced to resort to acts of this kind which, though they

achieved little, satisfied their need for action as well as serving to remind the German authorities of their existence. Degrelle boasted that these activities were merely the first in a prolonged campaign against the enemies of the New Order but in fact the Rexist attacks soon stopped, perhaps, one suspects at the insistence of the *Militärverwaltung*.

Nevertheless, although short-lived, these attacks did much to foster the reputation of Rex as a movement of violent extremists <sup>204</sup>, an image which was confirmed by the way the Rexist themselves presented the revolution they were seeking to achieve. This changed markedly during the last months of 1940 as a much greater emphasis was placed on the stark division within Belgium between the forces of reaction and those of the New Order <sup>205</sup>. They therefore rejected all talk of national reconciliation and, when Robert Poulet of *Le Nouveau Journal* proposed the creation of a broadly based single party <sup>206</sup>, they rejected his project out of hand. Rex, they insisted, was not interested in a "révolution de carnaval" which would enable the old elite to retain power and they called instead for a union of the true, committed revolutionaries <sup>207</sup>.

Thus, rather than posing as the rallying-point for the entire nation, the Rexist began to see themselves as an elite dedicated to the achievement of the integral revolution. A crude cult of power came to the fore, encouraged by Degrelle who declared in December that "il ne suffit pas d'avoir raison, il faut avoir la force" <sup>208</sup>. The image presented by the Rexist militia, the *Formations de Combat*, well illustrated this broader change. When it had been created, many in the *Formations* saw it as a symbol of the new mood of national unity. It was to operate outside the political sphere and all were welcome to join regardless of their background or former beliefs. But from the outset, others had had a more aggressive and combative image of the militia and it was this which

became more prominent in late-1940. The *Formations* were increasingly portrayed as an elite fighting force which would *impose* their revolution on Belgium <sup>209</sup>.

Thus the language, actions and self-image of Rex all demonstrated its evolution away from the centre ground of Belgian life towards a more extreme stance. Nevertheless, the most important yardstick by which to judge the Rexists remained the attitude which they adopted towards the Germans and, here again, significant changes occurred towards the end of 1940. There was no single moment during these months when the Rexists abandoned all pretence and opted unambiguously for the German cause but their comments did become progressively less cautious. Already when *Le Pays Réel* had first reappeared in late-August, it had inclined towards collaboration through its willingness to place the military events in an emphatically European context. Declaring that it was time to recognise that the age of narrow national frontiers was at an end, Rexist journalists stated their support for the diverse revolutionary forces which had developed throughout Europe, be they French, Italian, Spanish or German <sup>210</sup>.

But it was Degrelle who in the autumn picked up this theme and gave to it a much more explicitly pro-German character by portraying the revolutionaries of the New Europe as a single unified political force, of which Rex was one constituent element <sup>211</sup>. The implication behind this argument was that the Rexists were the allies of the Nazis and, speaking at Huy in December, Degrelle came close to making a clear declaration of support :

"Nous, Rexistes, ne sommes pas des convertis d'aujourd'hui. La jeunesse d'Allemagne, comme toutes les jeunesses qui sont en train de faire l'Europe nouvelle, reçoit notre salut le plus fraternel" <sup>212</sup>.

As if this was not clear enough, laudatory references to the Nazi regime, the German people and to Hitler, the "bienfaiteur" of Europe, became an

ever more prominent feature of his rhetoric <sup>213</sup>. Approaching the same conclusion from a different angle, Rexist writers were also at pains to point out the logical necessity of working with Germany. Regardless of their personal feelings, Belgians must accept the position of their country and respond positively to Goebbels' call for a spirit of collaboration amongst the European nations. As Degrelle again stated :

"Le patriotisme le plus élémentaire nous enseigne que, les faits étant ce qu'ils sont, . . . seule une attitude correcte, sans aplatissage, mais aussi sans hargne, tendue vers une collaboration entière et loyale, peut encore permettre le redressement de notre pays" <sup>214</sup>.

Thus, the Rexistists argued that both Belgium's situation and the need for a European revolution justified a friendly attitude towards Germany. None of this perhaps amounted to a formal policy of collaboration in the sense which it was subsequently to acquire. A strong nationalist tone did, for example, continue to pervade much of Rexist propaganda <sup>215</sup> ; but already the basic facts of hostility to England and sympathy towards Germany had been established. Thus, when in January 1941 Degrelle went much further in his support for Germany, he would only be building on the arguments he had advanced during the previous autumn.

Degrelle was well aware of the disquiet which his comments aroused even within Rex and, in private, he was frequently more cautious, reassuring worried supporters that Rex would remain independent of Germany and that he had no wish to become one of the "lécheurs des bottes des Allemands" <sup>216</sup>. But in public, Degrelle continued with his guarded declarations of support for Germany and, despite the failure of his dealings with Abetz, he continued where possible to supplement these public statements with more private approaches to German officials. Thus, Degrelle has claimed that he proposed to the Germans in October - quite possibly in imitation of similar moves in France <sup>217</sup> - that the



Rexists should be allowed to create a corps of Belgian aviators and regiments of colonial troops who would fight to liberate the Belgian colony of the Congo from the control of the English. Like so many of Degrelle's advances to the Germans the suggestion was, however, ignored <sup>218</sup>.

Concern at the evolution of Rex was not limited to Degrelle's apparent support for the German cause. Other militants were worried by the violent reputation which Rex was acquiring and the attacks on politicians and Jewish businesses in October were not to the liking of those Rexist who believed it was time for the movement to shake off its turbulent past and adopt a more sober style <sup>219</sup>. In addition, the arrival of men such as Rouleau and Simoens was clearly resented by some of the older members of Rex who criticised the changes introduced by the newcomers as well as their attempts to monopolise all contact with Degrelle <sup>220</sup>.

By far the most vocal of these malcontents was José Streel. As the principal leader writer of *Le Pays Réel*, he used his powerful position to make known his disquiet at the way in which Degrelle appeared anxious to emulate the Nazis. Rex, he warned his readers in a number of articles published during the autumn of 1940, should remain faithful to the ideas which had served it well through more than five years of struggle. In the New Order Europe, each country would be required to carry out its own distinctive revolution in accordance with its political culture and no purpose could be served by attempting to imitate alien foreign experiences <sup>221</sup>.

The climax of this defensive campaign by Streel was the forthright article "Gare aux Déraillements" which he published in *Puissance et Ordre*, the internal bulletin for Rexist militants, on 20 December 1940. Once again, his main theme was the need for Rex to retain its distinctiveness. Certainly the movement must adapt to the new political situation but the fashion for

borrowing the policies, style and even the language of Germany could only prejudice the success of the New Order cause within Belgium. If Rex was to achieve victory, Streeel argued, it must respect the historical realities which existed within Belgium :

"Dans tous les domaines, restons fidèles à nous-mêmes, à notre passé dans ce qu'il a d'essentiel ; ne perdons jamais de vue que notre révolution ne doit pas se faire dans la lune mais dans la Belgique telle que nous la trouvons, oeuvre des siècles avec ses lois et ses constantes. Nous avons à *faire notre révolution* et non pas n'importe laquelle" <sup>222</sup>.

Yet, although Streeel was undoubtedly an influential figure within Rex who had been active in the movement since its beginnings and was a popular speaker at local meetings <sup>223</sup>, the importance of his views should not be exaggerated. At this time, he remained something of a lone voice in the wilderness and most Rexists seemed happy to place their trust in the political judgement of Degrelle. Thus, his ascendancy within Rex remained beyond question and by the end of 1940 Degrelle's leadership had created a clear division between the position espoused by the Rexists and the sentiments of most Belgians. Rex had emphatically parted company with that broad national consensus which had existed in the summer and had emerged as a group of extremists who in many significant respects were opposed to their compatriots <sup>224</sup>.

In part, however, this division must be attributed to the profound change which had occurred in the political attitudes of the Belgian population during the autumn of 1940. In the periodic reports which he wrote to his superiors at this time, *Militärverwaltungschef* Reeder dwelt on the deplorable transformation which he sensed had taken place in the mood of the people since his arrival. In June, he wrote, most Belgians had seemed favourably disposed towards the Germans but within a few months that attitude had become one of scarcely concealed hostility <sup>225</sup>. This was - as Reeder recognised - partly the

consequence of military developments. Thanks to the radio, the population was well informed about the progress of the war and even in 1940 the broadcasts of the BBC - and from September those of *Radio-Belgique* based in London - were followed avidly <sup>226</sup>. Support for England grew rapidly and the German failure to invade Britain as well as the subsequent Italian debacle in Greece convinced a majority of the population that the war was not over and that the British might prove able to defeat the Axis powers <sup>227</sup>.

The result was a resurgence in patriotic and anti-German sentiments. During the autumn, numerous spontaneous acts of sabotage, a flourishing clandestine press and the demonstrations which took place at war memorials throughout Belgium on 11 November, all bore witness to the new mood of the population <sup>228</sup>. This change appears to have been especially marked in bourgeois circles but the working-class of the industrial regions was no more favourably disposed towards the German forces. The food shortages of the first winter of the Occupation caused widespread hardship and there were numerous strikes as workers attempted to protect their living standards <sup>229</sup>.

Thus, the German Occupation came to be seen as a temporary phenomenon which was to be endured rather than accepted. Contrary to first appearances, the war had proved to be a rerun of the events of 1914-1918 and, rather than looking on the Germans as the harbingers of a New Order, the "Boches" were detested as conquerors intent only on plunder <sup>230</sup>. In these circumstances, political attitudes changed markedly. The *secrétaires-généraux* were widely criticised for their willingness to appease the Germans and even attitudes towards the King began to change. His courage in remaining with his troops was admired but many regretted that, unlike other European monarchs, he was not in London to rally support for the struggle against Germany <sup>231</sup>. Looking to the future, most Belgians continued to believe that it would be

necessary to carry out profound reforms of their political system but there was no longer the same enthusiasm as had existed a few months earlier for authoritarian ideas. With the sufferings of the Occupation, a recognition of the value of basic liberties and of a participatory political system once again came to the fore and support for a New Order began to evaporate rapidly <sup>232</sup>.

The Rexists were well aware of the change which had taken place in popular attitudes. They first sought to blame it on the evil influence of *ancien régime* politicians, freemasons or Jews but, faced with the clear evidence of mass hostility to their ideas, they were increasingly forced to accept that the people were blind and that only an enlightened minority would create the New Order in Belgium <sup>233</sup>. Thus, they were beginning to accept their isolation and during the last weeks of 1940 one sees the first evidence of popular anger directed towards the supporters of Rex. This hostility would increase dramatically in the subsequent months but already at this time Rexists were becoming the targets for the abuse and ridicule of their compatriots. In the opinion of many Belgians, they were traitors attempting to profit from the misfortunes of their country and attacks on the Rexists and, more especially, on their leader featured prominently in the clandestine press <sup>234</sup>.

Thus, while the population was moving in one direction, the Rexists were being pulled by their leader in the opposite direction. The result was a gulf between the majority of Belgians and the Rexist minority which would grow ever wider during the subsequent years of the Occupation.

Thus, in many respects, the position of Rex was already clearly defined by the end of 1940. Presented with a choice, Degrelle had opted for the German cause. This had not, however, yet become a formal policy of collaboration. His declarations of support for Germany had been cautious and the

Rexists were still anxious to present themselves as a movement for national renewal. But, despite this ambivalence, the basic decision had been made and, as a consequence, the Rexist had parted company with the majority of Belgians.

This choice had not, however, brought Degrelle the success which he had anticipated. The history of Rex in 1940 was that of a threefold failure. In the first place, Degrelle had proved unable to establish himself as the central political figure within Occupied Belgium. Others such as the King, the Flemish Nationalists or the former Socialist leader Henri De Man remained much better placed to benefit from the political situation. Secondly, Degrelle had failed to establish Rex as a mass movement. Though it had expanded during the year, its success had been modest and Rex remained a marginal force. Finally and, in his opinion, most importantly, Degrelle had proved unable to win the support of the German authorities. Shunned by the *Wehrmacht* officials in Brussels, he had failed to open up any alternative means of communication with the leaders of the Third Reich.

Thus, far from emerging as one of the principal leaders of the German-dominated New Europe, Degrelle seemed doomed to remain an isolated figure of no great importance ; and in response he decided that he must make a categorical declaration of support for the German cause. This Degrelle would do in January 1941 and it was at this point that one adventure would end and another - that of collaboration - would truly begin.

### Footnotes : Chapter One

- (1) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, pp. 91-97.
- (2) *Ibid.*, pp. 346-348 ; H. Bernard *La Résistance 1940-1945* (Brussels, 1969), p. 25.
- (3) J. Stengers *Léopold III et le gouvernement ; les deux politiques belges de 1940* (Paris-Gembloux, 1980).
- (4) J. Vanwelkenhuyzen and J. Dumont *1940 ; Le Grand Exode* (Paris-Gembloux, 1983) ; J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *Op. cit.*, p. 168.
- (5) P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis* (Brussels, n.d.) I, 91 ; J. Wynants *Verviers 1940* (No place, 1981), pp. 123-146.
- (6) P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public en Belgique sous l'occupation allemande* (Brussels, 1945), p. 18 ; H. Bernard *La Résistance*, p. 24.
- (7) P. Struye *Op. cit.*, pp. 18-20.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 20 ; J-C Ricquier 'Le Vicomte Eyskens : souvenirs et commentaires', *Revue Générale* Aug.-Sept. 1983, 12.
- (9) M. L. Smith 'Neither Resistance nor Collaboration', *History* LXXII (1987), 251-278.
- (10) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, pp. 129-130.
- (11) A. De Jonghe *Hitler en het politieke lot van België (1940-1944)* (Antwerp-Utrecht, 1972) I, 186-198.
- (12) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *Op. cit.*, pp. 185-199.
- (13) See note 11.
- (14) A. De Jonghe *Hitler en het politieke lot van België.*, pp. 259-312 ; J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *Op. cit.*, pp. 211-215.
- (15) A. W. Willemsen *Het Vlaams-nationalisme 1914-1940* (Utrecht, 1969).
- (16) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *Op. cit.*, pp. 298-305 ; A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder pour la nomination d'un HSSPF à Bruxelles', *Cahiers* IV, 14-32. Cited henceforth as 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...'.  
(17) J-M Etienne *Le mouvement rexiste*, p. 163.
- (18) *Le P.R.* 7 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans les Stalags', 1 Apr. 1942, p. 4, 'Chronique du Mouvement' and 9 June 1942, p. 2, 'Les légionnaires et les prisonniers' ; VM to Reeder, date unknown, copy in Simar to Chefs de Groupes 21 Nov. 1942, C2GM, C 11/321.8.
- (19) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *Op. cit.*, pp. 105-122.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- (21) *Le P.R.* 7 Jan. 1941, p. 3, 'Le rassemblement de Liège' ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle : persiste et signe* (Paris, 1985), p. 203.
- (22) Journal de V. Matthys p. 1, C2GM ; *Le P.R.* 30 Nov. 1940, Magazine, pp. 1 and 3, 'Israël en Pyrenées', 14 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'Notre camarade Arsène Caignet...' and 20 Nov. 1942, p. 1, 'Notre camarade Jean Teughels...' ; *Le Soir* 5 Nov. 1947, p. 5, 'Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles' ; Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, p. 59, C2GM, JB 13.
- (23) Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 5-6, C2GM ; J-M Etienne *Op. cit.*, p. 165.
- (24) L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 89-99.
- (25) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, p. 114 ; *Le P.R.* 1 Sep. 1940, p. 1, 'Un martyr rexiste'.
- (26) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *Op. cit.*, pp. 114-115 ; P.J. Teughels to Conseil Général 2 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/115 ; *Le P.R.* 9 Jan. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (27) e.g. W. Dannau *Ainsi parla Léon Degrelle* (Strombeek-Bever, 1973) VI, 225-236 ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, pp. 217-221.
- (28) Circular from Conseil Général 8 June 1940, C2GM, C 11/113.
- (29) Vandeveldte to C. Damman 14 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/189.
- (30) Vandeveldte to R. Ledoux 15 June 1940 and Circular to members of Conseil Général 24 May 1940, C2GM, C 11/105 and C 11/106.
- (31) J-L Hondros *Occupation and Resistance ; The Greek Agony* (New York, 1983), p. 26 ; P. Hayes *Quisling* (Newton Abbot, 1971), pp. 210-245.

- (32) Avis of Directoire of Rex-Liége 15 June 1940 and Vandevelde to *Le Soir* 16 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/110 and C 11/113 ; *Le Soir* 7 June 1946, p. 3, 'Les Conseils de Guerre'.
- (33) Resolution of Conseil Général 26 June 1940, C2GM, C 11/108.
- (34) Conseil Général to Léopold III 7 June 1940, C2GM, C 11/109.
- (35) Circular from Conseil Général 8 June 1940, C2GM, C 11/113 ; Interview between Carl Peeters and José Gotovitch 24 Mar. 1972, p. 56, C2GM.
- (36) Resolution of Conseil Général 2 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/108.
- (37) P. Teughels to Conseil Général 2 July 1940 and A. Zégels to LD 4 June 1940, C2GM, C 11/115 and C 11/327.
- (38) L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, p. 265 ; Rex-Auderghem to Conseil Général 6 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/110.
- (39) Note from Directoire of Rex-Liége to Conseil Général 18 June 1940 and F. Van Overstraeten to Conseil Général 26 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/321.9 and C 11/112.
- (40) Declarations of Rex-Liége 12 and 15 June 1940 C2GM, C 11/110.
- (41) P. Janssens 'Les Dinassos wallons 1936-41' (Université de Liège Mémoire de licence 1982), pp. 215-217 ; Légion Nationale Feuille d'ordre No. 2 21 Aug. 1940, C2GM, C 8/5.
- (42) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, pp. 218-230.
- (43) C. Damman to Vandevelde 24 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/189.
- (44) Vandevelde to Chefs de Région 12 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/262.
- (45) Note from Directoire of Rex-Liége to Conseil Général 18 June 1940 and Vandevelde to C. Damman 14 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/321.9 and C 11/189.
- (46) Vandevelde to Conseil Général 12 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/114.
- (47) Journal de V. Matthys pp. 1-2, C2GM.
- (48) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, pp. 307-320 ; E. De Bens *De Belgische dagbladders onder Duitse censuur* (Antwerp-Utrecht, n.d.), pp. 139-160.
- (49) e.g. Mme. J. Beval to Vandevelde 4 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/112.
- (50) Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 9, C2GM ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 112-113 ; J. Denis 'Mémoire justificatif d'un condamné à mort' p. 25, Aud. Gén., Doss. Jean Denis, Info., Doct. 53.
- (51) Vandevelde to Mme. J. Beval 6 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/112 ; *Le Soir* 7 June 1946, p. 3, 'Les Conseils de Guerre'.
- (52) TB 8, 3 Sept. 1940, p. 528 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, p. 247.
- (53) *Ibid.*, pp. 98-103 ; 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12 (Brussels, 1963), pp. 14-15.
- (54) *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16 ; W. Dannau *Ainsi parla Léon Degrelle* VI, 274 ; J. Stengers *Léopold III et le gouvernement*, pp. 88-90.
- (55) C. Raty to Vandevelde 26 July 1940, C2GM, C 11/113.
- (56) J-M Etienne *Le mouvement rexiste*, p. 111 ; 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12, p. 16 ; P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis* I, 241-242.
- (57) E. Jäckel *Frankreich in Hitlers Europa* (Stuttgart, 1966), pp. 66-70 ; P. Ory *Les collaborateurs*, pp. 12-20 and 37-38.
- (58) L. Degrelle *Hitler pour mille ans* (Paris, 1969), p. 102 ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, p. 239 ; E. Krier 'Le rexisme et l'Allemagne', *Cahiers* V, 184.
- (59) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, pp. 43-47 ; B. de Jouvenal *Un voyageur dans le siècle* (Paris, 1979), p. 379.
- (60) Re. Laval and Abetz, see R. Paxton *Vichy France : Old Guard and New Order 1940-1944* (London, 1972), pp. 63-68.
- (61) *L'Eventail* 30 May 1980, p. 7, 'Léon Degrelle, le procès qui n'a jamais eu lieu' ; 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12, p. 16.
- (62) R. Devleeschouwer 'L'opinion politique et les revendications territoriales belges à la fin de la première guerre mondiale 1918-1919' in *Mélanges offerts à G. Jacquemyns* (Brussels, 1968), pp. 207-238 ; P. Janssens 'Les Dinassos wallons'.
- (63) e.g. L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 109-120.
- (64) Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 9-14, C2GM.

- (65) E. Brasseur to Vandeveld 3 Aug. 1940 and Vandeveld to E. Brasseur 4 Aug. 1940, C2GM, C 11/112.
- (66) L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 162-163 ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, p. 236.
- (67) Notes of meeting on 7 Aug. 1940, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye ; 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12, p. 17.
- (68) See note 57.
- (69) It remains unclear whether this meeting occurred on the 10 or 11 August. It had, however, certainly taken place prior to the 12th : *Le Soir* 30 Nov. 1946, p. 4, 'Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles' ; 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12, p. 18 ; B. de Jouvenal *Un voyageur dans le siècle*, p. 394. Uncertainty also surrounds who attended the meeting. Certain sources state that Pierre Daye and Mme. Didier (whose Brussels salon had for some years been a focus for those sympathetic towards Germany) as well as the wives of Degrelle and of De Man were present. Re. the Didiers, see J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, pp. 43-47.
- (70) L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 388-389 ; *L'Eventail* 30 May 1980, p. 7, 'Léon Degrelle'.
- (71) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, pp. 216-232 ; P. Dodge *Beyond Marxism : The Faith and Works of Hendrik De Man* (The Hague, 1966).
- (72) *L'Eventail* 30 May 1980, p. 7, 'Léon Degrelle'.
- (73) 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12, p. 18.
- (74) B. de Jouvenal *Un voyageur dans le siècle*, p. 395.
- (75) Interview between Léon Degrelle and Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen 11-12 Dec. 1977, p. 90 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, p. 390.
- (76) *Ibid.*, pp. 277 and 392-393.
- (77) *Ibid.*, p. 394 ; Notes of meeting on 19 Aug. 1940, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye.
- (78) Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 14-18, C2GM ; *Recueil de documents établi par le Secrétariat du Roi concernant la période 1936-1949* (No place, 1949), p. 82.
- (79) *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.
- (80) B. de Jouvenal *Un voyageur dans le siècle*, p. 395.
- (81) L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 153-154.
- (82) *Ibid.*, pp. 383-384.
- (83) *Ibid.*, pp. 142-148 ; *Recueil de documents établi par le Secrétariat du Roi*, p. 83.
- (84) L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 158-159 ; Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 25, C2GM.
- (85) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, pp. 207-210 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 159-170.
- (86) *Ibid.*, pp. 404-405.
- (87) Notes of meeting on 1 Aug. 1940, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye ; 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12, pp. 16-17 ; Comte Capelle *Au Service du Roi* (Brussels, 1949) II, 77.
- (88) Capelle to Daye 2 Aug. 1940, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye.
- (89) Capelle to Daye 16 Aug. 1940, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 120 and 269-270.
- (90) L. Degrelle *Lettres à mon Cardinal* (Brussels, 1975), pp. 33-34.
- (91) Notes of meeting on 21 Aug. 1940, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye ; 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12, p. 19 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 271-279 ; *Recueil de documents établi par le Secrétariat du Roi*, pp. 81-83 ; Comte Capelle *Au Service du Roi* II, 78-79.
- (92) J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, p. 237.
- (93) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, p. 211.
- (94) See pp. 4-6.
- (95) A. Dantoing 'La hiérarchie catholique et la Belgique sous l'occupation allemande', *Revue du Nord*, LX (1978), 311-330 ; J. Willequet *La Belgique sous la botte*, pp. 68-76.
- (96) Chanoine Leclef *Le cardinal Van Roey et l'occupation allemande en Belgique* (Brussels, 1945), p. 82 ; L. Degrelle *Lettres à mon Cardinal*, p. 33.
- (97) Chanoine Leclef *Op. cit.*, pp. 82-83 and 85 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 213-218.
- (98) Ch. d'Ydewalle *Degrelle ou la triple imposture* (Brussels, 1968), p. 186.



- (99) I am indebted to M. Alain Dantoing for sharing with me his unparalleled knowledge of the Church during the Occupation.
- (100) *Recueil de documents établi par le Secrétariat du Roi*, p. 83 ; General Van Overstraeten *Sous le joug : Léopold III prisonnier* (Brussels, 1986), p. 76.
- (101) L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 134 and 396-399.
- (102) General Van Overstraeten *Op. cit.*, p. 44.
- (103) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, p. 294.
- (104) *Le P.R.* 29 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'En marche vers l'unité' ; J. Denis 'Mémoire justificatif...' p. 102, Aud. Gén., Doss. Jean Denis, Info., Doct. 53 ; Ch. d'Ydewalle *Degrelle ou la triple imposture*, p. 191.
- (105) General Van Overstraeten *Sous le joug*, p. 76.
- (106) Vandevelde to E. Brasseur 4 Aug. 1940, C2GM, C 11/112.
- (107) *Le Soir* 5 June 1946, p. 2, 'Les Conseils de Guerre' ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 249-251 ; Interview between Carl Peeters and José Gotovitch 24 Mar. 1972, pp. 44-45, C2GM. From 1940 to 1944, *Le Soir* was published under German control without the permission of the Rossel family.
- (108) L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 247-248 ; Journal de V. Matthys p. 2, C2GM ; TB 8, 3 Sept. 1940, p. 528.
- (109) *Le P.R.* 18 Sept. 1940, p. 8, 'Dans le Mouvement' and 2 Oct. 1940, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement Rexiste'.
- (110) Vandevelde to LD 10 Sept. 1940 and to Doring 12 Sept. 1940, C2GM, C 11/190 and C 11/116 ; *Le P.R.* 5 Feb. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (111) *Le P.R.* 21 Sept. 1940, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement Rexiste'.
- (112) Extrait du Bulletin des Dirigeants 25 Jan. 1941, C2GM, C 11/92 ; Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988 ; Interview with M. Paul Jamin 11 Dec. 1987.
- (113) See note 111 ; E. Brasseur to Vandevelde 3 Aug. 1940, C2GM, C 11/112.
- (114) Albert Constant Pro Just., 18 Apr. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 219-220 ; Unofficial list of Rexist leaders, C2GM, C 11/88.
- (115) *Le P.R.* 11 Oct. 1940, p. 8, 'Rex Flandre au service de la communauté populaire'.
- (116) Peeters to Damman 13 Aug. 1940, C2GM, C 11/112.
- (117) See note 111.
- (118) Anonymous letter 17 Apr. 1987, Private Papers of the Author.
- (119) Interview between Carl Peeters and José Gotovitch 24 Mar. 1972, p. 37, C2GM.
- (120) J. Streel Notice pour mon défenseur ; deuxième suite, C2GM, Fonds José Streel ; Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988.
- (121) TB 15, 7 Apr. 1941, p. 1466 ; Anonymous letter 17 Apr. 1987, Private Papers of the Author.
- (122) Telegram from Chargé d'affaires at Madrid 10 Feb., 1951, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Brussels, Doct. 11179. I am grateful to M. José Gotovitch for kindly making a copy of this telegram available to me.
- (123) Ch. d'Ydewalle *Degrelle ou la triple imposture*, p. 195 ; Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 28 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Cour Militaire, Doct. 10.
- (124) See note 111. I am also indebted to M. Francis Balace of the University of Liège for certain information concerning Rouleau.
- (125) Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 28 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Cour Militaire, Doct. 10 ; TB 15, 7 Apr. 1941, p. 1466 ; Anonymous letter 17 Apr. 1987, Private Papers of the Author.
- (126) e.g. Daye to LD 10 Sept. 1940, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye.
- (127) Rouleau to Vandevelde 23 Aug. 1940, C2GM, C 11/190 ; *Le P.R.* 18 Sept. 1940, p. 8, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (128) Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988.
- (129) Bulletin du mouvement rexiste No. 1, 20 Sept. 1940, C2GM, C 11/162.
- (130) *Ibid.* ; Vandevelde to Vanderveken 29 May 1940, C2GM, C 11/107 ; *Le P.R.* 11 Oct. 1940, p. 8, 'Cadre du mouvement rexiste en Flandre'.

- (131) Région de Bruxelles Bulletin du 20 décembre 1940, C2GM, C 11/91.
- (132) Rex-Wallonie Liste des titulaires de cartes de dirigeants 20 Feb. 1941, C2GM, C 11/321.2.
- (133) See note 129. Figure One illustrates the hierarchical structure of Rex at this time.
- (134) *Le P.R.* 4 Oct. 1940, p. 1, 'Ouvriers et agriculteurs'.
- (135) Bulletins du mouvement rexiste Nos. 1-3, 20 Sept., 25 Oct., and 30 Nov. 1940, C2GM, C 11/162-164 ; *Le P.R.* 11 Oct. 1940, p. 8, 'L'Ecole des Dirigeants...'
- (136) *Le P.R.* 25-26 Aug. 1940, p. 1, 'Belgique'.
- (137) *Ibid.*, pp. 1 and 3, 'L'Europe va naître' and 31 Aug. 1940, p. 1, 'Sabotage et patriotisme'.
- (138) *Le P.R.* 30 Aug. 1940, p. 1, 'De Londres à Anvers' ; Bulletin du mouvement rexiste No. 2, 25 Oct. 1940, C2GM, C 11/163.
- (139) *Le P.R.* 25-26 Aug. 1940, pp. 1 and 3, 'L'Europe va naître', 3 Sept. 1940, p. 1, 'Un an de guerre' and 1 Nov. 1940, p. 1, 'Le crime posthume'.
- (140) *Le P.R.* 25-26 Aug. 1940, p. 1, 'Pourquoi notre retard ?' and 8 Sept. 1940, p. 1, 'Le martyre n'est pas une solution'.
- (141) *Le P.R.* 4 Sept. 1940, p. 1, 'Le devoir de présence'.
- (142) *Le P.R.* 25-26 Aug. 1940, pp. 1 and 3, 'L'Europe va naître' and 27 Oct. 1940, p. 1, 'Devoirs présents des Belges'.
- (143) *Le P.R.* 15 Sept. 1940, p. 1, 'Intérêt de la Patrie...' and 1 Oct. 1940, p. 1, 'La vie des peuples'.
- (144) *Le P.R.* 25-26 Aug. 1940, p. 1, 'Pourquoi notre retard ?' and 16 Oct. 1940, p. 1, 'La Révolution doit être totale'.
- (145) *Le P.R.* 25-26 Aug. 1940, p. 1, 'Belgique' and 22 Sept. 1940, pp. 1 and 2, 'Un déblaiement préalable'.
- (146) *Le P.R.* 7 Sept. 1940, p. 4, 'Le retour des fonctionnaires fuyards' and 5 Oct. 1940, p. 1, 'Nouvelles révélations...'
- (147) *Le P.R.* 28 Aug. 1940, p. 1, 'Les Traîtres de Limoges', 6 Sept. 1940, pp. 1-2, 'La paix sociale...' and 18 Sept. 1940, p. 1, 'Aucun pardon...'
- (148) *Le P.R.* 25-26 Aug. 1940, p. 6, 'La conception individualiste...' and 30 Oct. 1940, p. 1, 'La Paix intérieure'.
- (149) *Le P.R.* 29 Aug. 1940, p. 1, 'Réforme administrative', 4 Sept. 1940, p. 5, 'L'intérêt des Wallons' and 13 Sept. 1940, pp. 1-2, 'Le problème du corporatisme'.
- (150) *Le P.R.* 28 Aug. 1940, p. 1, 'Les Traîtres de Limoges'.
- (151) *Le P.R.* 6 Sept. 1940, pp. 1-2, 'La paix sociale...' and 15 Sept. 1940, pp. 1-2, 'Guerre à la misère'.
- (152) *Le P.R.* 8 Sept. 1940, p. 1, 'Le martyre n'est pas une solution'.
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- (176) Rouleau to Vandevelde 14 Oct. 1940, C2GM, C 11/132 ; *Le P.R.*, 16 Oct. 1940, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement Rexiste' ; LC to [Burtombloy] 30 Nov. 1940, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 137.19 ; General Van Overstraeten *Sous le joug*, p. 113.
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- (179) M. Steinberg *L'étoile et le fusil ; la question juive 1940-1942* (Brussels, 1983), pp. 134-135.
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- (181) J-P Brunet *Jacques Doriot*, pp. 312 and 324.
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- (193) *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85 ; A. Dantoing 'La hiérarchie catholique...', *Revue du Nord* LX (1978), 318.
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- (225) TB 10, 1 Nov. 1940, pp. 701-702 ; TB 11, 1 Dec. 1940, p. 858 ; TB 12, 3 Jan. 1941, p. 1011.
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- (229) *Ibid.*, pp. 354-355.
- (230) P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *Op. cit.* I, 164 and 208 ; J. Gotovitch 'Photographie de la presse clandestine', *Cahiers II*, 138-139 and 144.
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## CHAPTER TWO : JANUARY - AUGUST 1941

Collaboration never formed part of the world of modern politics. Its rules and character always remained different, often resembling more a pre-modern society in which gesture and symbolism were of pre-eminent importance. Degrelle, the outsider who had rejected the mundane *moeurs* of inter-war Belgian politics, felt at home in this new world. He was at last freed from the constraints which had dogged his political career and his willingness to throw himself wholeheartedly into the spirit of collaboration was his great strength and, ultimately, the reason for his success. His rivals within Occupied Belgium remained tied by the habits and principles of the political life of the old regime but Degrelle felt no such constraints and he embraced the new world with the same enthusiasm with which he had rejected the old.

Above all, the *Chef de Rex* understood the importance of the dramatic gesture which would demonstrate to a suspicious and distant German leadership his willingness to adopt their cause. Thus, at some point in mid-December 1940, Degrelle decided to abandon all pretence and hesitation. Rex, he declared to José Streel, must suppress its outdated scruples and instead "cross the Rubicon" by demonstrating its unambivalent solidarity with the Axis cause. By making this dramatic gesture he hoped at last to awaken the interest of the leaders of the Third Reich<sup>1</sup>.

The influence of certain of his advisors as well as his fear that he was being left behind by those other groups - such as the VNV - who had already signalled their willingness to work with the German authorities may have both been factors in his decision to identify publicly with the German cause. But, like many of the other rapid changes of direction which Degrelle had made during his political career, this move was based less on any rational

analysis than on his overweening sense of his own destiny. The pre-war years of unrewarding political struggle combined with the adulation of his supporters had fostered in Degrelle a firm conviction that he was a latter-day Cassandra whose fate it was to be ignored by his compatriots. Thus, the choice of collaboration with Germany always seems to have possessed a great emotional appeal for Degrelle, enabling him to cast himself in the role of the solitary and unrecognised prophet destined to lead an uncomprehending nation.

Degrelle's initial intention was probably to announce his support for Germany at the national rally which Rex intended to hold in Liège on 22 December <sup>2</sup>. However, for reasons which remain obscure, the meeting was postponed until after the New Year and Degrelle - ever reluctant to tolerate any delay - chose to publicise his new stance by means of an article in *Le Pays Réel* <sup>3</sup>. Entitled "Salut à 1941", this article appeared in the Rexist newspaper on January 1, although it had apparently been written several days earlier <sup>4</sup>. Its uncompromising tone and, in particular, its dramatic concluding cry of "Heil Hitler !" left no reader in any doubt as to Degrelle's pro-German sentiments and it had an immediate impact far beyond Rexist ranks.

Much of the article, however, merely restated themes already evident in Degrelle's journalism during the autumn of 1940. Thus, with his characteristic taste for hyperbole, he denounced the English threat to Europe, declaring :

"L'Angleterre est finie, ses ploutocrates vont payer leurs crimes et l'Europe entière, qui connut si longtemps la dictature de l'égoïsme britannique, rugira de bonheur le jour où la jeunesse d'Hitler jettera les derniers ploutocrates dans l'eau du Canal Saint-Georges" <sup>5</sup>.

But it was through his portrayal of the war as a revolution that Degrelle moved towards open support for Germany. The conflict, he declared, was a revolutionary struggle between the old and the new, between the forces of reaction and those

of progress. And in this conflict, Rex had no hesitation in espousing the cause of youth :

"ce n'est plus une guerre militaire qui étreint le monde, mais une guerre de religion où des millions de jeunes hommes se sentent solidaires, quel que soit leur pays natal. Qu'ils suivent Hitler ou Mussolini, qu'ils suivent Franco ou Horia Sima, qu'ils suivent Quisling ou Mussert, ou les drapeaux rouges de la Révolution rexiste, tous sont pris par le même idéal politique et social, par la même mystique" <sup>6</sup>.

Thus, Degrelle justified his support for Germany in ideological terms. He did not portray collaboration as an unavoidable necessity but as a demonstration of an individual's faith in the cause of a New Order Europe. Thus, Degrelle placed himself in the vanguard amongst the most radical and enthusiastic exponents of collaboration, for whom working with Germany was always a positive choice rather than an imposed necessity. If, as some have argued, a distinction should be made between "collaboration de raison" and "collaboration de sentiment", Degrelle was clearly in the latter camp <sup>7</sup>.

This New Year article was, thus, without doubt a major turning-point in the personal evolution of Degrelle and, consequently, of the Rexist movement as a whole. Indeed, recognising its importance, the Belgian judicial authorities subsequently decided that it was in January 1941 that membership of Rex became a crime. All those who had remained in the movement after this declaration of support for Hitler were judged to have shared in Degrelle's guilt <sup>8</sup>.

Yet, even in this article, there was evidence of Degrelle's caution. His espousal of collaboration was certainly unambivalent but it was also somewhat limited. As Streel subsequently pointed out, the article had the character of "un coup de sabre dans l'eau" in that, although it was a dramatic gesture, it had few practical consequences <sup>9</sup>. Degrelle had indeed adopted the cause of collaboration but he had done so in a largely symbolic manner. He had



left no doubt that Rex supported the Axis cause but, rather than committing the movement to working with Germany, Degrelle had merely portrayed Rex as working *alongside* Germany to achieve the European revolution. This narrow distinction was soon forgotten but its consequence was that Rex did not suddenly become the handmaiden of the German occupying forces. Indeed, in the subsequent weeks, Degrelle was careful to distinguish between his support for the Axis powers and his cautious attitude towards the *Wehrmacht* administrators of Belgium :

"L'Allemagne militaire ne nous intéresse pas. Nous n'avons pas de solidarité avec l'armée allemande mais avec la révolution National-Socialiste".

Rex, he stressed, had no wish to become the auxiliary of the Nazi forces but instead wished to stand alongside the Germans in the struggle to build the New Europe <sup>10</sup>.

On 5 January, the delayed national Rexist rally finally took place in Liège. It was the first such meeting since the German invasion and it firmly established Rex as a major factor in the political life of Occupied Belgium. The Rexist leaders were anxious that the rally should demonstrate the strength of their movement and its credentials as a serious contender for power. Great care was therefore lavished on its preparation and every effort was made to convince all militants to attend. In the event, according to German observers, a crowd of approximately 5,000 Rexist gathered within the hall <sup>11</sup>. Outside, however, they had to contend with the presence of a vocal group of counter-demonstrators organised by left-wing groups of the Liège region long experienced in disrupting Rexist meetings <sup>12</sup>. Estimates of the size of this hostile crowd varied wildly and the Rexist claimed that only a small group of trouble-makers had been dispersed without incident <sup>13</sup>. Other reports, however, spoke of many counter-demonstrators and it is clear that in the scuffles between the Rexist

and their opponents a number of members of the *Formations de Combat* were injured <sup>14</sup>.

In his two hour oration to the assembled militants, Degrelle largely reiterated the position which he had outlined in *Le Pays Réel* on 1 January. Once again, he denounced England as the source of all evil and portrayed Rex as part of a community of New Order movements fighting under the leadership of Hitler for the liberation of Europe :

"Dans dix ans, l'Europe entière reconnaitra qu'Hitler l'a sauvée. Nous le voyons dès aujourd'hui et nous avons le courage de dire : Heil Hitler !" <sup>15</sup>.

Degrelle was, however, also careful to present the Rexists as patriotic nationalists. Belgian tricolours and a bust of Léopold III were prominently displayed and, with his customary taste for grandiose historical tableaux, the *Chef de Rex* spoke of how collaboration with Germany would enable Belgium to become once again the cultural and mercantile centre of Europe <sup>16</sup>.

The principal purpose of Degrelle's speech was, however, to portray Rex as a movement advancing confidently towards power. In his public oration as well as in a private speech he made on the same day to the Rexist cadres, he stressed that Rex was no longer constrained by notions of legality :

"Trop longtemps nous avons eu peur de sortir de la légalité. Depuis le 10 mai, la légalité ne compte plus, n'existe plus. Le 10 mai la Révolution a commencé, c'est à nous de la faire triompher" <sup>17</sup>.

Despite the set-backs of the previous months, Degrelle remained confident that this revolution was within his grasp. It would be achieved, he argued, not by a massive undisciplined flock of supporters but by a small and determined minority of militants. Force not numbers would be crucial in the coming conflict and he called on the Rexists to follow his leadership with the blind loyalty of dedicated soldiers :

"Ne nous embrassons pas de ce que pense l'opinion politique, des réactions du public. Il n'y a qu'une manière de dire la vérité ; la dire crûment. Tant pis pour les mous qui nous quittent. On ne fait pas la révolution avec des mous, mais avec des soldats" <sup>19</sup>.

The impact of the article in *Le Pays Réel* and of the speech at Liège was substantial. Henceforth, attitudes towards Rex would be dominated by its sympathy for the German cause and, for the majority of Belgians, Rex and its leader came to epitomise unscrupulous and abject collaboration <sup>19</sup>. Moreover, even amongst those sympathetic to the ideology of the New Order, the declarations of the *Chef de Rex* were regarded with distrust. For example, Paul De Mont, the former leader of Rex in Flanders, commented :

"Il n'y a rien à gagner à une servilité qui ne peut que susciter le mépris. . . on ne négocie pas à genoux" <sup>20</sup>.

The New Order journalist, Robert Poulet, was of the same opinion. Writing in *Le Nouveau Journal*, he deplored the fawning tone of Degrelle's speech which, whatever its intended effect, could only harm the national interest <sup>21</sup>.

Many were also concerned that the violent tone of Degrelle's speech seemed to confirm the rumours which had been circulating of an imminent Rexist *coup d'état*. In late-December the Belgian authorities had placed a number of public buildings under the protection of armed gendarmes <sup>22</sup> and there was widespread apprehension that the Rexistists would use their national rally to launch a *putsch*. Indeed, fearing such a development, the *bourgmestre* of Brussels had ordered on 3 January that the police of the capital be placed on alert <sup>23</sup>. Although the Rexist leadership noisily denied that they were plotting any such *coup* <sup>24</sup>, it would seem quite plausible that they were to some extent responsible for the rumours. In private, Degrelle often liked to boast that he stood on the threshold of power and the Rexist movement as a whole felt confident that it would soon replace the bureaucrats of the *ancien régime*. These were, however,

largely idle threats and no evidence has survived to suggest that the Rexist ever developed concrete plans for a seizure of power. Moreover, any such Rexist adventure would have been firmly opposed by the Germans. In January, officials of the *Militärverwaltung* reassured the Belgian authorities of their support and Reeder summoned Degrelle in order to receive from him a categorical assurance that he would not attempt to disturb the *status quo* <sup>25</sup>.

It was not only outside the movement that the declarations of Degrelle inspired consternation. Few Rexist militants had anticipated such a radical espousal of collaboration and all observers were agreed that the *Chef de Rex's* comments had caused widespread astonishment amongst his followers <sup>26</sup>. Some decided that they could not accept the pro-German orientation of the movement and during January there were a considerable number of resignations from Rex <sup>27</sup>. Many others, equally surprised by Degrelle's declarations, retained their faith in the political judgement of their leader <sup>28</sup> or decided to await the consequences of his new policy. One such sceptic was José Streel. In his contributions to *Le Pays Réel*, he continued to argue for a collaboration based on principles very different from those of Degrelle. For Streel, collaboration was above all a national duty imposed on all Belgians by the situation of their country after the defeat of May 1940 :

"On peut aimer ou ne pas aimer les vainqueurs, partager ou ne pas partager, ou ne partager que partiellement leur idéologie : on n'empêchera pas la Belgique de se situer à un carrefour de l'Europe et de se trouver soumise au processus historique d'unification du continent. Les choses étant ce qu'elles sont, au seuil de cette année 1941, l'intérêt de notre pays exige sa collaboration avec les vainqueurs" <sup>29</sup>.

Thus, according to Streel, collaboration was little more than a passive acceptance of reality and he reprimanded those who ventured onto the shifting sands of ideological affinity or personal sentiment <sup>30</sup>. Such criticisms were

clearly aimed at Degrelle and Streeel's remarks demonstrated the clear division which remained between those Rexists anxious to forge ahead into the heady world of collaboration and those who remained loyal to the more cautious policies of 1940.

At first, Degrelle appeared unmoved by the unease which his pronouncements had fostered amongst his supporters declaring to the journalists of *Le Pays Réel* that there was no alternative but to press forward with the new policy of support for Hitler <sup>31</sup>. Indeed, he had undoubtedly anticipated that his espousal of the German cause would provoke some resignations from Rex. But the extent of the discontent may have taken him by surprise and he sought to reassure disaffected supporters by hinting that his more radical statements were only intended to trick the Germans into supporting Rex <sup>32</sup>.

Thus, in the weeks following the Liège rally, Degrelle seems to have been attempting to achieve a balance between reassuring the hesitant and consolidating his pro-German stance. The unambivalent phraseology of early-January was replaced by more circumspect formulations which, though they did not negate his previous comments, demonstrated a willingness to avoid unnecessary conflicts with his own supporters and with other Belgian supporters of New Order ideas <sup>33</sup>. Thus, Degrelle apparently agreed to work more closely with the more moderate *Le Nouveau Journal* <sup>34</sup> ; and it was only in unguarded moments - notably in an interview with an Italian journalist - that he returned to the tone of his earlier pronouncements <sup>35</sup>. In statements intended for domestic consumption, he was more cautious. While continuing to insist that the war was a "guerre de religion" in which Rex stood on the side of the revolutionary forces, he generally avoided referring directly to Hitler and instead placed a much greater emphasis on the patriotic necessity of collaboration <sup>36</sup>. In a series of public speeches, Degrelle argued that it was

the Rexistists and not the myopic anglophiles who were the true patriots and that the purpose of their struggle was to achieve a place for Belgium in the New Europe <sup>37</sup>. Above all, the *Chef de Rex* was careful to distinguish between collaboration and servility :

"être camarades de combat ne veut pas dire être des esclaves [ou] des valets, mais des collaborateurs dignes" <sup>38</sup>.

Yet, despite the self-imposed moderation of such comments, Degrelle was determined to capitalise upon the position which he had established in January 1941. He remained optimistic that his espousal of collaboration would eventually bring him success and much of his activities during the coming months were devoted to preparing the movement for the tasks which lay ahead. He continued to stress that the Rexist revolution would be the work of a dedicated elite of activists and he accepted that much of the population was hostile to Rex <sup>39</sup>. Nevertheless, Degrelle and his advisors also recognised that the small number of militants at the disposal of the movement was not sufficient to assure them of success and therefore, during February and March, they launched a recruitment campaign intended to swell the ranks of Rex.

*Le Pays Réel* was central to this propaganda effort. The circulation of the Rexist newspaper was declining rapidly and after Degrelle's speech in Liège it stood at only approximately 10,000 - 15,000 copies <sup>40</sup>. These readers were for the most part committed supporters of Rex and the leadership hoped to recover a wider audience for the newspaper by using it to voice their support for what they believed were a number of popular demands. Under the direction of Victor Matthys <sup>41</sup>, *Le Pays Réel* highlighted the general decline in living standards denouncing those whom it held responsible for the suffering of the Belgian population during this first winter under German Occupation. England and, in particular, its blockade of the European continent were a major target

for their ire <sup>42</sup> but the Rexist press also continued with its virulent attacks on the political elite of pre-war Belgium. After their momentary discomfort in May 1940, the "maffias politiciennes" had recovered their former positions of authority enabling them to preside over what Rexist journalists continually referred to as "le Désordre Nouveau" <sup>43</sup>. Thus, according to the Rexistists, the few administrative reforms which had been accomplished merely disguised the continuation of the evil ways of the past and, with an energy rarely seen in the Rexist press since the heady days of 1936, the journalists of the movement - led by Degrelle - sought to reveal the sordid corruption and self-interest of the established political elite. The Rexist message was clear : as long as these men remained in place, there could be no New Order in Belgium and a massive purge was required which would transfer power into the hands of new disinterested administrators <sup>44</sup>.

The whole thrust of this campaign of simplistic populist propaganda was directed towards the working class whom the Rexist leaders were convinced was more susceptible to the appeal of their ideology than the selfish and nostalgic middle classes. This distinction was, moreover, one made by a number of well-informed observers writing at this time who contrasted the patriotic and pro-Allied spirit of the bourgeoisie with the more ambivalent mood of the workers in the industrial regions <sup>45</sup>. Though there was no active support for the German cause, the workers remained alienated from the old political regime and, under the pressure of rapidly declining living standards, the massive Nazi propaganda campaign promising respect and dignity for the workers may have enjoyed a certain very limited appeal amongst those disillusioned by the failures of the past <sup>46</sup>.

Rexistists exulted in making the distinction between the anglophile bourgeoisie and the open-minded attitude of the working class, confidently

predicting that the workers were turning to Rex. During February and March, Degrelle addressed a series of public meetings, the majority of which were held in the industrial areas of Wallonia <sup>47</sup>. The reports which appeared in the Rexist press of these meetings highlighted the presence of large numbers of workers in the audience and Degrelle's speeches laid much stress on the commitment of Rex to a vast if rather ill-defined social revolution <sup>48</sup>.

These attempts by Rex to woo disaffected workers brought it some limited success and many of the new members who joined the movement in early 1941 were apparently drawn from the working class <sup>49</sup>. This seems to have been especially so in the *Formations de Combat*. A large proportion of those who had joined Rex since the German invasion chose to enrol in the *Formations* and the Rexist leaders boasted that the ranks of the militia contained many men from working class and socialist backgrounds <sup>50</sup>. How far this was true remains unclear but the volume of these new recruits was certainly not sufficient to transform the social character of Rex. Workers remained in the minority and, writing in May 1941, one Rexist worker noted that the middle class image of the movement remained a serious obstacle to its recruitment efforts in working class areas <sup>51</sup>.

Thus, Rex only succeeded in enrolling those on the fringes of working class communities. The mass of the workers remained hostile both to Germany and to Rex and, in an attempt to lend greater plausibility to their campaign, the Rexist leaders made strenuous efforts to win the support of the former leaders of the pre-war socialist organisations of Wallonia calling on militants of the left and right to unite against the established order <sup>52</sup>. Few socialists were, however, attracted by this proposed "union of revolutionaries". Many had participated in the anti-Rexist campaigns of the 1930s and the German invasion had not inclined them to abandon their anti-fascist convictions. Moreover, Henri



De Man's espousal of a pro-German New Order had made little impact on the vast majority of socialist activists. Although president of the *Parti Ouvrier Belge* (POB), his "neo-socialist" ideas had had remarkably little influence on the militants of the party and, though they had supported his proposed economic plan, little of his sympathy for more authoritarian forms of political organisation had filtered down into socialist ranks <sup>53</sup>. Only amongst a small coterie of young followers - composed largely of journalists and intellectuals rather than of socialist militants - did De Man's anti-democratic ideas have any success and some of these enthusiasts did subsequently become involved in collaboration.

In general, however, the efforts of the Rexist to attract the support of socialist militants proved totally unfruitful. The sole exception was in Charleroi and La Louvière where Rex forged links with a small group of socialists sympathetic to New Order ideas, including Marcel Parfondry and Henri Horlin of the POB and Charles Nisolle, a former militant in *Action Socialiste* and the *Jeunes Gardes Socialistes* who had left the POB to join the more radical *Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire* <sup>54</sup>. These men had been disappointed by the failure of De Man to launch a New Order socialist movement and in early 1941 discussions began to take place between them and local Rexist leaders. These meetings apparently revealed a considerable convergence of views and, during a visit to the region, Degrelle reassured them in expansive terms of his support for a socialist revolution <sup>55</sup>. Thus, in this isolated case, Rexist propaganda and the charm of Degrelle proved successful and several members of this group - including Horlin and Nisolle - subsequently joined Rex.

Without doubt the most remarkable consequence of this campaign to win the support of left wing groups was the attempted alliance between Degrelle and Walter Dauge. Dauge was the son of a miner from the Borinage and in the

1930s his revolutionary politics and unaffected proletarian style had come to epitomize the radical mood of the depressed mining communities of that blighted area. A powerful and charismatic orator, Dauge had initially been active in POB groups such as Spaak's *Action Socialiste* and the *Jeunes Gardes Socialistes* and had played a major role in the organisation of strikes in his native region. Yet he cared little for the cautious policies of the POB and had been one of the first and most enthusiastic advocates of a Popular Front of socialists and communists. In the mid-1930s, however, he turned against the Communist Party and, soon afterwards, his radical views also caused him to break away from the reformist POB. Instead, in 1936 he founded his own movement, the *Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire*, which, although it had little national support, absorbed much of Dauge's personal following in the Borinage. Rejecting both the "class collaboration" policies of the POB and the dependence of the communists on the Soviet Union, Dauge remained an uncompromising yet unconventional radical and his internationalist and revolutionary views brought him into alliance with Belgian Trotskyist groups <sup>56</sup>.

Yet this firebrand who had been in the vanguard of the struggle against the fascist threat fell strangely silent after the German invasion of Belgium. There were persistent rumours that he had met Degrelle and Dauge and a group of his followers attended the Rexist rally in Liège <sup>57</sup>. This was no idle gesture and, although the erstwhile foe of Rex was disturbed by certain aspects of the rally, there seems to be little doubt that at this time Dauge was sympathetic towards both the New Order and Degrelle's movement <sup>58</sup>. Quite why this should have been so remains unclear and even his friends had difficulty in explaining why he had renounced his former opinions. A shared hostility towards the Soviet Union does not appear to have been important and it would seem more probable that Dauge - who was in ill health - had come to believe that only

some form of New Order socialism could achieve the necessary improvement in the material conditions of working people. Having rejected the rival paths of Soviet-directed communism and POB reformism before the war as well as having witnessed the crumbling of his Trotskyist hopes of a spontaneous working class uprising, Dauge was by 1940 a rebel devoid of hope and faith and he was therefore perhaps peculiarly susceptible to the illusory promises of the New Order <sup>59</sup>.

His infatuation with these ideas was, however, short-lived. Negotiations in 1941 between Dauge and Degrelle concerning a fusion of the two movements never reached a conclusion and it would appear that Dauge drew back from any formal espousal of the New Order cause <sup>60</sup>. Although he acted as *échevin* and subsequently as *bourgmestre* of his commune, Dauge shunned political activity during the latter war years and the former revolutionary was rumoured to have turned instead to black market activities <sup>61</sup>. On 30 June 1944, Dauge was assassinated by unknown killers in the Borinage. No organisation claimed responsibility for the murder which could have been the work of the Communist-directed *Partisans Armés* or of the Rexists. Both certainly had their reasons to assassinate a renegade but, according to the unreliable post-war testimony of a former Rexist killer, it was in fact the work of local Rexist terrorists acting on their own initiative <sup>62</sup>.

Dauge's brief flirtation with New Order ideas brought Rex few benefits. It did not enable the movement to increase its presence substantially in working class industrial areas and even the militants of Dauge's pre-war party proved reluctant to follow the lead given by their leader. Of the approximately 750 members of his party in the Borinage in 1940 <sup>63</sup>, only a handful ever appear to have joined Rex. There was certainly no mass transfer of

support and those few who did go over to the Rexist cause mostly served outside Belgium in military units on the Eastern Front <sup>64</sup>.

This failure to attract substantial working class support did not appear to shake Degrelle's confidence. He continued to boast of how Rex would soon seize power and, despite attempts by Streel to present a more reassuring and cautious image of the movement proceeding to power by gradual steps, the *Chef de Rex* was clearly looking forward to an apocalyptic conflict with the manifold opponents of the Rexist cause <sup>65</sup>. In particular, Degrelle was anxious to distance Rex from the tentative institutional reforms being enacted by the *Secrétaires-Généraux*. Rex, he declared, did not want a bourgeois evolution accomplished by bureaucrats but a vast and bloody revolution enacted by men determined to overturn the existing way of life <sup>66</sup>.

Everything was done to create a mood of expectation amongst Rexist militants. They were exhorted by Degrelle to hold themselves in readiness for "le jour décisif très prochain" and at Rexist rallies the audience sang "C'est la lutte finale. . . " while the men of the *Formations de Combat* trained incessantly in preparation for their role as the shock troops and guardians of the revolution <sup>67</sup>.

Yet, as usual, the extravagant rhetoric of the *Chef de Rex* took no account of the realities of the political situation. Rex could only come to power with the assistance of the German forces and, whatever Degrelle claimed, his outspoken comments in January had not convinced the German authorities either in Belgium or in the Reich to give Rex that support. As far as the *Militärverwaltung* was concerned, the January speech was a speculative act by an opportunist desperate to lead some form of Belgian state in a New Order Europe. Reeder and his colleagues remained distrustful of Degrelle's character and they contrasted the unreliable behaviour of the Rexist leader with the sobriety and

sincerity of the Flemish nationalist movement <sup>68</sup>. Yet, although the VNV always remained the principal ally of the *Militärverwaltung*, Reeder did accept that Degrelle's declarations of support for Germany did make some form of limited co-operation with Rex possible. Thus, from January onwards, the *Wehrmacht* administrators in Belgium cautiously began to provide Rex with some assistance. As the only significant pro-German movement in Wallonia, it was allowed a free hand to recruit members and organise meetings and the Rexist press received financial assistance from the German authorities. In addition, Rexist and sympathisers of the movement began to be appointed by the Germans to positions in the Belgian public administration <sup>69</sup>.

There remained, however, clear limits to the amount of support which the *Militärverwaltung* was willing to accord to Rex. Von Falkenhausen, the titular head of the *Wehrmacht* administration in Belgium, still refused to receive Degrelle and on the rare occasions when he was able to meet German dignitaries the *Chef de Rex* was forced to make rather desperate efforts to impress his audience <sup>70</sup>.

The limited assistance offered by a *Militärverwaltung* evidently anxious to keep the Rexist at arm's length in no way satisfied Degrelle's considerable ambitions and he remained convinced that he must deal directly with the leaders of the Reich. But, even his New Year declarations had been largely ignored in Germany <sup>71</sup> and he still lacked any obvious means of bringing himself to the attention of Berlin. Only Abetz seemed to offer any hope of success and throughout the winter Degrelle continued to visit Paris in the belief that the German ambassador would be able to act as an intermediary between himself and the German leaders <sup>72</sup>. In fact, however, Abetz - whose influence was much less than he liked to suggest - was largely powerless to assist Degrelle and his tentative efforts to assist the *Chef de Rex* in January

1941 and again in March of that year were easily rebuffed by the *Wehrmacht* authorities in Brussels <sup>73</sup>.

A potentially more successful means for Degrelle to win the confidence of Reich leaders was to participate in the military campaigns of the Axis powers. He therefore repeated his requests first made in the previous autumn to be allowed to form various Rexist military units including an air corps which he proposed should fight against England as well as recovering the Congo from the Belgian government in London <sup>74</sup>. These unrealistic proposals were rejected by the Germans but in February 1941 a more modest opportunity arose for Degrelle to display his pro-Axis sentiments when the German authorities in Belgium decided to enrol local men in their auxiliary transport corps, the *Nationalsozialistisches Kraftfahrer-Korps* (NSKK).

Degrelle promptly volunteered to recruit men for this unit <sup>75</sup> and, announcing the creation of the *Brigade Motorisée Rexiste* to militants in early-March, the Rexist leaders stressed its importance. Rex, they declared, must seize this opportunity to impress the German authorities and must not allow the Flemish Nationalists to appear as the only group capable of recruiting volunteers for the German armed forces <sup>76</sup>. Degrelle initially promised to provide 1,000 drivers but this target was soon substantially reduced and, although the *Militärverwaltung* reported on 2 March that Rex had already enrolled some 328 volunteers, it seems that recruitment proved difficult <sup>77</sup>. Despite an energetic propaganda campaign throughout March and the very favourable conditions on offer to those who volunteered, many Rexist were clearly reluctant to join the new unit <sup>78</sup>. Eventually, however, sufficient drivers were found for the brigade to become operational and, contrary to assurances that it would operate only within Belgium, it was deployed both in Western Europe and subsequently on the Eastern Front <sup>79</sup>.

The *Brigade Motorisée Rexiste* was a concrete contribution to the Axis war effort but the recruitment of this small number of auxiliaries was insufficient to change German attitudes towards Rex. The principal concern of the Nazi authorities in Berlin was to favour the Flemish population and, as Heydrich commented dismissively in January 1941, Germany had no interest in aiding a Rexist movement which remained loyal to a unified Belgian state <sup>80</sup>.

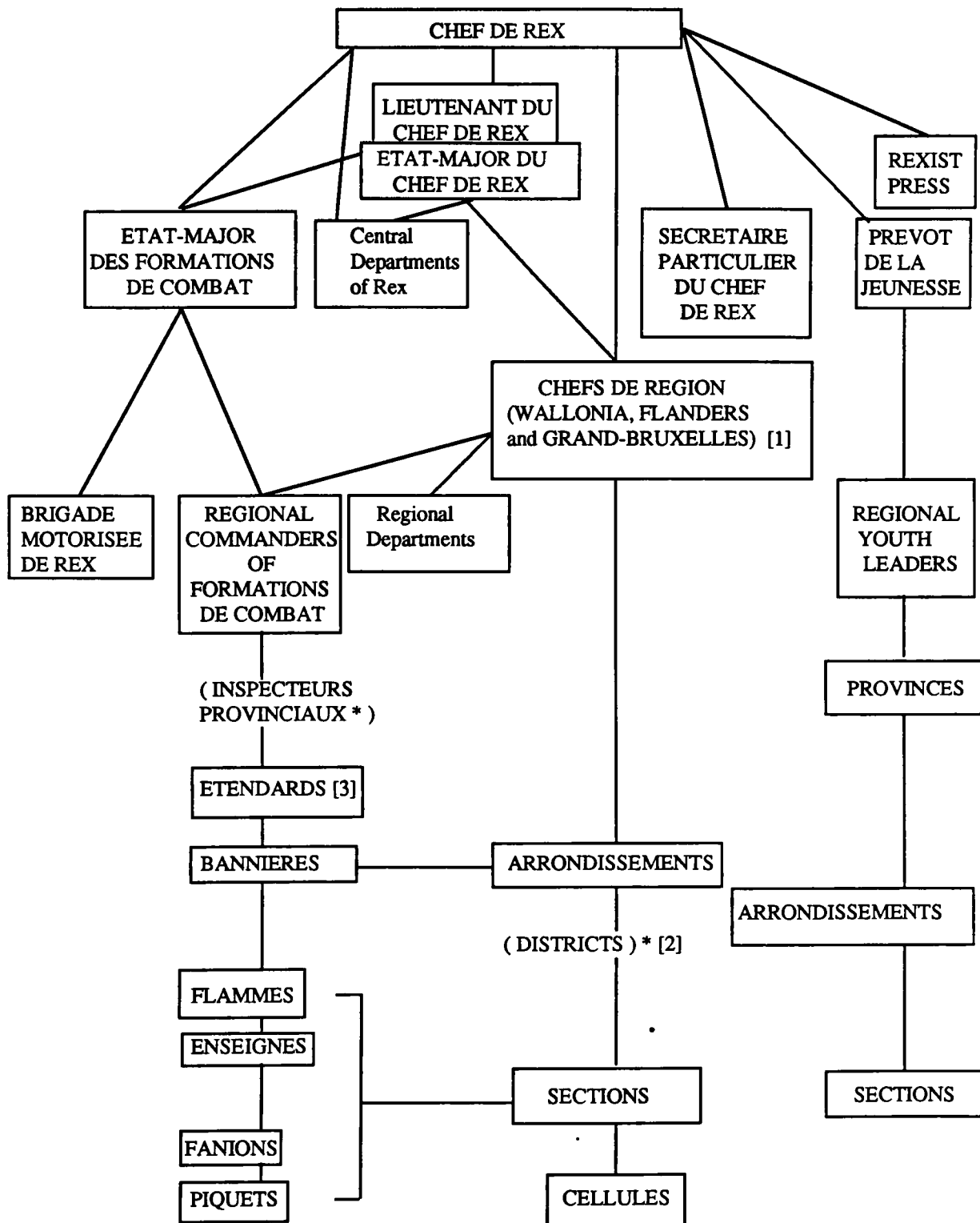
Thus, as Degrelle has recognised in his post-war writings, his strenuous efforts to attract the support of the leaders of the Reich were a dismal failure :

"Tout ce que nous fimes durant l'hiver 1940-1941 pour dégeler l'iceberg allemand échoué sur nos rivages, ne nous conduisit guère plus loin" <sup>81</sup>.

The problem for the *Chef de Rex* - as Streel subsequently observed - was that he was distrusted by both the conservative and the more radical German leaders. In the opinion of the *Wehrmacht* administrators in Belgium, Rex was "un élément turbulent et gêneur" whose activities threatened their attempts to work with the Belgian bureaucracy and the Flemish nationalists, while in the eyes of the SS and other more radical National Socialists Rex with its reactionary and clerical ideology could only hinder their attempts to impose a racial political solution in Belgium <sup>82</sup>. Discredited in both these camps, Degrelle could only grasp at the support of figures of secondary importance such as Abetz.

The failure of Degrelle to win German support undermined his attempts to pose as the future leader of Belgium. While figures such as Quisling and Mussert were receiving tangible German encouragement, Degrelle began to appear as something of a spent force. Rex no longer inspired the same fear as it had done in the first days of January and, in private, there was talk in collaborationist circles of replacing Degrelle with a more credible standard-bearer for New Order ideas in Wallonia <sup>83</sup>.

FIG. 2 THE STRUCTURE OF REX: FEBRUARY/MARCH - MAY 1941



Notes: \* Established only to co-ordinate activities. They did not form part of the hierarchical command structure.

[1]Grand-Bruxelles was a *district autonome* with powers equivalent to those of a region.

[2]Occasionally described as *cantons*.

[3]In principle the *bannières* were organised into *groupes* which, in turn, formed part of the *étendards* but there is no evidence that this took place.



This failure also had consequences within the Rexist movement. As the weeks passed by without any tangible evidence of success, a mood of unease and impatience became increasingly evident. Rexistists began to lose faith in the optimistic declarations of their leaders and this erosion in their confidence exacerbated the already serious tensions within the movement. The organisational structure established in 1940 had been an improvised affair and its ill-defined hierarchy created many opportunities for conflict between a number of ambitious individuals, all of whom could claim substantial but overlapping areas of responsibility <sup>84</sup>. This potential for conflict became a reality with the announcement in mid-February 1941 of a major reorganisation of the movement, of which the centre-piece was the creation of an *Etat-Major du Chef* <sup>85</sup>.

In part, these changes were merely an attempt to resolve the problems inherent in the 1940 structure. In line with a number of innovations already introduced during the previous few months <sup>86</sup>, they sought to establish the hierarchical structures necessary for a political movement which operated on authoritarian principles. Thus, the *Secrétariat-Général* as well as the other central Rexist offices lost much of their former importance and all responsibility for national decisions was concentrated in the hands of the new *Etat-Major du Chef*, to which Degrelle devolved effective responsibility for the administration of Rex. In addition, the powers of the three *Chefs de Région* were extended. They became responsible for all Rexist activities in their regions and were answerable only to Degrelle. On the other hand, the *Formations de Combat* were deprived of much of their autonomy. In each region, they were placed under the effective control of the *Chefs de Région* while at a national level the *Etat-Major du Chef* was empowered to intervene in the direction of the *Formations* <sup>87</sup>.

The most important consequence of this reorganisation was, however, the dramatic increase it brought about in the personal power of Fernand Rouleau, the *Lieutenant du Chef de Rex*. He was widely regarded as having been the author of the changes <sup>88</sup> and not surprisingly it was he who was appointed to head the new *Etat-Major*. A mere six months after joining the movement, Rouleau had become the undisputed second in command of Rex - a position confirmed by his appointment as Degrelle's replacement during the foreign travels of the *Chef de Rex* <sup>89</sup>.

The meteoric rise of the *Lieutenant du Chef* could hardly fail to annoy both long established Rexist leaders and those who - like Rouleau - had joined Rex in 1940 in the expectation of obtaining substantial power <sup>90</sup>. Indeed, hardly had the new structure been announced, than a dispute arose over the position of Antoine Leclercq. He was a Rexist veteran from Liège who, despite a somewhat impulsive and unstable character, seems to have enjoyed a substantial personal following amongst the Rexist of his native area <sup>91</sup>. Since 1940, he had been the regional leader of Rex in Wallonia but in the reorganisation of February he was downgraded to the rank of *Chef de Province* of Liège <sup>92</sup>. At first, Leclercq accepted this new position but he was clearly unhappy at his demotion and during the subsequent weeks he attempted to convince Degrelle to reverse Rouleau's decision <sup>93</sup>. This was, as Leclercq subsequently made clear in a private letter, essentially a struggle between himself and Rouleau for the ear of the *Chef de Rex* and in the event it was the new favourite rather than the Rexist veteran who proved victorious <sup>94</sup>. The decision was not reversed and during April Leclercq left Rex with the intention of establishing his own New Order movement <sup>95</sup>. He published a brochure entitled rather optimistically "Wallons, Réveillez-vous !" and, after receiving the approval of the German

authorities, the new party was launched in the summer of 1941 as the *Mouvement National Populaire Wallon* (MNPW) <sup>96</sup>.

This breakaway organisation was not a success. Its attempts to court popularity by posing as an authentically Walloon - rather than a Belgian - movement were unfruitful and, despite German hopes that it would attract a substantial number of disgruntled Rexists, few, even in Liège, appear to have joined Leclercq in his new venture <sup>97</sup>. Devoid of cadres, popular support and coherent leadership, the MNPW would never be more than a marginal force within the collaborationist world <sup>98</sup>.

The disarray caused by Leclercq's bitter departure may well, however, have been instrumental in provoking the defection from Rex of a second and more substantial group of *liégeois* militants. These were not supporters of Leclercq but enthusiastic Germanophiles who considered Degrelle's espousal of the German cause to be too cautious and who rejected a unitary Belgian state in favour of the integration of the Walloons into an expanded German confederation <sup>99</sup>. Their views inevitably attracted the ready support of the more radical German agencies and, with the assistance of the Liège offices of the Sipo-SD, these rebels launched the *Amis du Grand Reich Allemand* (AGRA) on 13 March 1941 <sup>100</sup>. As the self-proclaimed extremists of collaboration, the leaders of AGRA would never attract a large audience but their Germanic ideas were perhaps marginally less fanciful in the eastern city of Liège with its long history of contact with the German world than elsewhere in Wallonia and they proved able to attract the support of a good number of local Rexists <sup>101</sup>. The *Militärverwaltung* was, however, anxious to prevent AGRA from becoming a direct rival to Rex and it insisted that the new grouping should limit itself to what they termed "kulturpolitischer Betätigung". This was, moreover, a limitation largely accepted by the first leaders of AGRA who seem to have been more

interested in cultural propaganda than in political activity. Only towards the end of 1941 would AGRA begin to adopt a more avowedly political stance <sup>102</sup>.

The problems encountered by Rex in Liège were not unique. The changes introduced in February also provoked dissent elsewhere and one of the most prominent opponents of the new structure was Rutger Simoens, the *Commandant Général* of the *Formations de Combat*. Although he remained the national leader of the militia as well as becoming the operational commander of its Flemish units <sup>103</sup>, Simoens was deeply unhappy at the way in which the reorganisation had brought the *Formations* firmly within the political structure of the movement. Rouleau and the regional leaders of Rex now possessed substantial powers to intervene in the affairs of the militia and they soon demonstrated this authority by exercising their right to appoint its principal officers <sup>104</sup>.

An aggressive and highly ambitious individual, Simoens was never likely to accept this substantial curtailment of his power. He had long regarded the *Formations* as his personal fiefdom and he soon became embroiled in conflicts with the regional leaders of Rex <sup>105</sup>. At the same time, Simoens entered into contact with the leaders of an extremist Flemish collaborationist grouping, the *Algemeen SS Vlaanderen*. It appears that he hoped to regain in this organisation the power which he had lost in Rex and in a letter to the Flemish members of the *Formations* as well as in a speech to a rally at Antwerp Simoens encouraged his men in Flanders to defect to the *Algemeen SS* <sup>106</sup>.

Degrelle's public response to this insubordination was to expel Simoens but, in private, he apparently attempted to reach some form of agreement with the former commander of the *Formations* and for some time it seemed possible that he might return to Rex <sup>107</sup>. In the event, however, these negotiations were unsuccessful and Simoens subsequently went on to work as a propagandist for a number of Flemish collaborationist organisations <sup>108</sup>. His

departure was a serious blow for Rex and, despite attempts by Degrelle to retain the support of the Flemish units of the *Formations*, many members of the militia in the region apparently chose to follow the example of their commander and left Rex <sup>109</sup>.

The departures of Leclercq, of the founders of AGRA and of Simoens were merely the most prominent examples of dissent within a Rexist movement which by the spring seemed to be on the verge of collapsing under the pressure of its own internal divisions. Rumours of intrigues and defections were rife, prompting the internal Rexist bulletin to comment :

"Une crise de croissance semble s'être produite dans le Mouvement au cours de ces dernières semaines. Simultanément au Centre et en divers points du Pays, des différends se sont élevés entre quelques Dirigeants et groupes de membres du Mouvement. Quelques cabales ont été montées et il en est résulté un certain malaise. . . " <sup>110</sup>.

Although this article claimed that Degrelle's swift actions had resolved these difficulties, the crisis was a serious one. The bubble of optimism which had carried the movement through the first nine months of the Occupation had now burst and Rex would never fully recover the buoyant mood of those early days.

As always, the President of the *Militärverwaltung* was one of the keenest observers of the problems of Rex. Writing at the end of April 1941, Reeder contemplated what seemed to him to be an irreversible process of collapse. After describing the various internal disputes, he concluded that the responsibility for this situation was essentially Degrelle's. His entire strategy since the German invasion, observed Reeder, had been "ein fortgesetztes, nicht immer glückliches Improvisieren" and his impulsive pro-German declarations and rash promises of an imminent acquisition of power had aggravated the problems created by his bad choice of advisors and unskilful management of personal rivalries <sup>111</sup>.

He could see little future for Rex but, just as in January Degrelle had exaggerated the successes of the movement, so now Reeder was too hasty in announcing its demise. There remained a great fund of loyalty to the Rexist cause amongst the militants of the movement and the problems caused by the internal strife of early 1941, though serious, did not prejudice the survival of Rex. Those leaders who left were replaced and, in general, the structures of the movement remained intact.

In Wallonia, the new *Chef de Région* appointed to replace Leclercq was Joseph Pévenasse, an energetic lawyer and Rexist veteran of the Hainaut <sup>112</sup>. He established a powerful regional headquarters in Charleroi and, with the former *Chef de Province* of Namur, Jean Georges, as his deputy, he set about improving the Rexist organisation throughout Wallonia <sup>113</sup>. As can be seen from Figure Two, Pévenasse abolished the provincial level of command and the *arrondissements* emerged as the most important unit in the Rexist hierarchy <sup>114</sup>. The powers of the *chefs d'arrondissements* were enhanced and they were assisted by a number of local delegates with responsibility for specific aspects of Rexist activity. In addition, each *arrondissement* was encouraged to establish its own *service de renseignements* and propaganda school <sup>115</sup>. The sections remained the basic level of local Rexist organisation but Pévenasse encouraged the grouping of scattered rural sections into districts as well as the division of each section into cells composed of ten members <sup>116</sup>. These changes were not implemented immediately in all areas but their overall impact was undoubtedly to create a much more direct chain of command and for the first time, the local structure of Rex took on some of the characteristics of an authoritarian political movement.

The *Formations de Combat* were also substantially reorganised after the defection of Simoens. As has already been indicated, the militia had lost

much of its former autonomy and, although it retained its own hierarchy, it operated under the close supervision of the political leaders of Rex. A central *Etat-Major* was established for the *Formations* but it had little influence and, as with the political structure of Rex, it was the regional leaders - notably Albert Constant, the commander in Wallonia - who became the most powerful figures within the militia '17.

Thus, although the disputes and defections of the early months of 1941 were important, their impact can be exaggerated and the organisational changes which they provoked were in many ways an improvement on the previous structure. The inevitable disruption caused by these upheavals did, however, take its toll on Rexist morale which by the spring of 1941 was far less confidently optimistic than it had been at the beginning of the year. This was not, however, merely the consequence of the internal disputes. A second and in many ways more significant factor was the fundamental change taking place in popular attitudes towards Degrelle and his followers. Hostility towards Rex had, as we have seen, already been evident by the end of 1940 but during the first months of the new year this antipathy became much more marked. Henceforth, discrimination, sullen hostility and verbal abuse would form an unavoidable element of the daily lives of most Rexist, forcing many to retreat from normal social contact into the relative security of a ghetto existence.

The development of this antipathy towards the supporters of collaboration marked an important change in the mood of the majority of the population. Up until this time, the division between the anglophile majority and the pro-German minority had been one of several divisions within Occupied Belgium. Although important, it had not superseded the traditional conflicts of class and of political ideology and was merely one of several more novel sources of tension fostered by the events of 1940. During early 1941, however,

these other sources of conflict declined in importance and it was the division between collaborationists and pro-Allied patriots which came to dominate Belgian life. Any middle ground rapidly disappeared and contemporary observers were all agreed that Belgian society had become polarised into two very unequal camps <sup>118</sup>.

The emergence of this single overwhelming division owed much to the activities of the collaborationist groupings themselves. Without doubt, their espousal of the German cause had genuinely shocked the majority of the population. In Flanders, it had been hoped that the failure of pro-German "activism" during the Occupation of 1914-1918 would have prevented a resurgence in such activities ; while, in Wallonia, political collaboration was an unexpected - and entirely unwelcome - novelty <sup>119</sup>. Moreover, most Belgians paid little attention to the nuances of the positions adopted by the New Order groups. That Rex had little contact with the German administrators of Belgium was largely ignored by a population which saw in the Rexists merely "les embochés", a group of unprincipled opportunists dedicated to helping the German forces in every possible way. Thus, from the outset, there was an exaggerated belief in the danger which collaborationist groups posed for the rest of the population.

Other deeper factors, however, also help to explain how hostility towards collaborators came to dominate the life of Occupied Belgium. In subsuming their differences in the pursuit of a common cause, the diffuse forces of the patriotic majority required certain straightforward objectives upon which all could agree. A simple desire to see the expulsion of "les Boches" was one such goal <sup>120</sup> ; another was a shared hostility towards all those who aided the Germans. The social and ideological tensions evident in 1940 had not disappeared and, if anything, were exacerbated by the circumstances of the



Occupation. Relations between rich and poor were not improved by the material sufferings of the war years, the political Right became ever more fearful of a Communist-inspired uprising while the divisions caused by the King's actions continued to cast a long shadow over the political life of Belgium. Thus, opposition to the collaborationist minority became a necessary rallying-point for all men of good will and a way by which the not entirely united forces of the patriotic majority could express their sense of common purpose.

Hostility towards collaborators was also one of the very few means at the disposal of a population anxious to express its anti-German and pro-Allied sentiments. Embroiled in a vast global conflict, the unfortunate citizens of Belgium were the unwilling victims of a situation which lay entirely beyond their control but they were, none the less, keen to demonstrate their loyalties. Attacks on German forces were one means of doing so but such activities were dangerous and did not appeal to more than a minority. The daily - almost casual - persecution of traitors was, however, a much easier course of action within the capacity of all sections of the population. Every adolescent filled with enthusiasm for the Allied struggle, every housewife bitter at the daily sufferings of the Occupation and every *ancien combattant* anxious to demonstrate his antipathy to "les Boches" found in hostility towards the collaborators an outlet for his or her political sentiments.

Rex always bore the brunt of this hostility in Belgium. Although little sympathy existed for the pro-German stance of the Flemish nationalists, there was some awareness that Flemish grievances concerning their position in pre-war Belgium might have had some justification. But no such considerations clouded popular attitudes towards Degrelle and the Rexists. From early 1941 "cet inverti politique" and his band of mercenaries became the scapegoats for all of the frustrations and privations of the Occupation '21. Reeder, reporting to

Berlin in April 1941, described the sharp increase in anti-Rexist propaganda and, reporting the remarks of a high placed Belgian bureaucrat, he commented that the *Chef de Rex* was almost universally regarded as a worthless charlatan who, had he been German, would have been executed by the Nazis <sup>122</sup>.

Anti-Rexist propaganda was accompanied by intimidation of Rexist militants which extended into all aspects of their lives : bricks were thrown at their homes, numerous menacing letters were addressed to them, and the police, though tolerant of attacks on Rexist, were unusually zealous in their pursuit of those Rexist guilty of the slightest crime <sup>123</sup>. Members of Rex were shunned by their relatives or were even expelled from the family home <sup>124</sup>. Their appearance in uniform in the street led to scuffles from which they rarely emerged victorious and Rexist meetings were frequently disrupted by the activities of counter-demonstrators and hecklers <sup>125</sup>. On occasions, these crowd actions took on a ritualised character reminiscent of older forms of popular protest. For example, at Anhée near Dinant in May, a Rexist was assaulted and a straw effigy of him carried around the town in triumph <sup>126</sup>. If the presence of the German forces prevented widespread reprisals, many Belgians were nevertheless thinking to the future. Black lists of Rexist were circulating and some patriots were already dreaming of the bloody *jacqueries* which would follow the end of the war <sup>127</sup>.

The Rexist had long been a marginal group in Belgian political life and they were used to enduring the incomprehension and ridicule of their compatriots but the emergence of this all-pervading hostility was a novel and unwelcome development. Those who continued to support Rex had to accept that their political stance would have considerable consequences for their public and private lives and, not surprisingly, this was a commitment which not all proved willing to make. Thus, during the spring and early summer of 1941, there

appears to have been a significant reduction in the membership of Rex as the less committed of its supporters withdrew. Though detailed information is not available, it would seem that many of those who left the movement at this time were pre-war members of Rex. Generally drawn from the *petite bourgeoisie*, these were the men and women who had given Rex its electoral success in 1936 and who had thronged Rexist rallies to hear Degrelle denounce the immorality and corruption of the democratic political regime. Their commitment to a total revolution of society had always been distinctly ambivalent and they had joined Rex not to participate in some broad movement of European regeneration but to protest at the specific failings of the Belgian regime. Thus, they had always retained a largely nationalistic outlook and felt little sympathy for the cause of the German invaders <sup>128</sup>.

On the other hand, the militants who remained in Rex were on the whole those who accepted Degrelle's assertion that the war had become a revolution and that a German victory was essential for the future of Belgium and of Europe. Some of these were recent converts to Rex but many others were long-time supporters of the movement who, though they had not abandoned their nationalist loyalties, had come to see the Rexist struggle for a Belgian revolution as inseparable from the broader international conflict. These *militants de la première heure* who remained loyal to the Rexist cause tended to be those who were most enthusiastic for a profound and radical transformation of society. Although many were from bourgeois backgrounds, they were not *nostalgiques* in search of some secure Golden Age but radicals intent upon real and substantial social change who dismissed the hostility of the majority of the population as the work of agents of the *ancien régime*.

These self-styled revolutionaries of the New Order cause were little concerned by the exodus of their more cautious colleagues. Indeed, many seem to

have considered it as a timely *nettoyage* which would assist the transformation of Rex into a truly revolutionary movement. Their response to the development of popular hostility was to incite Rexists to take pride in their isolation and they called for the expulsion of those *rexistes honteux* unwilling to give their clear-cut support to the cause <sup>129</sup>.

This belief that there was no place in Rex for the hesitant and the uncertain was shared by their leaders who recognised that, if it was to survive in this hostile environment, Rex must adopt the characteristics of an authoritarian political movement. Thus, in propaganda and at local meetings an ever greater emphasis was placed on the need for "un esprit de foi et de discipline sans restriction" <sup>130</sup>. The oaths demanded of militants stressed this need for unquestioning obedience. For example, the membership card for 1941 stated :

"Je promets d'obéir sans discuter aux ordres du Chef de Rex, de Servir de toutes mes forces et de verser s'il le faut mon sang pour la Cause de la Révolution Rexiste" <sup>131</sup>.

Such language was still largely rhetorical but, as the gulf of incomprehension and hostility between the Rexists and the patriotic majority widened, so the likelihood of some form of Rexist "counter-violence" increased. Few Rexists were inclined to accept passively the insults directed at them and a desire to strike out against their many adversaries soon became evident within the movement. This was especially so in the militia, the *Formations de Combat*, which continued with its crude attempts at popular retribution against those tradesmen - especially Jews - accused of black market activities <sup>132</sup>. In addition, in certain localities, some members of the *Formations* resorted to more direct forms of retaliation. For example, at Herstal in January, a group of militiamen who had been assaulted by counter-demonstrators at the Rexist rally in Liège viciously attacked the democratically elected *bourgmestre* causing him

injuries from which he eventually died <sup>133</sup>. Other Rexistists resorted to more symbolic forms of revenge. The newly appointed *Chef de Rex Wallonie*, Joseph Pévenasse, for example, in February struck two fellow lawyers in the *Palais de Justice* of Charleroi who had mocked him for wearing his Rexist uniform during his legal work <sup>134</sup>.

The attitude of the Rexist leaders to such ripostes was ambivalent. Pévenasse's actions were given wide publicity in the Rexist press and were clearly presented as a model for other militants to emulate. Thus, the provincial commander of the *Formations* in Namur wrote to his officers praising Pévenasse's behaviour and advocating that they should carry a *cravache* with which to respond immediately to those who insulted them <sup>135</sup>. Others were, however, less willing to countenance such direct action and instructions were issued by the Rexist headquarters reminding militants that the correct response to all provocations was to report the culprits to the police :

"Dans ces épreuves de nerfs, restons maîtres de nous :  
notre sang-froid doit être à toute épreuve" <sup>136</sup>.

In particular, there was a general recognition amongst the leaders of Rex that the wild behaviour of certain elements in the *Formations de Combat* was causing great damage to the reputation of the movement. Strenuous efforts were made in the spring of 1941 to inculcate a mood of discipline and restraint into the membership of the militia <sup>137</sup>. Constant, as the regional commander of the *Formations* in Wallonia, continually incited his men to shake off their violent and destructive reputation. The Rexist militia, he declared, should be neither a "troupe d'aventuriers" nor a "bande de 'gamins'" but a disciplined army able to demonstrate maturity, a sense of responsibility and impeccable discipline <sup>138</sup>.

If these attempts to impose greater discipline and restraint on Rexist militants were to succeed, the leadership needed to be able to reassure

their supporters that, despite the disappointments of the winter, they did indeed stand on the threshold of power. Degrelle and his colleagues did not, however, have any such tangible evidence of success. The political situation in Belgium remained totally immobile and within a few months the arrogant confidence of the Rexist leaders had been replaced by a mood of frustration and despair <sup>139</sup>. Degrelle found this enforced inaction intolerable. Convinced that only he could save Belgium, he was, nevertheless, forced to stand idly by while the country drifted towards what he regarded to be anarchy and chaos <sup>140</sup>. It was the darkest moment of his political career and, in desperation, he wrote directly to Hitler expressing his sense of impotence :

"Après six années de lutte très violente, après des mois de cachot et de tourments, je me sens livré à un chômage qui m'est beaucoup plus dur que les luttes du passé et les tourments dans les prisons. . . Penser qu'à cette heure incomparable du destin, je suis immobile et stérile, m'est particulièrement amer" <sup>141</sup>.

This sense of frustration was also clearly evident in Degrelle's public declarations in which he admitted that the short-term outlook for the movement was unencouraging <sup>142</sup>. He was unable to offer his supporters any solution to these difficulties and - in what became a continual refrain in his speeches at this time - Degrelle warned that no positive changes could take place in Belgium until after the end of the war. In January he had portrayed the war as the enactment of the European revolution but the *Chef de Rex* now insisted that they were separate events and that the accomplishment of the Rexist seizure of power must await the resolution of the military conflict <sup>143</sup>. Thus, any prospect of immediate action had evaporated and, instead of boasting of imminent success, Degrelle warned the Rexistists that they were at the mercy of forces beyond their control. The uncertainty, he stressed, was total and nobody could predict whether the war would end within a few months or only after a

number of years. Nor was it even certain that a unified Belgian state would form part of a New Order Europe. The Rexists, he admitted, knew nothing of the intentions of the Germans and his unwelcome message for his followers was to advise them to master their impatience by concentrating on enhancing the strength of their movement <sup>144</sup>.

As Degrelle knew only too well, however, the real reason for the enforced idleness of Rex was his continued failure to attract German patronage. The Third Reich remained for him an incomprehensible maze and neither his visits to Paris nor his attempts to woo local German officials had brought him any success. Yet, despite this failure, Degrelle had begun to learn something of the harsh world of Nazi politics. In particular, he had realised that, if he wished to succeed, he would have to demonstrate an ability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. Immutable principles and cautious scruples had no place in the labyrinth of collaboration and the *Chef de Rex*, always a consummate opportunist, was in this respect well suited for the world into which he had ventured.

Thus, Degrelle began to modify the stance which he had adopted in January in order to render it more attractive to the German leaders. Aware that his continued commitment to a unified Belgian state was a hindrance, the *Chef de Rex* increasingly chose to avoid any references to Belgium in his speeches and newspaper articles preferring to employ more evasive terms such as "l'Occident" <sup>145</sup>. Degrelle also began to advance dubious historical arguments in order to convince the sceptical German authorities of the importance of Wallonia. Speaking at a rally in Liège in April, he declared that the Walloon race was not, as was commonly supposed, a fragment of the French nation but, in fact, a frontier people of Germanic origins with a proud history of resisting integration into the French world. Indeed, Degrelle added somewhat audaciously,

the Walloons had always enjoyed closer contacts with Germany than had the Flemish and their claim to a place in a German dominated Europe was no more than a return to this historical tradition <sup>146</sup>.

Not surprisingly, the German authorities were unmoved by this tendentious interpretation of history and Degrelle was also forced to make more direct attempts to attract their support. In his letter to Hitler on 10 April, he proposed that, as it seemed he could perform no useful role in Belgium during the war, he should be allowed to serve personally in the German armed forces. This appeal, which well illustrated his sense of desperation, was promptly rebuffed by the German authorities who were advised by Reeder that Degrelle's departure from Belgium would in all probability result in the collapse of his struggling political movement <sup>147</sup>.

Reeder's attitude towards Rex not only hampered Degrelle's attempts to win the support of the leaders of the Reich but also led the *Militärverwaltung* to reverse the policy of cautious support for Rex which it had initiated in January. In particular, Reeder and his colleagues decided that they could no longer support the nomination of Degrelle's supporters to important positions in public administration <sup>148</sup>. As a consequence, Rex was unable to benefit from the substantial changes made in the personnel of Belgian central government in April 1941. The *Militärverwaltung*, exasperated by what it regarded as the obstructive behaviour of many Belgian bureaucrats, had decided to transfer power into the hands of supporters of New Order ideas who would be more willing to implement their commands. In particular, they had been angered by the caution and patriotic scruples of the *secrétaires-généraux* who, acting as a *collège*, exerted great influence over the public administration of Occupied Belgium. Hence, despite the dubious legality of such actions, the German officials intervened directly in the appointment of new *secrétaires-généraux*. It



was the Flemish nationalists who were the great beneficiaries of these changes and on 1 April a leading member of the VNV, Gérard Romsée, was appointed to the key post of *secrétaire-général* of the Ministry of the Interior. In contrast, although an apolitical Walloon magistrate, Gaston Schuind, was nominated as the head of the Ministry of Justice, no supporter of Rex was appointed to the *collège* of *secrétaires-généraux*. The nomination of Rexists, as Reeder reported to Berlin, was impossible because of the internal problems of Rex as well as the bitter opposition which such appointments would provoke from the rest of the Belgian bureaucracy <sup>149</sup>.

Degrelle was furious at this exclusion of Rexists from high office. His hopes of acquiring real political power had again been frustrated and he immediately used the columns of *Le Pays Réel* to disassociate Rex from the policies of the *Militärverwaltung* <sup>150</sup>. Annoyed by such public dissent, Reeder seized upon this opportunity to call the *Chef de Rex* to order. Degrelle was summoned to what proved to be a stormy meeting at which Reeder apparently imposed a fine on *Le Pays Réel* and threatened to suppress the newspaper in the event of any further rebelliousness. Once again, the President of the *Militärverwaltung* had succeeded in exposing the weakness of Degrelle's position. His bluster evaporated and, cowed if not truly repentant, the *Chef de Rex* apologised and promised his support for German policies <sup>151</sup>.

Although Rexist leaders were at pains to present the changes announced on 1 April as a reallocation of administrative tasks of no political importance <sup>152</sup>, this failure to acquire important governmental posts was undoubtedly regarded by most Rexists as a major reverse. Nevertheless, the changes at the Ministry of the Interior did give them some cause for hope. Romsée was regarded as one of the leaders of the VNV most sympathetic to the interests of francophone Belgians and many Rexists hoped that his appointment

would at last open the way to far-reaching reforms of the structure and personnel of local and provincial government <sup>153</sup>.

During the previous winter, little progress had been achieved by the Rexists towards their ambition of ousting *ancien régime* figures from their entrenched positions of power in the *maisons communales* of Wallonia. Isolated successes - notably in Charleroi where the Rexist veteran and former deputy, Prosper Teughels, had become the *bourgmestre* - had been more than outweighed by the removal from office of many of those Rexists who had illegally usurped power in certain localities during the summer of 1940 <sup>154</sup>. In March 1941, however, a German decree was issued barring from public office all those aged over 60 and, as many of the democratically elected communal officials exceeded this age limit, Rex welcomed this decree as the prelude to the entry of their supporters into local government <sup>155</sup>. In addition, soon after Romsée's appointment, new administrative procedures were announced which increased substantially the power of the new *secrétaire-général* to intervene directly in the nomination of *bourgmestres* and *échevins* <sup>156</sup>.

Thus, the stage appeared to be set for a rapid and decisive change in the personnel of local government and in April the Rexists were already looking forward to acquiring control of the local communes of Wallonia <sup>157</sup>. Their optimism was further encouraged when Degrelle and Romsée agreed that in the appointment of local officials in francophone Belgium the *secrétaire-général* would rely on the advice of a *cabinet wallon* to be established in the Ministry of the Interior. As the head of this *cabinet*, Romsée and Degrelle chose Ernest Delvaux, who was a lawyer as well as a long-standing if somewhat moderate Rexist. He was appointed on 21 April and was assisted by two deputies, Boulanger and Dessart, both of whom were also Rexist militants <sup>158</sup>.

Encouraged by this agreement, the Rexist *Etat-Major* began the task of identifying those Rexistists deemed suitable for recommendation to the Ministry of the Interior. Rouleau, the omnipotent *Lieutenant du Chef*, took responsibility for this work and he established a *Service des Nominations* headed by Charles Lambinon to process all applications from Rexistists for posts in local and provincial government <sup>159</sup>. During the spring and summer of 1941, a number of internal circulars bore witness to the efforts of Rouleau and his assistants <sup>160</sup>. Yet, although a small number of Rexist *bourgmestres* assumed power - notably at Verviers <sup>161</sup> - there was no avalanche of new appointments and, once again, initial optimism soon gave way to disappointment. To the great frustration of Rex, the decree forcing office-holders aged over 60 to retire was implemented very slowly <sup>162</sup> and, in general, Romsée approached his task in a spirit of prudent caution. The new *secrétaire-général* was anxious to win some measure of popular approval for his reforms and he therefore preferred, wherever possible, to appoint moderate supporters of New Order ideas who were untainted by association with Rex. Only in 1942, when all hope of obtaining popular support had disappeared, would Romsée prove more willing to listen to the advice proffered to him by Rex <sup>163</sup>.

Frustrated in their ambitions, disappointed by every new development and harassed by an increasingly hostile population, the Rexist leaders were sorely in need of some cause for optimism if they were to retain the loyalty of their supporters and emerge as the future leaders of Belgium. Hence, they were ready to welcome any new development which seemed to herald a thaw in the political climate and, when on 10 May an accord was announced between Rex and the Flemish nationalist movement, the VNV, it was inevitable that it should be greeted within Rex as a harbinger of better times. Degrelle, conscious of the

mood of his followers, encouraged such expectations and, at a press conference held in the imposing surroundings of his private home, he spoke grandiloquently of the accord as a historic agreement which would enable the two movements to work together to achieve the National Socialist revolution. It was, he declared, the successor to the accord signed by Rex and the VNV in the autumn of 1936 and, like that earlier ill-fated agreement, this new understanding proved that Flemish and Walloon New Order revolutionaries could collaborate to build a unitary devolved state which would respect the distinctive characters of the two linguistic groups <sup>164</sup>.

Not all, however, agreed with Degrelle's remarks and a detailed examination of the accord revealed its limited scope. The first and most important of its three clauses announced the fusion of the VNV, of the pro-German elements of the late Joris Van Severen's *Verdinaso* movement and of the Rexist groups in Flanders (*Rex-Vlaanderen*) into a single New Order party. In fact, though nominally a new organisation, this movement would inevitably be dominated by the much larger VNV and it was clear that the agreement was principally intended to formalise the absorption of these two much smaller groupings by the VNV. The other two clauses were of much less importance. The second stated that the signatories agreed to recognise Rex as "le parti unique pour le peuple wallon" while, in the final clause, Rex and the newly expanded VNV undertook to assist each other and to collaborate on "toutes les questions d'intérêt commun" <sup>165</sup>. This evasive formula amounted to much less than a clear political alliance and, notwithstanding Degrelle's grand declarations, the accord significantly made no reference to a unitary Belgian state.

The limited scope of the agreement reflected its origins in the negotiations which had long been taking place in Flanders between the several collaborationist groupings of the region. As early as the summer of 1940, the

VNV had proposed the formation of a single party and, in October, a tentative accord had been concluded between the *Verdinaso* movement and *Rex-Vlaanderen* <sup>166</sup>. These efforts received the firm support of the *Militärverwaltung* which hoped that such a union would reinforce the strength of its ally, the VNV, while also ensuring the isolation of those small extremist groups in Flanders - notably the *Algemeen SS Vlaanderen* - with which the VNV had been in conflict during the winter of 1940-41 <sup>167</sup>. Thus, the VNV and the pro-German elements in *Verdinaso* continued with their discussions and by April agreement had been reached on the formation of a single party <sup>168</sup>.

The leaders of Rex in Flanders were apparently not party to these negotiations but they did, nevertheless, support the idea of a union of Flemish New Order groups. Since May 1940, *Rex-Vlaanderen* had operated largely independently of the rest of the Rexist movement : it had its own *Etat-Major* and secretariat and its head, Odiel Daem, was responsible directly to Degrelle for its activities <sup>169</sup>. The appeal of Degrelle's ideas was limited in Flanders and, although it was present throughout the region, *Rex-Vlaanderen* had always remained a relatively small organisation whose support was strongest amongst the professional middle classes of Antwerp, Malines, Gent and certain towns in West Flanders <sup>170</sup>. Its leaders boasted of their success in rebuilding the movement after May 1940 but, regarded with suspicion by both the *Militärverwaltung* and the VNV because of their pro-Belgian opinions, they frequently found it difficult to operate effectively <sup>171</sup>. Consequently, Daem and his colleagues, decided at an early stage that they must accept the integration of *Rex-Vlaanderen* into a single New Order party dominated by the VNV. They called repeatedly for such a union <sup>172</sup> and it would seem probable that it was largely at their initiative that *Rex-Vlaanderen* was included in the proposed accord between the VNV and *Verdinaso*.

The details of this fusion were apparently negotiated by the Flemish leaders of Rex who then submitted it to the *Chef de Rex* for his approval <sup>173</sup>. Degrelle had little choice but to accept this *fait accompli* but he hoped to turn it to his own advantage by demanding that Rex should receive some form of quid pro quo for the loss of its Flemish organisation. Hence, it seems to have been at his insistence that the second and third clauses were added to the agreement and that it was presented to the public as a national accord between Rex and the unified Flemish movement.

Although the leaders of the VNV apparently accepted these concessions as the price they must pay for the incorporation of *Rex-Vlaanderen* into their movement, they regarded them as no more than a sop to the *amour propre* of the *Chef de Rex*. At the press conference held to announce the agreement, the leader of the VNV, Staf De Clercq, was anxious to portray it as essentially an internal Flemish matter and was reluctant to make any declaration of support for Rex. The Flemish nationalist movement, he insisted, could not abandon its activities in support of those members of the Flemish nation resident in Wallonia and it soon became apparent that De Clercq and his colleagues remained committed to achieving the integration of Wallonia into "l'espace vital" of Flanders <sup>174</sup>. Further problems arose over the future of Brussels. The accord had made no reference to the capital city and the VNV reiterated its demand that Brussels must form part of the Flemish community. In response, Rex had little choice but to pose as the defender of the interests of francophone Belgium and Degrelle warned that he would not tolerate any Flemish interference in the affairs of Brussels and Wallonia <sup>175</sup>.

These disputes did not prejudice the enactment of the accord but they did reveal the extent to which it was an agreement between parties of very unequal strengths. The VNV - confident of the support of the *Militärverwaltung*

- was in an aggressive and self-assured mood and was not willing to be deflected from its ambitious political goals. Rex, in contrast, was its poor cousin in the collaborationist world. It was in no position to impose its wishes on the VNV or the Germans and it could only hope that its attempt to reach an understanding with the Flemish Nationalists might eventually enable to escape from the impasse in which it was trapped.

Critics of Rex in francophone Belgium were not slow to exploit the weaknesses of the accord and, even in the censored press, reactions to it were largely negative. Journalists such as Colin and Poulet of *Le Nouveau Journal* and De Becker of *Le Soir* stressed that it was an unofficial accord which concerned only its signatories. While obviously of significance within Flanders, they denied that it was of importance in Wallonia. The status of Rex had not been substantially altered and, as it had reached no agreement with the other various Walloon supporters of a New Order, its claim to be the "parti unique wallon" was an absurd presumption. In reality, they argued, Degrelle had merely capitulated to the demands of De Clercq by abandoning his activities in Flanders without obtaining in return any clear guarantees from the VNV regarding the future of francophone Belgium <sup>176</sup>.

Stung by these criticisms, Rexist journalists defended as best they could their agreement with the VNV. José Streel admitted that it was "un texte court et assez banal" which did little more than delimit the respective spheres of influence of Rex and of the VNV. Nevertheless, Streel argued that the accord did mark a first step towards the co-operation between the collaborationist forces of Wallonia and Flanders which would be essential if Belgium was to survive in a German-dominated Europe. Therefore, those self-important New Order journalists who made much of their commitment to a unified Belgian state should

support this imperfect agreement rather than voicing criticisms motivated principally by unsatisfied personal ambition <sup>177</sup>.

Thus, the Rexists and their New Order critics were more divided by the Rex-VNV accord than they had been by any previous issue. Most Rexists - including those, such as Streel, who remained cautious about the wisdom of collaboration with Germany - felt that the agreement was a necessary concession to the Flemish nationalist movement. They regretted the loss of *Rex-Vlaanderen* which, as they had foreseen, did indeed become totally absorbed within the VNV <sup>178</sup>. Nevertheless, they believed that their tentative association with the Flemish nationalists did provide them with the official recognition they craved and they hoped that they would now be able to receive German support. Thus, Rexist circulars boasted of their quasi-official status in Wallonia and warned militants not to tolerate competition from any other New Order groups <sup>179</sup>.

On the other hand, the opponents of Rex considered such arrogance to be ridiculous. In their opinion, the agreement with the VNV demonstrated the degeneration of the Rexist movement and its leader's willingness to make any concessions which offered him some whiff of power. Hence, the accord brought to a head the conflict which had long been looming between Rex and that "moderate" wing of francophone collaboration which controlled the New Order press of Brussels. Although Rex was the only pro-German movement of any size in francophone Belgium, the principal journalists of these newspapers were an influential force within New Order circles and they felt little affection for Degrelle and his followers. Raymond De Becker, the editor-in-chief of *Le Soir*, was the most outspoken of these critics. He had already made a number of thinly disguised attacks on Degrelle <sup>180</sup> and, after the announcement of the Rex-VNV accord, he felt sufficiently confident to launch his own political grouping which he hoped would supplant Rex as the standard-bearer of the New Order



cause in Wallonia. De Becker rapidly won the support of a number of other figures in the Brussels press, including Robert Poulet of *Le Nouveau Journal* who had long advocated the establishment of a broadly based single party. They intended that the basis of support for their movement should be those many francophone Belgians who, they believed, felt some sympathy for New Order ideals. Rex, discredited by its past and by the impulsive behaviour of its leader, had failed to mobilise this penumbra of New Order sympathisers but De Becker was confident that they would rally to an entirely new movement directed by new, disinterested men <sup>181</sup>.

Two meetings were held in De Becker's office at *Le Soir* during May 1941 at which agreement was reached on the structure of the new organisation <sup>182</sup>. Baptised the *Parti des Provinces Romanes*, it stated its commitment to the New European Order and called for the construction of a federal Belgian state based on authoritarian and corporatist principles <sup>183</sup>. As well as De Becker and Poulet, the statutes of the new party were signed by a number of prominent New Order figures including Degrelle's erstwhile advisor, Pierre Daye, the pre-war head of *Verdinaso* in Wallonia, Jacques Boseret, Gabriel Figeys of *Radio Bruxelles* and Henri Bauchau, the founder of the pro-New Order *Service des Volontaires du Travail pour la Wallonie* <sup>184</sup>.

Although the new organisation did not intend immediately to commence public activities <sup>185</sup>, there was no doubt that it posed a serious threat to Rex. Unlike AGRA and Leclercq's MNPW, the *Parti des Provinces Romanes* enjoyed the support of figures of some national standing and had at its disposal the most influential organs of the francophone press. Thus, it was not surprising that its creation should have been strongly criticised by the Rexist leaders. Employing his considerable polemical powers to the full, Degrelle used *Le Pays Réel* to pour scorn on De Becker and his associates. Rex, he thundered, had no intention

of being pushed aside by mediocre journalists who talked of the need to create a new movement as if a political party could be created as easily as a temperance society. In fact, if they had any grasp of political realities, they would recognise that there was no possible alternative to Rex :

"On n'improvise pas un parti, ni surtout un chef. . . Rex peut déplaire, mais un fait est certain, c'est qu'il est seul dans son cas".

Forged by many years of struggle, the Rexists were the indispensable shock troops of the New Order revolution. Certainly, Degrelle admitted, Rex did not command the support of the majority of Belgians but it was determined minorities and not incoherent popular movements which made revolutions. Without Rex, there could be no New Order and Degrelle concluded with a clear warning to his rivals :

". . . nous prétendons, ayant été la révolution vivante, en rester le moteur.  
Nous sommes dans la place, nous y resterons" <sup>186</sup>.

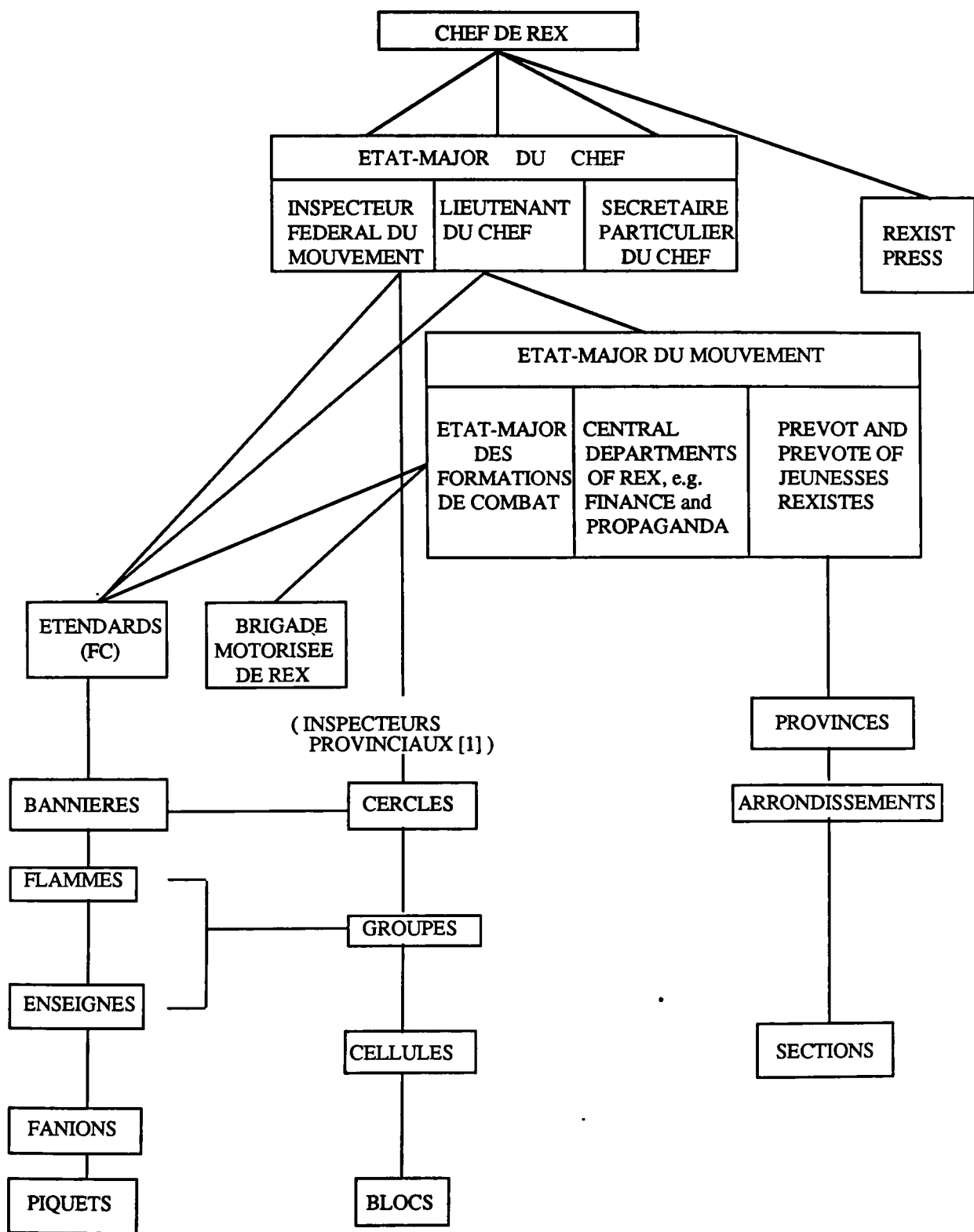
Intimidated perhaps by this outburst, De Becker proposed that he and Degrelle should sign a non-aggression pact whereby both parties would agree not to publish articles critical of each other and would attempt to coordinate their future political activities <sup>187</sup>. Degrelle, however, was in no mood to make concessions to his opponents and, apparently dismissing De Becker's proposal out of hand, he continued to fulminate against the naivety of journalists who believed they could convert their readership into a political force <sup>188</sup>.

Degrelle's invective might intimidate but, as he was only too aware, there was in reality little he could do to frustrate the plans of De Becker and his allies. Only the German authorities possessed the power to determine the success or failure of the new movement. During the early months of the Occupation, relations between the Germans and those Belgians who supported their cause had been cloaked in some ambivalence. The collaborationist groups,

claiming they were the representatives of an important section of the population, had at first sought to negotiate with the German authorities as equals. But during the winter of 1940-41, all such pretensions had evaporated as their reliance upon German patronage had become apparent. Unable to boast of significant popular support, they were forced to gravitate - like moths fluttering around a light - towards the German officials who had become their only source of money, of influence and, ultimately, of power. It was a dependent relationship which dragged them progressively out of the real world of Belgian life into an artificial closed environment somewhat akin to the court of a capricious and wily monarch where they competed as courtiers for the support of the German authorities.

Degrelle had been one of the first to appreciate this reality and, from January 1941 until the final collapse of the Reich, the pursuit of German patronage would be his overriding obsession. The founders of the *Parti des Provinces Romanes* on the other hand persevered in pretending that they were the representatives of a section of the Belgian nation and, in all probability, it was this unrealistic assessment of their own importance which led Reeder to decide against giving his approval to the new movement. The President of the *Militärverwaltung* rightly believed that the vast majority of francophone Belgians were irredeemably hostile to the Germans as well as to their camp followers. Hence, though he continued to predict the collapse of Rex, Reeder held out little hope for the emergence of any new mass movement<sup>199</sup>. De Becker was therefore informed in June that his initiative was premature and that, although consultations between the editors of the francophone New Order press could continue, German approval would not be forthcoming for the *Parti des Provinces Romanes*<sup>200</sup>. A few days later, Reeder made his attitude public. Writing in the *Brüsseler Zeitung*, the *Militärverwaltungschef* stressed that for the foreseeable

FIG. 3 THE STRUCTURE OF REX: MAY - AUGUST 1941



Note: [1] Co-ordinated the activities of *cercles*. Not part of the hierarchy.

future the German authorities would regard Rex and the VNV as the only authorised political movements in Belgium <sup>191</sup>. Faced with such disapproval, De Becker had little choice but to retreat. In August, the meetings of the founders of the new party were suspended and they were never to resume <sup>192</sup>.

Ever anxious for any evidence of German support, the Rexists greeted the decision of the *Militärverwaltung* with undisguised glee <sup>193</sup>. In reality, however, Reeder continued to regard the Rexists with the greatest distrust. In particular, Degrelle's claim that Rex had become the official New Order movement in francophone Belgium exasperated Reeder who remained convinced that Rex was an outmoded and unreliable organisation which could have no long-term role in German plans for the region <sup>194</sup>.

Nevertheless, the agreement with the VNV and the disintegration of De Becker's plans did give Rexist militants some modest cause for hope and during May a substantial reorganisation of the internal structure of the movement took place. In part, these changes were the consequence of the dismantlement of *Rex-Vlaanderen* but they also marked a further stage in Rexist efforts to create an efficient and disciplined movement commensurate with their political ambitions.

As can be seen from Figure Three, the most important change was the abolition of the powerful regions established in February and their replacement by a centralised structure based in Brussels <sup>195</sup>. The *Etat-Major du Chef* remained the centre of political power but it was expanded so as to include not only the *Lieutenant du Chef*, Fernand Rouleau, but also Degrelle's secretary, Félix Francq, as well as the former head of *Rex-Wallonie*, Joseph Pévenasse. He was appointed to the new post of *Inspecteur Fédéral du Mouvement* and, with the assistance of his deputy, Jean Georges, was responsible for the supervision and coordination of all local Rexist activity <sup>196</sup>. Rouleau's responsibilities, on the other hand, remained much more general. As Degrelle's trusted advisor, he

continued to determine the political strategy of Rex as well as supervising the central Rexist offices grouped together in a new *Etat-Major du Mouvement*. These consisted of a number of specialised departments, of which one of the most important proved to be the Propaganda Department directed by Victor Matthys <sup>197</sup>. Changes were also made in the structure of the *Formations de Combat*. In place of the former regional units, the militia was organised into two *Etendards* based in Brussels and Wallonia. They operated under the political control of Rouleau and Pévenasse, who were appointed respectively as *Commandant Fédéral* and *Inspecteur Fédéral* of the *Formations* <sup>198</sup>.

The most durable change introduced in May was the replacement of the former network of *arrondissements* by the approximately 25 *cercles* which were to remain the principal unit of local Rexist organisation throughout the subsequent years of the Occupation. The *cercles* were based in the principal towns of francophone Belgium and they varied considerably in size from the very substantial ones in Brussels, Liège and Charleroi whose meetings were frequently attended by several hundred members to the much smaller *cercles* in some provincial towns. Each *cercle* was subdivided into a number of *groupes* based either on local *quartiers* or in more rural areas on the constituent towns and villages of the *cercle*. In addition, as the Rexist leaders became more conscious of the need to imitate authoritarian models of political organisation, the *groupes* were further divided into *cellules* and *blocs* <sup>199</sup>. The *chefs de cercles* had many and varied responsibilities and, although unpaid volunteers, many of them dedicated themselves totally to their Rexist activities. In each case, they were assisted by a small *Etat-Major* of local assistants as well as by delegates appointed on an *ad hoc* basis to carry out specific tasks <sup>200</sup>.

This reorganisation, although substantial, did not effect the political direction of Rex which remained under the control of the *Lieutenant du*

*Chef*, Fernand Rouleau. The true nature of his ambitions has remained the subject of some controversy. Many regarded Rouleau as an opportunistic adventurer devoid of political idealism who cared less for Rex than for his reputation with the German authorities. José Streel, for example, subsequently referred disparagingly to this period as "l'aventure Rouleau" when Rex had drifted without clear political purpose at the mercy of a leader whose sole intention was the reinforcement of his personal power <sup>201</sup>.

Nevertheless, Rouleau's principal ambitions were in fact clearly evident. First and foremost, he was determined that Rex should commit itself fully to collaboration. Rexists, he believed, must not merely make rhetorical declarations of support for the German cause but should become at every level of the movement the loyal adjuncts of the German authorities. To this end, Rouleau fostered close links with German officials and, as one of the few Rexists to speak German fluently, he acquired a reputation within the movement as "l'homme de la Kommandantur" <sup>202</sup>.

The second priority of the *Lieutenant du Chef* was the internal transformation of the Rexist movement. He had no sympathy for the rather chaotic Rexist traditions inherited from its pre-war political activities and was convinced that the movement must emulate the authoritarian style of the Nazis. Hence, like other pro-German leaders elsewhere in Occupied Europe, Rouleau introduced rituals, uniforms and commands derived from Nazi models whilst also striving to instil a greater respect for procedures and discipline in the somewhat disorderly ranks of Rex <sup>203</sup>.

Rouleau's ascendancy and the nature of his activities continued to inspire resentment amongst certain long-standing militants. Several incidents of dissent arose, most notably in Brussels where a well known Rexist journalist, Carl Suzanne, and some officers of the *Formations de Combat* circulated a

document strongly critical of the *Lieutenant du Chef*. Rouleau, no doubt conscious that he had few personal supporters within the movement, reacted energetically to this relatively minor incident by instigating legal proceedings against his critics, establishing a *tribunal d'honneur* to clear his name and ensuring that Suzanne was expelled from the movement <sup>204</sup>.

Rouleau was able to rebuff such challenges to his authority because he could rely on the support of the *Chef de Rex*. The true nature of Degrelle's relations with his ambitious deputy remain difficult to discern. The former *Chef de Rex* denies that he had any especial confidence in Rouleau and, at times, they were reported to have been in conflict with each other <sup>205</sup>. These disputes do however appear to have been short-lived and on all important matters Degrelle gave his backing to his *Lieutenant*. In truth, the *Chef de Rex* was obsessed with his pursuit of German patronage and he seems to have preferred to devolve responsibility for internal Rexist matters to his deputy.

Moreover, most Rexistists proved remarkably willing to accept the leadership of Rouleau. After the departure of Simoens, there was no serious challenge to his position and, given the difficult political problems they faced, many Rexistists seem to have accepted that the only way forward lay in a closer relationship with the German forces. Collaboration which had been launched as a journalistic flourish by Degrelle was rapidly becoming a fact of daily life for many Rexistists. Quite apart from the burgeoning relations between local officials of the movement and the German authorities and the participation of Rexist drivers in the German NSKK, examples abounded of ordinary militants who volunteered their services to the Germans. Indeed, so common had such advances become, that the Rexist leaders were forced to try and restrain their members from making these individual initiatives <sup>206</sup>.



Rouleau's influence was also evident in the ideological positions adopted by the journalists and propagandists of the movement. As they became ever more fulsome in their praise of the German regime, so Nazi ideas became more evident in their publications. During 1941, a number of long-established Rexist concepts largely disappeared to be replaced by new terms borrowed from Germany. The most important of these imports was "National Socialism". This rapidly came to dominate Rexist rhetoric supplanting the former somewhat vague aspiration for a "New Order" as both the guiding principle and the declared goal of the movement <sup>207</sup>.

This new term was in many ways as vacuous as its predecessor but, with its unambivalently Germanic connotations, its adoption by Rex illustrated the profound change which was taking place in the ideology of the movement. This change went much deeper than any concession to intellectual fashion and, though Rexist propagandists were at pains to stress the continuity in their beliefs, other Rexist documents admitted to the reality of these changes <sup>208</sup>. In matters of ideology, as in so many other fields, the Rexist leaders believed that only by aligning their aspirations more closely with those of Germany could Rex hope to play a role in the New Europe. As Joseph Pévenasse declared to a private meeting of militants in April :

"REX doit être un Mouvement National Socialiste pour entrer dans cette immense confédération européenne [créée] par la main de fer et aussi de justice d'Hitler" <sup>209</sup>.

The impact of these changes was most clearly evident in the political aspirations of the movement. The former ideal of a "révolution des âmes" was gradually replaced by a much harsher vision of a violent revolution which would destroy the power of certain social groups <sup>210</sup>. Dreams of reconciliation and of a new dawn gave way to images of struggle and of incessant conflict and, in practice, a much greater emphasis was given to the destruction of the old than

to the creation of the new. Some articles in the Rexist press continued to dwell on the mystical anti-materialist essence of their revolution <sup>211</sup> but, in general, the focus of Rexist interests turned from the internal to the external and from the spiritual to the concrete. Much of their former concern with the transformation of individual attitudes disappeared to be replaced by bold if somewhat unattractive promises of the material changes which would accompany their revolution. Above all, Rexist propagandists became obsessed with proving that theirs was the truly radical cause. They made much of their socialist inspiration and stressed on every occasion their commitment to a vast social transformation which would benefit the working class <sup>212</sup>.

Not all Rexist welcomed these changes but their impact on the movement was unmistakable. In particular, they deprived Rexistism of much of its former distinctiveness and brought it much closer to the model of German National Socialism. Well advanced by the end of 1941, this progressive incorporation of Rexist ideology into the German mould would proceed still further during the subsequent years of the Occupation <sup>213</sup>.

As the members of Rex moved towards this pro-Nazi definition of their revolution, so they developed a new image of their own role. Instead of regarding themselves as an avant-garde preparing the way for a revolution which would ultimately be enacted by the whole nation, they abandoned any pretence of popular participation. Theirs was the radicalism of the vacuum and, like all such extremists deprived of popular support, they were forced to fall back on a Messianic vision of their own role. The people, they declared, were a "masse. . . amorphe et veule" and even the more moderate Rexist agreed with Degrelle that their revolution would be the work of a dedicated minority <sup>214</sup>. Thus, the Rexist were continually exhorted to regard themselves as a revolutionary elite. Blind loyalty, total dedication and unquestioning obedience

were the qualities extolled by a movement which had lost all faith in human nature and which sought to depersonalise even its own militants. As Matthys, the newly appointed *Chef de Propagande*, declared :

"Ce que nous cherchons, ce que nous voulons, ce sont des soldats, toujours sur le pied de guerre de la révolution. . . Etre rexiste, c'est militer de toutes ses forces, de tout son temps, de toutes ses possibilités et avec une discipline de soldat pour la révolution" <sup>215</sup>.

Their threats of the violent revolution which they intended to accomplish inevitably aggravated relations between Rex and the ruling elite of Belgium but they were generally considered by their intended victims to be more of an irritation than a genuine danger. The pre-war elite still felt able to look on Degrelle and his followers more with disdain than with trepidation and, although there was much apprehension as to long-term German plans for Belgium, they had good reason to be satisfied with their position under the existing Occupation regime. Far from destroying the power of the traditional leaders of Belgian society, the *Militärverwaltung* had - as the collaborationist minority never ceased to complain - deliberately reinforced their authority. The German system of indirect rule in Belgium was based on the principle that, as far as was possible, Belgian society should remain largely unaltered. Thus, many of the notables of pre-war Belgium played a prominent role in public life during the years of the Occupation. Civil servants, industrialists and Church leaders were all the privileged *interlocuteurs* of the German authorities who preferred to work with these established leaders of society rather than risking dangerous experiments with untried adventurers <sup>216</sup>.

The role of the Catholic Church exemplified the powerful position of the established elite within Occupied Belgium. The *Wehrmacht* officials were very conscious of the need to retain good relations with the Catholic hierarchy and did everything within their power to mollify Cardinal Van Roey and his

colleagues <sup>217</sup>. The Rexists, on the other hand, excluded from power chose the path of open conflict with the leaders of the Church. Ever since the failure of Degrelle's efforts in 1940 to obtain the approval of the Church for his activities, *Le Pays Réel* had frequently attacked the anglophile sentiments and *ancien régime* mores of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The Belgian Church, they declared, had been corrupted by its involvement with the democratic political regime and, unlike Catholic leaders elsewhere in Europe, it was unable to recognise that its true interest lay in support for a New Order which would rescue religion from the evils of the modern age <sup>218</sup>. Such arguments partly reflected the origins of Rex as a Catholic protest movement but their denunciations of the Church rivalled those of even the most committed anti-clericals and the movement's pro-Nazi evolution during the winter of 1940-41 had effectively destroyed what remained of Rex's Catholic roots <sup>219</sup>.

Thus, the movement became obsessed with countering manifestations of pernicious ecclesiastical influence and in many parishes Rexists became involved in long-running and often bitter disputes with the local *curé*. In turn, many priests did everything within their power to hinder Rexist activities warning their parishioners of the error of Rexist opinions and refusing to administer communion to those wearing the insignia or uniform of the movement <sup>220</sup>.

These local disputes took on a national dimension in early-1941 when the Church hierarchy issued a series of directives concerning the New Order movements. In response to the disruptive activities of small groups of Rexists and Flemish nationalists in Catholic schools, the pupils of these institutions were forbidden from enrolling in or supporting such organisations. Further, in May, the Cardinal expressly instructed priests not to allow uniformed New Order militants to participate in communion or funeral services <sup>221</sup>. These orders, as

well as the refusal of the Church authorities to allow a memorial ceremony for Joris Van Severen and the comments of Van Roey to an audience of Catholic youth leaders in July, left no doubt as to the stance of the Church and they drew an angry response from much of the pro-German press <sup>222</sup>. It was, however, the journalists of *Le Pays Réel* who were in the vanguard of this campaign claiming that the conflict had been deliberately provoked by a Church which had abandoned all pretence of political neutrality <sup>223</sup>.

The role of arbiter in this dispute fell inevitably to the officials of the *Militärverwaltung*. They had observed with dismay the deterioration in relations between the Church and the collaborationist minority and, to the intense annoyance of the Rexists, they proved more anxious to pacify the Church than to support Rex. Hence, the German authorities apparently suppressed a newspaper article by Degrelle which they judged to be too critical of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and, after negotiations with a representative of the Cardinal, they agreed that the orders issued by the Church could remain in force substantially unaltered <sup>224</sup>. Thus, the manner in which this dispute was resolved demonstrated once again the isolated and impotent position of Rex within Occupied Belgium and, deprived of any means of imposing their will on the Church, Rexist militants resorted to acts of violence against priests who refused to accept their orders <sup>225</sup>.

When in June 1941 the Rexists looked back on the first year of the German Occupation, they could not disguise their sense of disappointment. For them, the year had brought a long and dispiriting series of reverses offset only by brief and largely illusory moments of optimism. Streel, writing on the anniversary of the capitulation of the Belgian armies, expressed the feelings of many when he lamented :

"En Belgique, il y aurait peut-être à faire le bilan de ce qui s'est passé depuis un an. Mais il ne s'est rien passé. Nous avons piétiné sur place, c'est-à-dire reculé. . . on a beaucoup parlé, beaucoup écrit, beaucoup comploté. On tue le temps en attendant que vienne enfin l'heure de l'action" 226.

Events had certainly not worked out as they had hoped. Everywhere they looked the new dawn of 1940 had given way to a military and political stalemate which seemed likely to continue for months or even years. The prospects for change were slight and, more than ever, Degrelle and his colleagues longed for a decisive event which would restore the optimism which they had felt in the summer of 1940 227.

On the morning of 22 June 1941, this wish was suddenly and unexpectedly satisfied. The news of Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union was greeted by the Rexists - as by pro-German groups throughout Europe - as a glorious event which had resolved the ambiguities surrounding the military conflict. The embarrassing *realpolitik* of the Nazi-Soviet Pact was at an end and the war had finally taken on the character of a clear-cut struggle between good and evil. Thus, the Rexists celebrated the declaration of hostilities both as a belated vindication of the stance they had adopted in January as well as a real cause for optimism. They believed that the remaining obstacles to the creation of the New Europe had been swept away and Degrelle hastened to declare his unconditional support for the German armies advancing in the east. Predicting that Hitler would be in Moscow by Bastille Day, the *Chef de Rex* called on his supporters to shed their remaining hesitations :

"Qu'on finisse avec la peur devant les mots ! Nous sommes de toute notre âme avec la jeunesse hitlérienne" 228.

Degrelle's exultant reaction was predictable but of greater significance was the way in which the new declaration of war caused more moderate Rexists to abandon their former caution. Almost overnight, men such as

José Streeel declared their support for the German cause arguing that the war was no longer a conflict between nations but a struggle between the forces of darkness and of light. Henceforth, the only possible victors were Bolshevism or Nazi Germany and, should the former prevail, Europe would be plunged into "un état d'anarchie épouvantable, un chaos d'apocalypse". Thus, he concluded, the fate of all Belgians was inextricably linked to the victory of the German armies and he called on them to regard the war in the East as a crusade for European civilisation <sup>229</sup>.

This argument was not original. Indeed, it has become the standard justification advanced by many of those who have claimed an idealistic motive for their pro-German activities. That it should have been so frequently used was in part due to the image of the Soviet Union which existed in right-wing Catholic circles. Many Rexists had been brought up to regard international Communism as a grave threat to Europe and to the Catholic faith and it was therefore scarcely surprising that they should have responded sympathetically to the German declaration of war. But it was also evident that many other Belgian Catholics did not respond in this way. Although they felt no sympathy for the Soviet cause, most did not suddenly abandon their hostility towards the German invaders, preferring instead to wish a curse on both of the combatants in the new conflict <sup>230</sup>.

Thus, Streeel and those other Rexists who rallied so promptly to the German side in June 1941 did so not only because of their hostility to Communism but because they were already predisposed to support Germany. For them, the German attack on Russia was the event which enabled them to shake off their residual hesitations. Already considered by their compatriots to be *de facto* supporters of Germany, they now passed from a superficially neutral acceptance of the German Occupation to positive support for the Nazi cause.

For Degrelle, Rouleau and their colleagues, the war in the East had no such significance. They had long since entered the German camp and they welcomed the new conflict principally as a propaganda *coup* which presented new opportunities for personal advancement. Degrelle has often described his pleasure on learning of the German attack on Russia. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, he has written, he found himself confronted by a miracle which would enable Rex to escape from :

"l'année de déboires, de tergiversations et même d'humiliations que nous avons connue d'août 1940 à août 1941" <sup>231</sup>.

Thus, from the outset, Degrelle was determined to exploit the war in Russia to his own ends. As we have seen, he had long believed that only by participating directly in the military conflict could Rex attract the support of the German leaders and it seems that, almost as soon as he learnt of the attack on the Soviet Union, he decided to repeat his request to be allowed to create a volunteer unit to fight alongside the Germans <sup>232</sup>. Moreover, Degrelle had more reason to believe that on this occasion his proposal would be favourably received. Foreign volunteers would provide much needed manpower for the new front as well as assisting the efforts of Nazi propagandists to portray the conflict as a crusade for European civilisation. In addition, although the *Chef de Rex* appears to have acted in isolation, he was not the only collaborationist figure to be thinking in such terms. Pro-German leaders elsewhere in Occupied Europe were also contemplating sending volunteers to fight in Russia and Degrelle's proposal was only one of several that the Germans received after the declaration of war <sup>233</sup>.

The *Chef de Rex* seems, however, to have been unable to present his proposal directly to the German authorities. On 26 June, he left for a visit to Paris and, in his absence, it fell to Rouleau to contact the



*Militärverwaltung* <sup>234</sup>. Not surprisingly, their initial reaction was discouraging. Quite apart from their distrust of the Rexists, the *Wehrmacht* officers of the *Militärverwaltung* were not inclined to consider sympathetically the enrolment of inexperienced foreign volunteers in the German armies <sup>235</sup>. The Rexists did not, however, allow the matter to drop. Degrelle had undoubtedly learnt in Paris of the plans to create a corps of French volunteers and, on his return to Brussels, he seconded enthusiastically the efforts of his *Lieutenant* <sup>236</sup>. At length, their persistence was rewarded. In early-July, the *Militärverwaltung* - acting in all probability on instructions from Berlin - gave permission for the Rexists to create a unit composed exclusively of francophone Belgian volunteers. In exultant mood, Degrelle announced this success to a meeting of the *Formations de Combat* in Brussels on 6 July. Never before, he proclaimed with his usual gusto, had such an opportunity been presented to Belgian youth. They would be able to participate in the most glorious military campaign in history and would return to Belgium as the conquering heroes of the New Europe <sup>237</sup>.

Behind such rhetoric, however, there lay uncertainty and unease. The *Corps Franc "Wallonie"* - or *Légion "Wallonie"*, as it soon came to be known - did not accord in every respect with the wishes of the Rexists. They had proposed the creation of a Belgian unit but the ethnic sensibilities of the VNV and of the *Militärverwaltung* excluded such a possibility, and, although they continued to lobby in July for the establishment of a single Belgian corps, Degrelle and Rouleau were eventually forced to accept the creation of entirely separate Flemish and Walloon units <sup>238</sup>. Moreover, much else regarding the proposed *Légion Wallonie* remained unclear. In their haste to receive German approval for the unit, the Rexist leaders seem to have preferred to leave unresolved many of the more contentious issues. Thus, the uniforms of the new unit, the oaths which would be demanded of its members and the exact nature of its relationship with

the German armies were all matters which were studiously avoided when the creation of the *Légion* was announced <sup>239</sup>.

For Degrelle and Rouleau, the overriding consideration was that the new unit should be created as rapidly as possible. The *Chef de Rex* was convinced that the German armies would defeat the Soviet forces within a matter of weeks and he was determined that the *Légion* should reach Russia in time to participate in the final battles. *Ad hoc* recruitment offices were therefore opened and in mid-July Degrelle began a tour of francophone Belgium to enrol volunteers <sup>240</sup>.

The arguments which he advanced to justify the establishment of the *Légion* soon took on the form of a familiar litany. Anti-communism and support for the ideals of a New Europe both featured prominently but Degrelle always portrayed the new unit as primarily patriotic in purpose. It was on the battlefields of the east, he declared, that the structure of the New European Order would be decided and it was essential that Belgians must participate in this collective effort. By fighting shoulder to shoulder with German troops, the *légionnaires* would win the respect and confidence of the Nazi leaders and ensure a place for Belgium in a German-dominated Europe. Thus, the danger of obliteration which had hung over Belgium since May 1940 would be removed <sup>241</sup>.

In his post-war writings, Degrelle has frequently returned to this argument stressing how the *Légion* was essentially a means of forcing the attention of the German leaders upon Belgium <sup>242</sup>. At the time, however, few of his compatriots seem to have been impressed by his rhetoric. Most Belgians dismissed the *Légion Wallonie* as the last desperate throw of a discredited adventurer and, although German and Rexist propagandists boasted of the crowds which had besieged the recruiting offices of the *Légion* <sup>243</sup>, few in fact responded to Degrelle's invitation. Even when compared with the modest

achievements of the units being created elsewhere in Europe, the initial success of the *Légion Wallonie* was very limited <sup>244</sup>. Indeed, Degrelle even appears to have had difficulty in winning the support of committed Rexistists for his new venture and a strongly-worded circular had to be issued to militants warning them not to shirk their duty <sup>245</sup>.

Many, however, remained unconvinced that the new unit would be truly Belgian in character and Degrelle attempted to assuage these anxieties by ensuring that as far as possible the outward insignia of the *Légion* reflected its patriotic purpose. Thus, he convinced a reluctant *Militärverwaltung* that the Rexist Burgundian Cross and not the *Coq Wallon* should be the flag of the *Légion* and that the *Wehrmacht* uniforms of the volunteers should be emblazoned with a badge in the colours of the Belgian tricolour. In addition, it was agreed that French would be the language of command within the *Légion* and that effective operational control would remain in the hands of its Belgian officers <sup>246</sup>. These concessions did, however, provide only a thin veneer of patriotic credibility and for many Rexistists the most important stumbling-block remained the German uniforms to be worn by the *légionnaires*. Donning the uniform of the conqueror was a step which few - even within Rex - were willing to contemplate and some recruits have subsequently claimed that Degrelle misled them by leading them to believe that they would in fact be allowed to wear Belgian army uniforms <sup>247</sup>.

The *Chef de Rex* and his *Lieutenant* seem to have been similarly unscrupulous regarding the contentious issue of the King's attitude towards the new unit. Any indication of support on the part of Léopold III would of course have been of enormous value to Degrelle and he dispatched Pierre Daye to the palace at Laeken to sound out the King's advisors <sup>248</sup>. Daye was received by Comte Capelle on 15 July but, not surprisingly, his proposal that the King make a public gesture of support for the *Légion* was rejected. Daye did, however,

claim that Capelle expressed his sympathy for the courage and ideals of the *légionnaires* - an assertion which Capelle strenuously denied after the war <sup>249</sup>. In fact, much probably depended on the interpretation of certain guarded comments made by the King's advisor. Since 1940, Léopold III's entourage had become considerably more wary in their political initiatives and they had little reason to look with favour on Degrelle's activities. Rumours of disparaging remarks made by Degrelle about the King had reached Laeken and his rash adventurism had done much to undermine the more circumspect efforts of the King to reach an understanding with the Nazi leaders <sup>250</sup>.

Nevertheless, the suspicion remains that Capelle may have been less cautious in his comments to Daye than he cared to remember after the war. Although Capelle was subsequently able to point to examples of men whom he had advised not to volunteer for the *Légion*, his attitude was not one of clear-cut disapproval. During his regular conversations with Robert Poulet, Capelle apparently indicated his sympathy for the idealism of certain *légionnaires* and there were persistent rumours both within Rex and the *Légion* that not all of those who had sought the advice of the court had been discouraged from fighting in Russia <sup>251</sup>.

What is nevertheless clear beyond any doubt is that Degrelle and Rouleau set about manufacturing the impression that the King had privately given his blessing for the creation of the *Légion* <sup>252</sup>. Rouleau, never one to be constrained by scruples, went a stage further, producing a forged letter purporting to be written by Comte Capelle and which expressed the King's support for the *Légion*. Widely distributed amongst the *légionnaires*, the existence of this fake did not fail to become known to the King's advisors. They called Rouleau to Laeken but Degrelle's deputy prudently chose to ignore this summons <sup>253</sup>.

These unscrupulous tactics clearly demonstrated the sense of desperation felt by Degrelle and his deputy. The creation of the *Légion Wallonie*, far from returning Rex to the centre of Belgian political life, was in danger of proving a dismal failure. Although a certain number of Belgians were undoubtedly attracted by the idea of a crusade against the Bolshevik peril, only the most idealistic or naïve of these anti-Communists were in practice willing to be associated with a military unit which seemed to be little more than a vehicle for the ambitions of the *Chef de Rex*.

Thus, the *Légion* failed to attract more than a handful of non-Rexist volunteers and during the last two weeks of the recruitment campaign Degrelle concentrated instead on enrolling men from within the ranks of his political movement. He boasted - somewhat belatedly - of how the *Légion* would be composed almost exclusively of Rexist and attempted to bully even journalists such as José Streel and Jean Denis into joining the unit <sup>254</sup>. Many Rexist, however, were still reluctant to participate in a distant military campaign and in a bid to win them over Degrelle was forced into taking a step which proved to be of decisive importance both for his future and that of Rex. At a meeting in Liège on 20 July, the *Chef de Rex* suddenly announced that he would himself join the *Légion* <sup>255</sup>.

This dramatic gesture was apparently an impulsive move undertaken, so Degrelle has claimed, without warning either the German authorities or even his family <sup>256</sup>. Nevertheless, it immediately transformed the attitudes of many ordinary Rexist towards the *Légion*. Despite Degrelle's impassioned rhetoric, they had until then looked on it as a temporary initiative of no great importance. But the example of their leader himself enrolling, despite his total lack of any military training, in the new unit as well as his refusal to accept any special treatment from the German authorities in favour of serving as an

ordinary soldier <sup>257</sup> undoubtedly convinced many that it was their duty to accompany the *Chef* in his new venture.

Thus, on the appointed date of departure of 8 August approximately 850 volunteers assembled on the Place Royale in Brussels <sup>258</sup>. They differed considerably in age and in appearance but many were wearing Rexist uniforms and, according to the best estimates, about 730 members of the unit were in fact Rexist, most of them drawn from the *Formations de Combat* <sup>259</sup>. Alongside them stood only a small number of other volunteers. About 30 were members of the extremist anti-semitic movement *Défense du Peuple* while others were young idealistic Catholics, enthusiastic anti-communists, Russian exiles or workers disillusioned with Communism. A few, on the other hand, were no more than simple adventurers who saw in the *Légion* merely an opportunity to escape from material, judicial or domestic difficulties <sup>260</sup>.

These recruits and their supporters gathered first in the Palais des Beaux Arts to hear a flamboyant oration from Degrelle which, amidst the shifting sands of Rexist opportunism, subsequently came to be treasured by his followers as a rare expression of their central beliefs. What they particularly welcomed in this speech was the emphasis which Degrelle placed on patriotism. Responding directly to the charge of treason which had dogged them since their espousal of collaboration, he claimed for the Rexist the mantle of the true patriots in Occupied Belgium. Unlike those who preferred to cling to outmoded beliefs or to unrealistic dreams, the *légionnaires*, Degrelle declared, were departing to the East as lucid and realistic nationalists determined to win a place for their country in the New Europe <sup>261</sup>.

The rapturous reception which his speech received indicated that most Rexist continued to prefer to regard themselves not as the soldiers of some National Socialist revolution but as patriots serving their nation in a time of

trial. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the creation of the *Légion* was that it was accompanied within Rex by a return to a more moderate and patriotic basis for their actions. For the first time since the summer of 1940, the Rexists felt confident that they could justify their actions in patriotic terms and, after the frustrations of the previous winter, there was a general feeling of relief that they had succeeded in returning to the right course.

The patriotic arguments they advanced did, however, rest on the flimsiest of bases. Nothing could disguise the total dependence of the *Légion* on the German authorities and the nationalist veneer Degrelle sought to give to the unit was at every turn contradicted by the circumstances of its creation. Thus, when the *Chef de Rex* boasted on 8 August of the patriotism of the new soldiers, he did so standing beneath a huge photograph of the German Fuhrer and, in reality, the entire cost of the recruitment campaign had been met from German funds. Even the military band which played the Belgian national anthem during the march past of the *légionnaires* was that of the *Wehrmacht* <sup>262</sup>.

Thus, if the immediate impact of the formation of the *Légion* was to give to Rex a more moderate air, its more lasting effect was to deepen still further the gulf between the Rexists and their compatriots by drawing them into an ever closer relationship with the German authorities. Military collaboration was, above all, an act of free will. No constraint - moral or material - was involved and no problems of definition would trouble those called upon after the war to judge the *légionnaires*. To don the uniform of the conqueror was an unambivalent act and one with a long lineage in European history. Thus, the *Légion* stands as a clear symbol of the willingness of the Rexists to serve the Nazi cause and, despite their protestations of their patriotic intent, they soon found themselves drawn into an embrace with the Germans which would ultimately be sealed in blood.

For the majority of pro-Allied Belgians, there could be no excuse for serving in the German armies. To assist the invader for whatever reasons was a monstrous crime and this attitude of popular incomprehension was evident during the march by the *légionnaires* through the streets of Brussels to the Gare du Nord. Although a large crowd of curious onlookers had gathered to witness the bizarre spectacle, they manifested little sympathy for the new soldiers and local police officers apparently chose to turn their backs on the volunteers <sup>263</sup>.

For the Rexists, on the other hand, the departure of the *légionnaires* was a moment charged with emotion. After the enforced idleness of the winter, they at last had the opportunity to act and the commemoration of the emotional events of 8 August subsequently became a major ritual in the Rexist calendar <sup>264</sup>. Few of those who gathered in the fine rain to watch the *légionnaires* depart could, however, have imagined the future which lay in store for the untried soldiers. Degrelle had spoken with his usual bravura of his willingness to die for his beliefs but he had privately reassured his fellow volunteers that they would be no more than *soldats de propagande* serving behind the front lines before participating in the victory parades in liberated Moscow <sup>265</sup>. In fact, the war in the east proved to be anything other than a brief if exotic blitzkrieg. The *Légion* was never to return from the front for more than periods of recuperation and, within a few months, many of its members were to die in obscure and bloody battles on the killing fields of the Ukraine. Degrelle, with his customary good fortune, escaped virtually unscathed from all these battles but the *Légion*, far from acting as a springboard for the anticipated acquisition of power became - like some monstrous cuckoo - the *raison d'être* of Rex, continually depriving the movement of its energy, manpower and resources. Thus, for the new soldiers, the optimistic new dawn of August



1941 proved to be merely the prelude to a long nightmare from which only death or the end of the war in 1945 would give some form of release.

### Footnotes : Chapter Two

- (1) JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. See also Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, p. 59, C2GM ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, pp. 252 and 257.
- (2) Bulletin du mouvement rexiste No. 3, 30 Nov. 1940, C2GM, C 11/164.
- (3) *Ibid.* No. 4, 20 Dec. 1940, C2GM, C 11/165 ; *Le P.R.* 13 Dec. 1940, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (4) Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, p. 57, C2GM.
- (5) *Le P.R.* 1 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Salut à 1941'.
- (6) *Ibid.*
- (7) See P.M. Dioudonnat *Je suis partout*, p. 358.
- (8) e.g. *Journal des Tribunaux* 6 May 1945, p. 322, 'Conseil de Guerre de Liège'.
- (9) J. Streel 'Analyse de l'acte d'accusation : première suite' p. 11, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (10) *Le P.R.* 18 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex' ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, p. 455.
- (11) TB 13, 2 Feb. 1941, p. 1149. Other estimates of the attendance varied between 6,000 and 12,000 : P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis I*, 239 ; *Le P.R.* 8 Jan. 1941, p. 3, 'Le rassemblement rexiste et la presse'.
- (12) TB 13, 2 Feb. 1941, p. 1149 ; J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, pp. 383-385.
- (13) *Le Soir* 6 Jan. 1941, p. 2, 'La manifestation rexiste de Liège' ; *Le P.R.* 7 Jan. 1941, p. 3, 'Le rassemblement de Liège'.
- (14) 'Faits et anecdotes...' 18 June 1941, C2GM, PD 40 ; *La Meuse* 2 July 1946, p. 2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre'.
- (15) *Le P.R.* 7 Jan. 1941, p. 3, 'Le rassemblement de Liège' ; *La Légia* 6 Jan. 1941, pp. 1 and 3, 'Un rassemblement rexiste'.
- (16) *Ibid.*
- (17) *Ibid.*
- (18) *Ibid.* ; *Le P.R.* 7 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'A Liège devant 10,000 militants...'.
- (19) P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis I*, 236 and 239 ; Ch. d'Ydewalle *Degrelle ou la triple imposture*, p. 183.
- (20) P. De Mont to Daye 4 Jan. [1941], C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye.
- (21) *Le Nouveau Journal* 3 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'L'Occupant et nous' ; R. Poulet *Histoire du Nouveau Journal* p. 28 (Private Collection).
- (22) General Van Overstraeten *Sous le joug*, p. 113.
- (23) *Ibid.*, p. 117 ; P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis I*, 238-239 ; *Le P.R.* 15 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Manoeuvres et provocations'.
- (24) *La Légia* 4-5 Jan. 1941, p. 3, 'Le rassemblement rexiste...' ; *Le P.R.* 7 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'A Liège devant 10,000 militants...'.
- (25) General Van Overstraeten *Op. cit.*, p. 117 ; TB 13, 2 Feb. 1941, p. 1150.
- (26) General Van Overstraeten *Op. cit.*, p. 117 ; Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, p. 58, C2GM.
- (27) General Van Overstraeten *Op. cit.*, p. 119 ; *La Meuse* 12 Dec. 1945, p. 1, 'Joseph Mignolet...' ; R. Vincent to Daye 31 Jan. 1941, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye ; Interview with M. Paul Jamin 11 Dec. 1987.
- (28) *L'Avenir du Luxembourg* 10 May 1946, p. 1, 'Au Conseil de Guerre d'Arлон'.
- (29) *Le P.R.* 5 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Collaborer'.
- (30) *Ibid.* ; *Le Soir* 30 Jan. 1941, pp. 1-2, 'Les trois mobiles...'.
- (31) Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, pp. 59 and 63, C2GM.
- (32) Albert Constant Pro Just., 2 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 86-87.
- (33) R. Poulet *Histoire du Nouveau Journal* pp. 28-29 (Private Collection).
- (34) *Le Soir* 4 June 1947, p. 5, 'Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles'.

- (35) Radio Vatican 14 Feb. 1941 cited in BBC Daily Digest of Foreign Broadcasts 14 Feb. 1941, C26M, Fonds INBEL/732.
- (36) *Le P.R.*, 30 Jan. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement' and 4 Feb. 1941, p. 1, 'Occupants et hitlériens' and p. 3, 'Le Chef de Rex...'
- (37) *Le P.R.*, 18 Feb. 1941 and 4 Mar. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex'.
- (38) *Le P.R.*, 4 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Le Chef de Rex...'. See also *Le P.R.*, 30 Jan. and 28 Feb. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (39) *Le P.R.*, 11 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex'.
- (40) *Le Soir* 7 June 1946, p. 3, 'Les Conseils de Guerre' and 14 June 1946, p. 2, 'Les Conseils de Guerre'; E. De Bens *De Belgische dagbladders*, pp. 149-151; J. De Launay *Histoires secrètes de la Belgique* (Paris, 1975), p. 219.
- (41) JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (42) *Le P.R.*, 19 Feb. 1941, p. 1, 'Pourquoi vous aurez faim', 1 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Et la Belgique?' and 4 Mar. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex'.
- (43) *Le P.R.*, 4 Jan. 1941, p. 2, 'Billet de Charleroi', 18 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Sous le signe du désordre nouveau', 27 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Billet de Verviers' and 4 Mar. 1941, p. 3, 'Nominations partisans à Soignies'.
- (44) *Le P.R.*, 18 Feb. 1941, p. 1, 'Il faut en finir', 23 Feb. 1941 Magazine, p. 1, 'Les bâtisseurs de l'Ordre Nouveau', 25 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex', 4 Mar. 1941, p. 4, 'Le Collège échevinal de Liège...' and 19 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'La Révolution doit être faite...'
- (45) TB 12, 3 Jan. 1941, pp. 1021-1022; P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, pp. 36-38.
- (46) Material distress and Nazi propaganda also led considerable numbers of Belgians to volunteer in the early years of the Occupation to work in factories in Germany.
- (47) *Le P.R.*, 7 Jan. 1941, p. 3, 'Le rassemblement de Liège' and 23 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Parti unique?' Degrelle held 12 meetings during the first three months of 1941, addressing audiences as large as 1,000.
- (48) *Le P.R.*, 11 Feb., 25 Feb. and 4 Mar. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex' and 12 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Le meeting de Frameries'; TB 14, 2 Mar. 1941, p. 1311.
- (49) *Le P.R.*, 31 Dec. 1940, p. 1, 'Léon Degrelle a parlé...' and 24 Jan. 1941, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement'; Bulletin du mouvement rexiste No. 5, 25 Jan. 1941, C26M, C 11/166.
- (50) *Le P.R.*, 23 Jan. 1941, p. 2, 'Rex accueille...' and 25 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex'; Pévenasse circular to militants 17 Feb. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Doct. 90bis.
- (51) Bulletin des dirigeants 20 May 1941, C26M, C 11/99.
- (52) Journal de V. Matthys p. 4, C26M.
- (53) See, for example J. Gotovitch 'Du Collectivisme au Plan de Travail' in *1885-1985 : Du Parti Ouvrier Belge au Parti Socialiste* (Brussels, 1985), pp. 123-143.
- (54) Charles Nisolle Pro Just., 18-25 June 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Charles Lambinon, Inst., Doct. 47-56. See also *Le P.R.*, 7 Dec. 1941, p. 1, 'Les nouveaux députés permanents...'; B. Deltord 'A propos de quelques "chapelles"...', *Cahiers X*, 171; C. Legein 'Le Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire (Le Mouvement Trotskyiste en Belgique de 1936 à 1939)' (Université Catholique de Louvain Mémoire de licence 1982), pp. 363-364.
- (55) *Ibid*; *Le P.R.*, 4 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Le Chef de Rex fait acclamer...'; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, p. 185.
- (56) R. Lefebvre 'Dauge et le Daugeisme' (Université Libre de Bruxelles Mémoire de licence 1979).
- (57) *Ibid.*, p. 80; Journal de V. Matthys p. 4, C26M; *Le P.R.*, 9 Jan. 1941, p. 3, 'La réunion rexiste de Liège'.
- (58) P. Hubermont 'Mes procès de classe', C26M, W 3/72; Charles Nisolle Pro Just., 18-25 June 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Charles Lambinon, Inst., Doct. 47-56; *Le Soir* 1 May 1941, p. 1, 'Fécondité du mouvement ouvrier...'; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 203-207.
- (59) G. Figeys Carnets 3 Mar. 1946, pp. 89-90, C26M, JP 093.
- (60) *Ibid*; *Le P.R.*, 5 July 1944, p. 2, 'Walter Dauge a été abattu'. In May 1941, Dauge was described in Rexist documents as the *Chef* of the Rexist trade union (the *Ordre du Travail*

- Nationale-Socialiste*) but he was never active in this organisation : EM du Chef de Rex 12 May 1941, C2GM, C 11/98.
- (61) R. Lefebvre *Op. cit.*, pp. 80-83 ; *Le P.R.* 14 Feb. 1942, p. 3, 'W. Dauge affirme qu'il est innocent' ; C. Legein *Op. cit.*, p. 326.
- (62) Marcel Destrain Pro Just., 31 July 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 91-99. See also G. Figeys Carnets 3 Mar. 1946, pp. 90-91, C2GM, JP 093 ; R. Lefebvre *Op. cit.*, pp. 82-83 ; *Le P.R.* 5 July 1944, p. 2, 'Walter Dauge a été abattu'.
- (63) M. Lorneau 'Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement trotskyite belge 1939-1960' (Université de Liège Mémoire de licence 1983), p. 301.
- (64) Notably Vallée and Nisolle. Frequent reference was made in the Rexist press to the presence of a number of former supporters of the extreme-left in the *Légion Wallonie* ; e.g. *Le P.R.* 30 July 1941, p. 1, 'La croisade contre le bolchevisme' and 28 Sept. 1941, p. 3, 'Entre camarades'. See also G. Figeys Carnets 3 Mar. 1946, pp. 89-93, C2GM, JP 093.
- (65) *Le P.R.* 31 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Le combat indispensable...', 11 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex' and 19 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Il y a un an...'
- (66) *Le P.R.* 23 Feb. 1941, p. 1, 'Magistrature couchée', 11 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'La Révolution se fait' and 30 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Le présent et Rex'.
- (67) *Le P.R.* 28 Jan. 1941, p. 2, 'Prestation de serment...', 4 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Le Chef de Rex fait acclamer...', 11 and 18 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex' and 23 Feb. 1941, p. 1, 'Formations de Combat' ; TB 14, 2 Mar. 1941, p. 1312.
- (68) TB 13, 2 Feb. 1941, p. 1150.
- (69) *Ibid* ; TB 14, 2 Mar. 1941, p. 1311 ; TB 16, 9 May 1941, pp. 1647-1648.
- (70) General von Falkenhausen *Mémoires d'outre-guerre* (Brussels, 1974), p. 300 ; Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, p. 75, C2GM ; Souvenirs de H. Forsteneichner p. 1, C2GM, PF 3.
- (71) Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry reiterated to the German press on 7 January that they should ignore the declarations of Degrelle : W. Boelcke *Kriegspropaganda 1939-1941* (Stuttgart, 1966), p. 597.
- (72) e.g. *Le P.R.* 19 Jan. 1941, p. 1, '"Un artisan de l'Europe nouvelle"'.  
 (73) A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers V*, 46-47.  
 (74) P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis I*, 274 ; Radio Vatican 14 Feb. 1941 cited in BBC Daily Digest of Foreign Broadcasts 14 Feb. 1941, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/732.  
 (75) J. Streeel 'Au sujet de l'article 115' [p. 16], C2GM, Fonds José Streeel.  
 (76) Bulletin du mouvement rexiste No. 6, 1 Mar. 1941, C2GM, C 11/167 ; Chef de Rex-Wallonie to Rexist militants 2 Mar. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse, Doct. 914.  
 (77) *Ibid* ; TB 14, 2 Mar. 1941, p. 1312.  
 (78) Chef de Rex-Wallonie to Chef de la Province de Namur 5 Mar. 1941 and Chef de Rex-Wallonie to Cdt. Régional FC de la Wallonie 24 Mar. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse, Docts. 914 and 913 ; *Le P.R.* 13 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.  
 (79) *Le P.R.* 27 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement' ; Constant to Cdt. Jacobs 24 Apr. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 12. See also pp. 405-406.  
 (80) Cited in A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers IV*, 41.  
 (81) L. Degrelle *Hitler pour mille ans*, p. 104 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 459-461.  
 (82) J. Streeel 'Au sujet de l'article 115' [pp. 4-6], C2GM, Fonds José Streeel. See also A. De Jonghe *Op. cit.*, V, 46.  
 (83) General Van Overstraeten *Sous le joug*, pp. 122-123.  
 (84) See pp. 53-56.  
 (85) Bulletin du mouvement rexiste No. 6, 1 Mar. 1941, C2GM, C 11/167.  
 (86) e.g. Bulletin du mouvement rexiste No. 5, 25 Jan. 1941, C2GM, C 11/166 ; *Le P.R.* 29 Jan. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.  
 (87) See note 85 ; *Le P.R.* 1 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.  
 (88) TB 15, 7 Apr. 1941, p. 1466 ; JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.  
 (89) See note 85.  
 (90) TB 15, 7 Apr. 1941, p. 1466.

- (91) *La Meuse* 4 Dec. 1946, p. 2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre' ; TB 16, 9 May 1941, p. 1647.
- (92) See p. 55. See also note 85.
- (93) *Le P.R.* 26 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement' ; Leclercq to Pévenasse 3 Apr. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse, Doct. 921 ; TB 16, 9 May 1941, p. 1647.
- (94) 'Propositions confidentielles du Chef du MNPW à Monsieur le Capitaine Dalldorff...' 26 May 1942, C2GM, C 13/7.
- (95) See note 91 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 508-509.
- (96) Dalldorff to OFK 589 30 May 1941 and to Propaganda Abteilung Belgien 9 July 1941 and 6 Oct. 1941, C2GM, C 13/4 and C 13/5.2 ; 'Rapport à Monsieur Dalldorff...', C2GM, C 13/5.1 ; *La Légia* 13 Oct. 1941, p. 2, 'Une réunion du Mouvement National Populaire Wallon'.
- (97) Only two liégeois Rexists of importance - Sabatier and Defraigne - appear to have joined the MNPW : Région de Bruxelles Bulletin du 20 décembre 1940, C2GM, C 11/91 ; Leclercq to Dalldorff 1 May 1941 and 'Rapport à Monsieur Dalldorff...', C2GM, C 13/1 and C 13/5.1 ; Documentation Jans 313 ; *La Meuse* 2 Nov. 1945, p. 2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre' and 24 Feb. 1947, p. 2, 'Cour Militaire'.
- (98) See pp. 218-221.
- (99) W. Ganshof van der Meersch *Réflexions sur la répression des crimes contre la sûreté extérieure de l'état belge* (Brussels, 1946), p. 36 ; Documentation Jans 1.
- (100) *Ibid* ; Documentation Jans 73.
- (101) *Ibid* ; Report of Propaganda Abteilung Liège 27 Aug. 1941, C2GM, C 5/23.
- (102) TB 18, 21 Dec. 1941, p. 2120 ; Gaillard to KK of Namur 22 Apr. 1943, C2GM, C 5/27. See also pp. 221-223.
- (103) Bulletin du mouvement rexiste No. 6, 1 Mar. 1941, C2GM, C 11/167.
- (104) *Le P.R.* 1 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement' ; Constant to Chef de Rex-Wallonie 17 May 1941 and Albert Constant Pro Just., 2 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 35 and 86-87.
- (105) Albert Constant Pro Just., 18 Apr. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 219-220.
- (106) LD to Officials of FC (Flanders), C2GM, C 11/269 ; Louis Richard Pro Just., 12 July 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Doct. 1-5.
- (107) LD to Officials of FC (Flanders) 16 Apr. 1941, C2GM, C 11/269 ; *Le P.R.* 19 Apr. 1941, p. 2, 'De Beweging in Vlaanderen' ; TB 16, 9 May 1941, pp. 1646-1647.
- (108) *Le Soir* 14 Feb. 1947, p. 5, 'Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles'.
- (109) *Le P.R.* 22 Apr. 1941, p. 3, 'Préparons-nous pour l'après-guerre !' and 24 Apr. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (110) See note 103 ; *Le P.R.* 27 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement' ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, p. 461.
- (111) TB 16, 9 May 1941, pp. 1648-1649.
- (112) See note 103.
- (113) *Le P.R.* 15 and 26 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement' ; Rex-Wallonie Bulletin des dirigeants 15 Apr. 1941, C2GM, C 11/321.3 ; Speech by Pévenasse [12 Apr. 1941], Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse.
- (114) The *arrondissements* were occasionally described as *groupes*.
- (115) See note 113 ; Untitled article by Pévenasse, C2GM, C 11/321.5 ; Documentation Jans 126 ; *Le P.R.* 31 Jan. and 8 Apr. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (116) Documentation Jans 126 ; Speech by Pévenasse [12 Apr. 1941], Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse ; *Le P.R.* 28 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (117) Historique de l'organisation des FC and Constant to FC units [Apr. 1941], C2GM, C 11/263 and C 11/264 ; Constant to Chef de Rex-Wallonie 3 Mar. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 32.
- (118) P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, pp. 34-36 ; Anonymous report 'La situation à la fin de septembre 1941', C2GM, W 3/37.
- (119) A. Delattre *Mes Souvenirs*, p. 231.
- (120) J. Willequet *La Belgique sous la botte*, pp. 104-109.

- (121) *Le P.R.* 15 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Manoeuvres et provocations' ; R. Verlaine *Sans haine et sans gloire* (Liège, n.d.), pp. 175 and 181.
- (122) TB 15, 7 Apr. 1941, p. 1465.
- (123) *Vers l'Avenir* 13 Feb. 1946, p. 3, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur' ; *L'Avenir du Luxembourg* 10 May 1946, p. 1, 'Au Conseil de Guerre d'Arion' ; Police d'Ixelles Ordre de Service, C2GM, PV 18.
- (124) Charles Nisolle Pro Just., 18-25 June 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Charles Lambinon, Inst., Doct. 47-56 ; Raymond Camby Pro Just., 17 July 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 22-36.
- (125) TB 15, 7 Apr. 1941, pp. 1465-1466 ; *Le P.R.* 4 Mar. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex' and 12 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Le meeting de Frameries' ; *Vers l'Avenir* 16-17 Mar. 1946, p. 2, 'Léon Degrelle à Namur' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Dons *La Belgique sous les Nazis I*, 401-402.
- (126) *Le P.R.* 13 May 1941, p. 2, 'Des antirexistes arrêtés à Anhée'.
- (127) 'Faits et anecdotes...exposés par le Capitaine BEM Monjoie' 18 June 1941, C2GM, PD 40 ; P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, p. 68.
- (128) Backx to LD 3 Nov. 1941, C2GM, C 11/279 ; Interview between Jean Verneire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, pp. 59-63, C2GM ; R. Verlaine *Sans haine et sans gloire*, p. 175.
- (129) Backx to LD 3 Nov. 1941, C2GM, C 11/279.
- (130) Bulletin du mouvement rexiste No. 5, 25 Jan. 1941, C2GM, C 11/166 ; *Le P.R.* 14 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (131) Membership card 1941, C2GM, C 11/323.15. See also Documentation Jans 83.
- (132) *Le P.R.* 29 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Les FC anversois...', 14 Mar. 1941, p. 3, 'Devant la carence des autorités...', 18 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'La police de St. Gilles...' and 27 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (133) *La Meuse* 1 July 1946, p. 2, 'Les agresseurs du bourgmestre Duchatto...', 2 July 1946, p. 2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre' and 3 July 1946, p. 2, 'Les agresseurs de Michel Duchatto...'.
- (134) *Le P.R.* 27 Feb. 1941, p. 6, 'Une bonne leçon...et un exemple', 1 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Les bienfaits de la crevache', 17 May 1941, p. 3, 'Le Conseil de Discipline...' and 25 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Notre camarade Pévenasse...'.
- (135) Dreumont to Cdts. de Groupe 6 Mar. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse, Doct. 916.
- (136) Bulletin des dirigeants 20 May 1941, C2GM, C 11/99.
- (137) *Ibid* ; *Le P.R.* 30 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Pas de meetings aujourd'hui'.
- (138) Constant to Inspecteur Provincial du Brabant Wallon 30 Mar. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 33 ; Le Gorlois to FC officers of Wallonia 16 Apr. 1941 and Rex-Wallonie Bulletin des dirigeants 15 Apr. 1941, C2GM, C 11/281 and C 11/321.3
- (139) Journal de V. Matthys pp. 4-5, C2GM.
- (140) *Le P.R.* 13 Apr. 1941, p. 1, 'Pâques de grisaille' ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 481 and 508.
- (141) LD to Hitler 10 Apr. 1941 cited in A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers V*, 168.
- (142) *Le P.R.* 20 Apr. 1941, p. 1, 'La guerre et l'avenir' ; L. Degrelle *Discours prononcé à Liège le 27 avril 1941* (Liège, n.d.), p. 1.
- (143) *Le P.R.* 30 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Le présent et Rex', 29 Apr. 1941, p. 3, 'Léon Degrelle a donné...' and 6 May 1941, p. 3, 'Le Chef de Rex exalte...' ; L. Degrelle *Discours prononcé à Liège*, p. 6.
- (144) *Le P.R.* 23 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Parti unique ?', 20 Apr. 1941, p. 1, 'La guerre et l'avenir' and 22 Apr. 1941, p. 3, '"Préparons-nous pour l'après-guerre !"' ; L. Degrelle *Discours prononcé à Liège*, pp. 1 and 14.
- (145) e.g. *Le P.R.* 7 May 1941, p. 1, 'Nationalisme et l'Occident' and 11 May 1941, p. 1, 'La déclaration du Chef de Rex'.
- (146) L. Degrelle *Discours prononcé à Liège*, pp. 9-11.
- (147) A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers V*, 168-170 ; TB 16, 9 May 1941, p. 1649 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, p. 515.
- (148) TB 16, 9 May 1941, p. 1648.

- (149) TB 15, 7 Apr. 1941, pp. 1443, 1449-1451 and 1466-1467 ; *Le Soir* 2 Apr. 1941, p. 2, 'Nos nouveaux Secrétaires Généraux'.
- (150) *Le P.R.*, 30 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Le présent et Rex'.
- (151) TB 15, 7 Apr. 1941, pp. 1467-1468 ; Journal de V. Matthys p. 5, C26M ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 464-465.
- (152) *Le P.R.*, 6 Apr. 1941, p. 1, 'Objectifs immédiats'.
- (153) *Le P.R.*, 3 Apr. 1941, p. 1, 'L'arrivée de M. Romsée...' ; *Le Soir* 2 Apr. 1941, p. 1, 'Les nouveaux Secrétaires Généraux'. See also J. Willequet *La Belgique sous la botte*, p. 164.
- (154) e.g. *Le P.R.*, 28 Feb. 1941, p. 4, 'Billet du Centre' and 11 Apr. 1941, p. 1, 'Notre camarade...'
- (155) *Le P.R.*, 9 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Un fameux nettoyage...' and 14 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Les vieux s'en vont'.
- (156) TB 16, 9 May 1941, p. 1657 ; *Moniteur Belge* 30 May 1941, pp. 3808-3809.
- (157) Documentation Jans 126 ; *Le P.R.*, 17 Apr. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (158) VM Pro Just., 14 and 21 May 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Enquête Complémentaire, Farde C, Docts. 19 and 20-26 ; *Le Soir* 13 May 1947, p. 4, 'Les Conseils de Guerre', 28 and 29 May 1947, p. 5, 'Les Conseils de Guerre de Bruxelles'.
- (159) VM Pro Just., 21 May 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Enquête Complémentaire, Farde C, Doct. 20-26 ; JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (160) Inspecteur Fédéral to Chefs de Cercles 11 June, 24 July, 13 and 25 Aug. 1941, C26M, C 11/169, 172, 173 and 174.
- (161) *Le P.R.*, 11 May 1941, p. 8, and 13 May 1941, p. 3, 'Notre camarade...'
- (162) Cercle de Mons Cadre Politique Meeting of 21 Feb. 1942, C26M, C 11/321.10 ; J. Wynants 'Verviers, l'autorité communale en 1940-1941', *Cahiers* II, 163-164 and 167.
- (163) Letter to P. Herlemont 30 June 1941, C26M, W 3/20. See also pp. 224.
- (164) *Le P.R.*, 11 May 1941, p. 1, 'La déclaration du Chef de Rex'. Re. the 1936 accord, see J-M Etienne *Le mouvement rexiste*, pp. 99-102.
- (165) *Le P.R.*, 11 May 1941, pp. 1 and 4, 'La réunion d'hier matin...'
- (166) A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers* IV, 17-19 ; Internal circular of Verdinas 2 Nov. 1940 cited in P. Janssens 'Les Dinamos wallons', p. 228 ; *Le P.R.*, 23 Oct. 1940, p. 1, 'Un accord...'
- (167) TB 13, 2 Feb. 1941, pp. 1147-1149 ; TB 14, 2 Mar. 1941, p. 1308 ; TB 16, 9 May 1941, pp. 1642-1644 ; A. De Jonghe *Op. cit.* IV, 20-52.
- (168) P. Janssens *Op. cit.*, pp. 235-236 ; A. De Jonghe *Op. cit.* IV, 51.
- (169) *Le P.R.*, 1 Jan., 30 Jan. and 5 Feb. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (170) *Le P.R.*, 11 Oct. 1940, p. 8, 'Cadre du mouvement rexiste en Flandre', 4 Jan. and 23 Feb. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement' ; P. Janssens *Op. cit.*, p. 228.
- (171) *Le P.R.*, 1 Jan. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement' ; Journal de V. Matthys p. 4, C26M ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 475-476.
- (172) *Le P.R.*, 2 Oct. 1940, p. 2, 'Dans le mouvement rexiste', 11 Oct. 1940, p. 8, 'Rex Flandre...' and 8 May 1941, p. 2, 'De Beweging in Vlaanderen'.
- (173) *Le P.R.*, 14 May 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (174) *Le P.R.*, 11 May 1941, pp. 3-4, 'La communication du leader du VNV'. Earlier in 1941, the aggressive comments of VNV leaders had already aroused opposition in the Rexist press ; General Van Overstraeten *Sous le joug*, pp. 120-124 and 128 ; *Le P.R.*, 4 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Pour un compromis des Belges' and 1 Apr. 1941, p. 1, 'A propos d'espace vital'.
- (175) *Le P.R.*, 16 May 1941, p. 1, 'Positions de Rex et du VNV...' and p. 3, 'Les précisions de Rex et du VNV...'
- (176) *Le Soir* 13 May 1941, p. 1, 'En marge de l'accord Rex-VNV' ; *Le Nouveau Journal* 12 May 1941, p. 1, 'Les principes et les méthodes' ; *Cassandra* 11 May 1941, p. 1, 'Fusions et "partis uniques"' ; *Le Journal de Charleroi* 13 May 1941, p. 1, 'Evénement historique ?'
- (177) *Le P.R.*, 13 May 1941, p. 1, 'Toutes les forces populaires...' and 16 May 1941, p. 1, 'A propos de Bruxelles' ; *Le Soir* 15 May 1941, p. 1, 'Le Peuple et l'Etat'.

- (178) Some Flemish Rexists subsequently served in the VNV militia and in the Flemish Legion on the Eastern Front but many others followed the example of their leader, Odier Daem, who, finding it difficult to work with the VNV, gradually abandoned his political activities : *Le P.R.* 17 May 1942, p. 1, 'Un rexiste flamand...' and 22 May 1942, p. 3, 'Une grande journée...' ; INBEL Informations reçues de Belgique 2 Mar. 1943, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/965 ; *Le Matin* 22 Oct. 1946, p. 1, 'Odier Daem...devant le Conseil de Guerre'.
- (179) Bulletin des dirigeants 20 May 1941 and Constant to Cdts. d'unités FC, C2GM, C 11/99 and C 11/321.4.
- (180) e.g. *Le Soir* 23 Apr. 1941, pp. 1-2, 'Idéal et action'.
- (181) *Le Soir* 22-23 Mar. 1941, pp. 1-2, 'Les tâches du jour' and 13 May 1941, p. 1, 'En marge de l'accord Rex-VNV' ; *Le Nouveau Journal* 12 May 1941, p. 1, 'Les principes et les méthodes'.
- (182) Untitled note, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye, Doct. 313 ; Documentation Jans 137.
- (183) 'Pour un Parti Unique des Provinces Romanes' 19 May 1941, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye.
- (184) *Ibid* ; De Becker and Daye to founders of party 5 Aug. 1941, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye.
- (185) See note 183.
- (186) *Le P.R.* 18 May 1941, p. 1, 'Rex ou quoi ?'
- (187) De Becker to Daye 19 May 1941, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye.
- (188) *Le P.R.* 20 May 1941, p. 3, 'Léon Degrelle parle à Namur...', 22 May 1941, p. 1, 'Le temps de la critique...' and 10 June 1941, p. 3, 'Bruxelles a vécu...'.
- (189) Jahresbericht der Militärverwaltung June 1941, Section A, pp. 44-45.
- (190) Documentation Jans 137.
- (191) *Le P.R.* 3 July 1941, pp. 1 and 6, 'L'article du Président Reeder'.
- (192) De Becker and Daye to founders of party 5 Aug. 1941 and Daye to Herlemont 16 Aug. 1941, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye.
- (193) *Le P.R.* 4 July 1941, p. 1, 'Une leçon et un avertissement'.
- (194) See note 189.
- (195) Rex Statut du Mouvement [1941], C2GM, C 11/86.
- (196) *Ibid* ; Bulletin des dirigeants 20 May 1941, C2GM, C 11/99.
- (197) *Ibid*.
- (198) *Ibid* ; Historique de l'organisation des FC, C2GM, C 11/263 ; Albert Constant Pro Just., 18 Apr. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 219-220.
- (199) Rex Statut du Mouvement [1941] and Bulletins des dirigeants 20 May and 15 Aug. 1941, C2GM, C 11/86, 99 and 101 ; *Le P.R.* 27 June and 18 Sept. 1941, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement' and 14 and 19 Oct. 1941, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.
- (200) *Ibid* ; Documentation Jans 193.
- (201) JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (202) Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, pp. 70-74, C2GM.
- (203) See notes 201 and 202. See also Y. Jelinek *The Parish Republic : Hlinka's Slovak People's Party 1939-1945* (New York and London, 1976), pp. 44-46.
- (204) Rouleau to Vandeveld 16 May 1941, C2GM, C 11/133 ; Région de Bruxelles Ordres hebdomadaires des FC 17 May 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Jean Colman, Inst., Doct. 69 ; *Le P.R.* 4 May 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'.
- (205) Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988 ; TB 16, 9 May 1941, p. 1646 ; Louis Richard Pro Just., 12 July 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Doct. 1-5.
- (206) e.g. *L'Avenir du Luxembourg* 28 Feb. 1946, p. 1, 'Au Conseil de Guerre' and 5 June 1946, p. 1, 'Le Gestapiste de Bourcy...' ; *Le P.R.* 2 May 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement' ; Ile Etendard des FC Ordres hebdomadaires 16-23 Aug. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Farde D, Doct. 1.
- (207) *Le P.R.* 8 July 1941, p. 1, 'Pourquoi "Nationaux-Socialistes" ?' and 11 July 1941, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement' ; Bulletin des dirigeants 15 Dec. 1941, 'De la démocratie au national socialisme', C2GM, C 11/184.
- (208) Membership brochure 1941, C2GM, BR B 9/2.
- (209) Speech by Pévenasse [12 Apr. 1941], Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse.



- (210) *Le P.R.* 10 June 1941, p. 3, 'Bruxelles a vécu...' and 24 June 1941, p. 3, 'Au Camp des FC de Mons'. See also p. 102.
- (211) e.g. *Le P.R.* 11 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'La Révolution se fait' ; L. Degrelle *Discours prononcé à Liège*, p. 14.
- (212) *Le P.R.* 1 May 1941, p. 1, 'Peuple de chez nous !' and 28 June 1941, p. 1, 'Il y a la manière...'. See also note 48.
- (213) See pp. 210-218.
- (214) *Le P.R.* 18 May 1941, p. 1, 'Rex, ou quoi ?', 10 June 1941, p. 3, 'Bruxelles a vécu...', 15 June 1941, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement' and 26 June 1941, p. 1, 'L'Indiscipline Nationale'.
- (215) *Le P.R.* 4 June 1941, p. 3, 'Nos camps de Pentecôte' and 6 June 1941, p. 1, 'Tous les rexistes...'
- (216) Only the Flemish Nationalists of the VNV, consistently supported by the *Militärverwaltung*, threatened the position of the traditional elite.
- (217) A. Dantoing 'La hiérarchie catholique...', *Revue du Nord* LX (1978), 315-317.
- (218) e.g. *Le P.R.* 27 Mar. 1941, p. 2, 'Dans le Mouvement'. See also p. 70.
- (219) *Le P.R.* 6 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'La Bibliothèque de Louvain' and 8 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Les beautés de l'enseignement "religieux".'
- (220) *Le P.R.* 13 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Un incident scandaleux à Warsage' and 18 Feb. 1941, p. 3, 'Les messages de Rex'.
- (221) Chanoine Lecléf *Le Cardinal Van Roey et l'occupation allemande*, pp. 93-94 and 181-182 ; *Le diocèse de Tournai sous l'occupation allemande*, p. 117.
- (222) *Le P.R.* 18 May 1941, p. 1, 'Les prières interdites' ; A. Dantoing *Op. cit.*, p. 319 ; Chanoine Lecléf *Op. cit.*, pp. 93 and 261-275 ; C. Chevalier 'La presse francophone et l'église catholique', pp. 161 and 190-193.
- (223) *Le P.R.* 6 June 1941, p. 1, 'Pour la paix des consciences', 2 Aug. 1941, p. 1, 'Une offensive qui se précise' and 13 Aug. 1941, p. 1, 'Une carence dangereuse'.
- (224) Chanoine Lecléf *Op. cit.*, pp. 97-98 and 182-186.
- (225) *Le P.R.* 22 July 1941, p. 1, 'Des incidents pénibles' ; *Vers l'Avenir* 9 July 1946, p. 2, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur'. See also pp. 236-240.
- (226) *Le P.R.* 28 May 1941, p. 1, 'Le 28 mai'.
- (227) *Le P.R.* 10 June 1941, pp. 1 and 3, 'Bruxelles a vécu...' and 22 June 1941, p. 1, 'L'impuissance anglaise'.
- (228) *Le P.R.* 24 June 1941, p. 3, 'Au Camp des FC de Mons' and 20 July 1941, p. 1, 'Pour la croisade contre Moscou'.
- (229) *Le P.R.* 25 June 1941, p. 1, 'Il faut choisir entre l'Ordre et le Bolchevisme' and 27 June 1941, p. 1, 'Croisades et Guerres'.
- (230) TB 17, 22 Sept. 1941, p. 1814 ; P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, p. 82.
- (231) L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, p. 526 ; P. Dastier 'Degrelle parle', *Dossier du mois* Nos. 6/7 (Brussels, 1963), p. 10 ; Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, pp. 75-76, C26M.
- (232) *Le P.R.* 30 June 1941, p. 1, 'L'heure des Wallons' and 14 June 1942, p. 1, 'L'anniversaire du Chef de Rex'. See pp. 74-75 and 104.
- (233) e.g. O.A. Davey 'The Origins of the *Légion des Volontaires Français contre le Bolchevisme*', *Journal of Contemporary History* VI No. 4 (1971), 29-45 ; J-L Hondros *Occupation and Resistance*, p. 72.
- (234) INBEL 1 Dec. 1941 No. 1, C26M, Fonds INBEL/1087 ; Henry Marcovitz Pro Just., 7 Mar. 1946, C26M, PF 3 ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, pp. 267-268. Mathys subsequently claimed that the idea of creating the *Légion* was in fact Rouleau's ; *Journal de V. Mathys* p. 5, C26M.
- (235) Interview between Carl Peeters and José Gotovitch 24 Mar. 1972, p. 47, C26M.
- (236) Abetz was central to the creation of the *Légion des Volontaires Français* and it must be assumed that he encouraged the parallel efforts of Degrelle ; O.A. Davey *Op. cit.*

- (237) LD to Formations de Combat de Bruxelles 6 July 1941, C2GM, C 11/275. Degrelle simultaneously announced the establishment of a second military unit (the *Gardes Wallonnes*), the creation of which was subsequently postponed until the autumn of 1941 : see pp. 174-176.
- (238) Journal de V. Matthys p. 5, C2GM ; E. De Bruyne 'Un aspect de la collaboration militaire dans la Belgique francophone 1941-1945', C2GM, JP 732.
- (239) *Le P.R.* 8 July 1941, p. 1, 'Un corps franc "Wallonie"...' and 'Aux armes !'
- (240) Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, p. 70, C2GM ; *L'Avenir du Luxembourg* 31 May 1947, p. 1, 'Au Conseil de Guerre d'Arion' ; *Le P.R.* 9 July 1941, p. 1, 'Gardes Wallonnes et Corps Franc' and 13 July 1941, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.
- (241) *Le P.R.* 13 July 1941, p. 1, 'Pourquoi participer à la lutte contre le Bolchevisme ?', 20 July 1941, p. 1, 'Pour la croisade contre Moscou' and 9 Aug. 1941, p. 1, 'Le message du Chef' ; Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 28 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Cour Militaire, Doct. 10.
- (242) L. Degrelle *Hitler pour mille ans*, p. 111 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 517-518.
- (243) *Le P.R.* 15 July 1941, p. 1, 'La croisade contre Moscou' and 26 July 1941, p. 1, 'Plus de mille engagements...' ; Radio Zeesen 28 Aug. 1941 cited in C2GM, Fonds INBEL/732.
- (244) Comte Capelle *Au Service du Roi II*, 127 ; Henry Marcovitz Pro Just., 7 Mar. 1946, C2GM, PF 3 ; *Le P.R.* 4 Jan. 1942, p. 2, 'Les grandes heures...'
- (245) Inspecteur Fédéral to Chefs de Cercles 14 July 1941, C2GM, C 11/171.
- (246) L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, p. 519 ; VM Pro Just., 12 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 48-51 ; Interview between Léon Degrelle and Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen 11-12 Dec. 1977, p. 119.
- (247) André Renotte Pro Just., 13 July 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Doct. 111-116 ; Henry Marcovitz Pro Just., 7 Mar. 1946, C2GM, PF 3. Degrelle strenuously denies that he gave any such assurance : Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988.
- (248) 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12, pp. 21-22.
- (249) *Ibid* ; Comte Capelle *Au Service du Roi II*, 127 ; *Recueil de documents établi par le Secrétariat du Roi*, pp. 365-367 ; *La Meuse* 5 Sept. 1945, p. 1, 'Conseil de Guerre'.
- (250) Comte Capelle *Op. cit.* II, 106.
- (251) *Ibid.* II, 209 ; R. Poulet Mémoire confidentiel à S.A.R. le Régent [Jan. 1946], p. 3 (Private Collection) ; Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 20-22, C2GM.
- (252) Louis Richard Pro Just., 12 July 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Doct. 1-5 ; *La Meuse* 5 and 25 Sept. 1945, p. 1, 'Conseil de Guerre'.
- (253) Interview between Carl Peeters and José Gotovitch 24 Mar. 1972, p. 56, C2GM ; P. Pauly Pro Just., 4 July 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Info., Doct. 18. Degrelle denies that he knew of the existence of what Matthys subsequently admitted to Capelle was a crude forgery ; Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988 ; Comte Capelle *Au Service du Roi II*, 209-210.
- (254) *Le P.R.* 1 Aug. 1941, pp. 1 and 3, 'La Légion "Wallonie"...' ; R. Poulet Prison Diary 12 July 1946, p. 6 (Private Collection) ; J. Denis 'Mémoire justificatif d'un condamné à mort' p. 52, Aud. Gén., Doss. Jean Denis, Info., Doct. 53.
- (255) *Le P.R.* 22 July 1941, p. 1, 'Le Chef de Rex s'engage...' and p. 3, 'Devant trois mille Rexistes liégeois'.
- (256) L. Degrelle *Hitler pour mille ans*, pp. 108-109 ; P. Dastier 'Degrelle parle', *Dossier du mois* No. 617, p. 10.
- (257) Reeder to OKH 26 Jan. 1943, C2GM, Procès von Falkenhausen, Doct. 117 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 525-526 ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, p. 269.
- (258) *Le P.R.* 10 Aug. 1943, p. 4, 'Une émouvante cérémonie d'hommage...' ; *National Socialisme* 15 Aug. 1943, p. 3, 'Vingt-quatre mois...' ; J. Streel 'Au sujet de l'article 115' [p. 10], C2GM, Fonds José Streel ; Légion Belge "Wallonie" Historique, p. 3, C2GM, W 4. Later in August and in September, small groups of additional volunteers joined the *Légion* bringing its total strength to approximately 1,000.
- (259) *Le P.R.* 9 Aug. 1941, p. 1, 'La Légion est partie', 2 Sept. 1941, p. 3, 'Les nominations de bourgmestres' and 23 Dec. 1941, p. 3, 'Deux mille militants liégeois...' ; Report by Reeder 23 Aug. 1941, C2GM, Procès von Falkenhausen, Doct. 118.

- (260) *L'Ami du Peuple* 11 Oct. 1941, p. 2, 'Une conférence de Me Lambrichts...' and 18 Oct. 1941, p. 2, 'Légion Wallonie' ; *Le P.R.* 6 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Nos chefs sont des anciens combattants...' ; 11 Jan. 1942, p. 1, 'Capitaine Dupré...' ; 1 May 1942, p. 7, 'Une émouvante cérémonie...' and 3 Jan. 1943, p. 1, 'Nos héros...' ; *Le Nouveau Journal* 26-27 Feb. 1944, p. 1, 'Avec l'un des ouvriers-soldats...' ; André Renotte *Pro Just.*, 13 July 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Doct. 111-116 ; Mathieu to A. De Bruyne 4 Nov. 1985, C2GM, JP 722 ; E. De Bruyne 'Un aspect de la collaboration militaire dans la Belgique francophone 1941-1945', C2GM, JP 732 ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, pp. 522-523.
- (261) *Le P.R.* 9 Aug. 1941, pp. 1 and 6, 'La Légion est partie' and 'Le message du Chef' ; J. Streel 'Analyse de l'acte d'accusation : première suite' p. 4, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (262) *VM Pro Just.*, 12 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 48-51 ; *Le P.R.* 9 Aug. 1941, p. 6, 'La Légion est partie' ; L. Degrelle *La Cohue*, p. 519.
- (263) P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, p. 83 ; *Le P.R.* 9 Aug. 1941, pp. 1 and 6, 'La Légion est partie' ; INBEL 30 Nov. 1941 No. 2, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/1981 ; *Cassandra* 10 Aug. 1941, p. 1, 'Echos et Indiscrétions'.
- (264) *Le P.R.* 10 Aug. 1941, p. 1, 'Les devoirs de la Légion qui reste' and 10 Aug. 1943, pp. 1 and 4, 'Une émouvante cérémonie...' ; Interview between Carl Peeters and José Gotovitch 24 Mar. 1972, p. 48, C2GM.
- (265) *Le P.R.* 1 Aug. 1941, pp. 1 and 3, 'La Légion "Wallonie"...' ; Sylvain Jadoul *Pro Just.*, 28 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Cour Militaire, Doct. 10.

### CHAPTER THREE : AUGUST 1941 - SPRING 1942

Once the initial euphoria engendered by the departure of the *légionnaires* had passed, those Rexistists who remained behind were once again required to confront the difficult and unpromising political situation which existed within Belgium. The creation of the *Légion Wallonie* had done nothing to alleviate these difficulties and, by depriving Rex of many of its most experienced and capable militants, it had also significantly weakened the ability of the movement to respond to them.

All observers were agreed that those who had joined the *Légion* in August were primarily those faithful Rexist veterans who had served the cause through all of the vicissitudes in its fortunes and who had always constituted the core of its organisation <sup>1</sup>. Thus, they were not, for the most part, young rootless adventurers but men often of quite mature years who had abandoned both their jobs and their responsibilities to their families in order to answer Degrelle's call to arms <sup>2</sup>. Many, moreover, had directed Rexist *cercles* or units of the *Formations de Combat* which now suddenly found themselves deprived of their leaders. Degrelle, desperate to acquire the largest possible number of recruits for his new venture, paid little attention to this decimation of the local structure of Rex. The *Légion* had already eclipsed all of his other priorities and it was only a few days before its departure that it was agreed that a small group of leaders should remain behind to staff the central *Etat-Major* of the movement <sup>3</sup>.

Degrelle does not appear to have considered the selection of these interim leaders to be of great importance. He remained confident that he would be returning to Belgium before the onset of winter and he did not expect there to be any change before then in the political situation within the country. His

choice was, however, complicated by a resurgence in personal rivalries which once again threatened to disrupt the operation of Rex. In particular, the establishment of the *Légion Wallonie* had brought to a head the long-standing tensions concerning the power exercised by Fernand Rouleau. Already established as the *de facto* deputy of Degrelle, the *Lieutenant du Chef* had further reinforced his authority by taking charge of the organisation of the new military unit <sup>4</sup>. As such, Rouleau considered himself to be the interim head of the *Légion* and, according to a number of leading Rexists, he intended - possibly with the connivance of certain German officials - to make the new military unit into his own largely autonomous power base which would gradually absorb the remnants of the civilian Rexist organisation <sup>5</sup>. The sudden decision by the *Chef de Rex* to serve in the *Légion* disrupted these plans. Though Degrelle would be only an ordinary soldier, Rouleau could no longer hope to mould the *Légion* to his purposes and he apparently proposed that he should instead be allowed to remain in Belgium as the interim leader of Rex during the absence of Degrelle <sup>6</sup>. Possibly fearful of the ambitions of his *Lieutenant*, Degrelle chose, however, to refuse this request insisting that Rouleau must serve in the *Légion*.

Once the new soldiers had arrived at their training camp in eastern Germany, relations between the two men deteriorated rapidly. The details of what actually occurred will probably never be known but it is clear that Degrelle had come to regard his deputy with the deepest mistrust. Rouleau, as the ordnance officer of the *Légion*, enjoyed close relations with the German officers and made frequent visits to Berlin <sup>7</sup>. These activities, as well as his apparent attempts to build up a personal following amongst the *légionnaires*, inevitably aroused suspicions as to his intentions and it was rumoured that Degrelle would soon be forced to return to Belgium leaving Rouleau as the undisputed head of the

*Légion* <sup>8</sup>. Whether there was any substance to these rumours remains impossible to ascertain and they may have been no more than a fabrication designed to justify Rouleau's dismissal <sup>9</sup>. Degrelle, however, decided to act decisively against his former deputy. In a furious rage, he accused Rouleau of plotting against him and within a few hours Rouleau, whether at the instigation of the Germans or because he genuinely feared for his life, disappeared from the ranks of the *Légion* <sup>10</sup>.

Thus, Rouleau's involvement with Rex ended - as it had begun - in an atmosphere of some mystery. He was never to return either to Rex or to the *Légion* and there will always be speculation regarding both his real motivation and the means by which he emerged so rapidly as the *adjoint* of Degrelle. Perhaps it was indeed true - despite Degrelle's denials - that he was financing Rexist activities and it must also be suspected that Rouleau was in reality the agent of some part of the Nazi hierarchy <sup>11</sup>. Yet, whatever the truth, his role in Rex personified a certain opportunistic style of collaboration which was most evident during these early years of the German Occupation. As the wind changed, many of these figures would retreat from public view seeking either to rehabilitate a patriotic image or taking refuge in more discreet collaborationist activities. Such was the case with Rouleau who disappeared from politics into the murky - and, one suspects, for him congenial - world of the German police. For some months, he was occasionally glimpsed in Brussels in the company of German officials but he soon moved to Paris where he was variously reported to be an agent of the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) and a recruiter for the Charlemagne division of the *Waffen-SS*. He later worked for the SD in Tunisia and at the end of the war was serving with an SS cavalry division in Hungary. From there, he succeeded in fleeing - apparently with a considerable fortune - first to Switzerland and then, a few months later, to Spain where he was

employed from 1946 as a chemical engineer. He lived in La Coruna and Madrid and during a minor court case in 1951 was described as an *ancien combattant* in the Nationalist armies. Protected from Belgian justice by his connections with the Francoist police, he died in Spain in 1984 aged 81 <sup>12</sup>.

Rouleau's hurried departure deprived Rex of the most important of those new leaders who had come to prominence in the summer of 1940 and for the remaining years of the Occupation Degrelle was to rely instead upon those veterans who had served him faithfully since the beginning of his political career. Though he remained in so many other respects an impulsive adventurer, his experiences with Rouleau and Simoens had made Degrelle cautious in his choice of assistants and all of the principal leaders of Rex after the summer of 1941 were Rexist of long standing. Only in the ranks of the *Légion Wallonie* would more recent converts to the Degrellian cause find greater scope for the satisfaction of their ambitions.

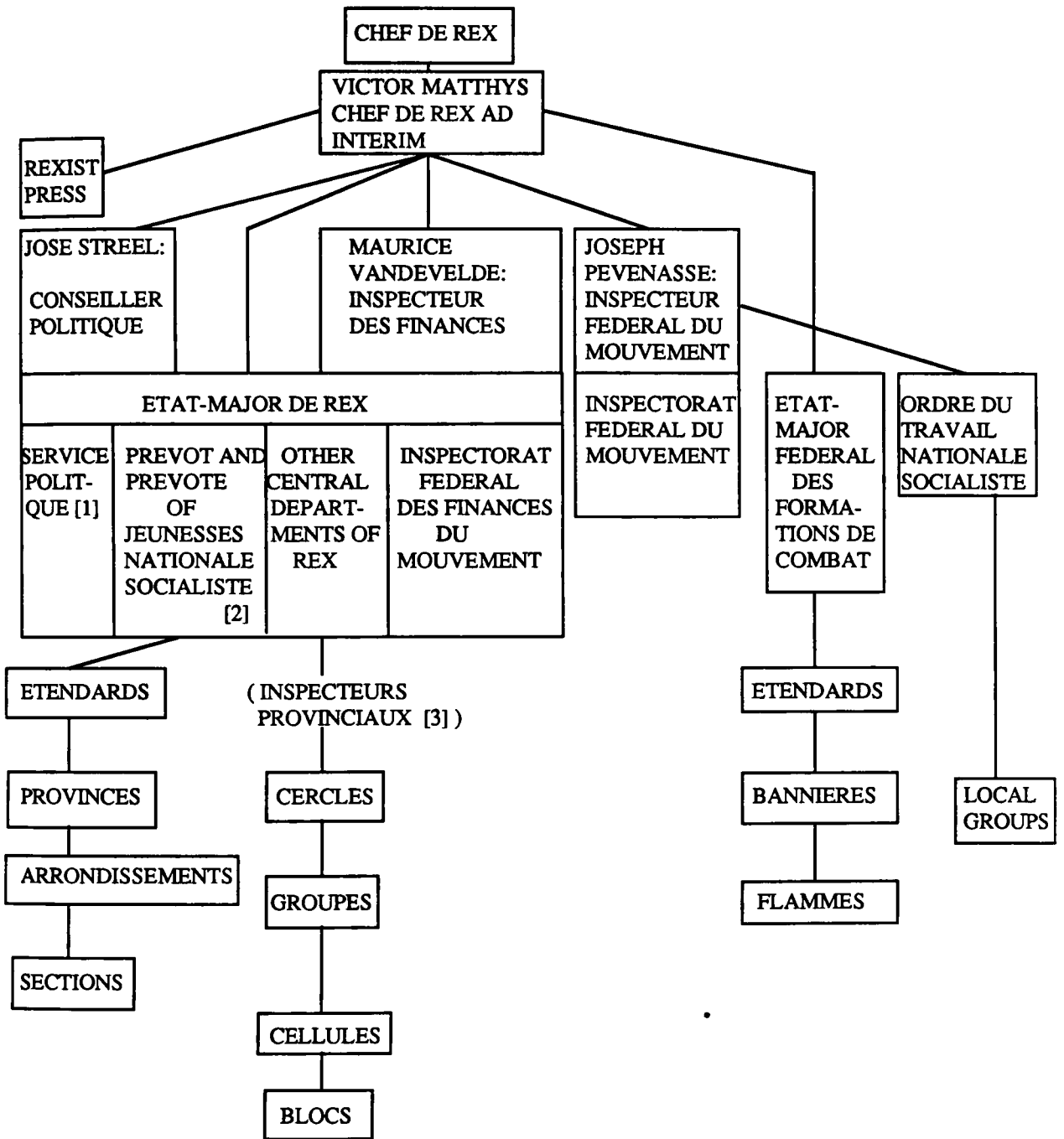
To direct the affairs of Rex during his absence, Degrelle eventually chose Victor Matthys. Appointed as *Chef ad interim* of Rex "jusqu'à mon retour à la fin de la guerre" <sup>13</sup>, Matthys was in some respects a surprising choice. Aged only 27 in 1941, he was, even by the standards of the youthful Rexist movement, exceptionally young and had few evident qualifications for the tasks which would confront him. A journalist by profession, Matthys was the principal editor of *Le Pays Réel* but his only experience within the Rexist organisation had been as *Chef de Propagande* since May 1941 <sup>14</sup>. In turning to Matthys rather than to a more experienced figure, Degrelle was, however, clearly anxious to appoint a man who would remain faithful to his directions. He described the new *Chef de Rex ad interim* in August 1941 as "mon plus vieux et plus fidèle collaborateur" and Matthys had indeed been one of his closest associates since the beginnings of the movement <sup>15</sup>. His background was, however, very different from that of

most of those student journalists and aspiring intellectuals who formed the first nucleus of Rexists. Unlike those sons of the provincial Catholic bourgeoisie, Matthys was illegitimate and had been raised by his mother in modest circumstances. He had few formal educational qualifications and when he first met Degrelle he was a lowly employee in the offices of the *Action Catholique de la Jeunesse Belge* in Louvain. However, both his enthusiasm for a Catholic resurgence within Belgium and his irreverent humour attracted Degrelle and he soon became one of the *Chef de Rex's* inner circle of advisors taking responsibility for the direction of the Rexist press <sup>16</sup>.

Matthys was far from evidently suited to be the leader of an authoritarian political movement. His physical appearance was unimpressive and his poor health had caused him to be exempted from military service <sup>17</sup>. He was an inexperienced and somewhat awkward public speaker who possessed none of the oratorical gifts of Degrelle. Hesitant and almost gauche on public occasions, Matthys was, however, fluent and charming in private and his shrewd intelligence would impress many of those with whom he worked during the subsequent years <sup>18</sup>. He had numerous close friends amongst the other veterans of the political movement which had become his life and, in the frequently murky world of Rex, he was widely regarded as a sincere figure who never doubted that Rex alone could bring salvation for his country. Matthys was, however, no single-minded extremist. Although totally committed to the policy of collaboration and an uncritical admirer of the achievements of the Nazi regime, he rarely allied himself with the most extreme Rexists. Though in no sense a moderate, he always retained that irreverent *esprit farceur* which was so characteristic of those who had joined Rex in the student world of Louvain. He was by temperament an iconoclast and, even during the Occupation, he found it easy to mock and to ridicule, displaying on occasions a cynical, amoral attitude



FIG. 4 THE STRUCTURE OF REX: AUGUST-DECEMBER 1941



Notes: [1] Established in the Autumn of 1941.

[2]The title of the youth organisation was changed from *Jeunesses Rexistes* to *Jeunesses Nationales Socialistes* in November 1941.

[3]Co-ordinated the activities of the *cercles*. Not part of the hierarchy.

towards public events which contrasted with the bloody consequences of his decisions. José Streel, who knew Matthys well, noted this division within him between a dignified, serious tone and an attitude of student irresponsibility which refused to engage fully with the dark events in which he was implicated. Called to account for his actions after the war, Matthys was able to mount an impressive and reasoned explanation of his collaborationist career taking upon himself the responsibility for many of the most incriminating Rexist actions. Yet, he retained to the last that irreverent and light-hearted aspect to his character which had led him to comment to Streel on one occasion during the war :

"On ne sait pas comment tout ça finira, mais on se sera tout de même bien amusé" <sup>19</sup>.

Degrelle had great confidence in the abilities of Matthys but he nevertheless took care to surround the new leader with more experienced advisors. Thus, Joseph Pévenasse as *Inspecteur Fédéral du Mouvement* was responsible for the local Rexist groups as well as for the *Formations de Combat* while the veteran militant Maurice Vandeveldé retained control of the finances of the movement. In addition, José Streel, the chief leader writer of *Le Pays Réel*, was appointed as *Conseiller Politique*, a new post which would enable him to exert considerable influence over the policies of Matthys <sup>20</sup>.

As far as Degrelle was concerned, the task of these new leaders was to act as custodians of the Rexist organisation during his absence. His instructions to Matthys were to take charge of "l'expédition des affaires courantes du mouvement" while refraining from any new political initiatives <sup>21</sup>. Degrelle had become totally disenchanted with the political situation in Occupied Belgium and his departure for Russia was in many ways an admission that he had abandoned the struggle for power within the country in favour of

winning the respect of the Germans from outside. Thus, he believed that it was only with the return of the battle-hardened *légionnaires* that political progress would again become possible and he was clearly already contemplating the rewards which would await the victorious Rexist soldiers. As he promised his supporters on 8 August :

"un jour nous reviendrons. Ayant tout donné, nous pourrions alors tout prendre" <sup>22</sup>.

The Rexistists who stayed behind in Belgium did not, however, share their leader's pessimism and many were reluctant to abandon the struggle entirely during the absence of the *légionnaires*. Matthys too was anxious that he should not be a mere caretaker leader of Rex and he soon made clear his determination to place his personal stamp on the movement. While not explicitly contradicting Degrelle's guide-lines, he asserted that there should be no diminution in Rexist activity and, in a forceful message which was read out to all of the *cercles* on 7 September, he put forward his own strategy for the future development of Rex, declaring unambivalently :

"Je vous promets que vous serez commandés, je me promets que je me ferai obéir" <sup>23</sup>.

Nor did Matthys limit himself to words. Conscious that his most obvious potential rival was Joseph Pévenasse, he used the occasion of a joint meeting of the Brussels *cercles* to receive a public oath of loyalty from the *Inspecteur Fédéral* <sup>24</sup>. This was a dramatic gesture more akin to the feudal world than to a modern political movement but it was effective and, after the almost incessant conflicts of the previous year, Matthys' determination to assert his authority appears to have been widely appreciated within the movement <sup>25</sup>.

Inevitably, the most important priority for Matthys and his advisors was to reconstruct the local structure of Rex. The *Légion* had deprived the

movement of many of its most capable militants and Matthys called on those who remained behind to dedicate themselves totally to the Rexist cause :

"A l'égale des absents, nous devons nous considérer tous comme des soldats mobilisés qui ne peuvent connaître aucun repos avant la victoire, qui ne peuvent connaître d'autre occupation que le combat, d'autre objectif que la conquête" <sup>26</sup>.

No longer, Matthys declared, would any "esprit de clan" or sterile democratic discussion be allowed to disrupt the movement. Rex must adopt the authoritarian structures of other New Order movements and Matthys and his colleagues worked hard to foster a cult of discipline and secrecy amongst their followers. Membership of Rex, they insisted, was a total and irrevocable commitment and there could be no place in the movement for those unwilling to accept these rules <sup>27</sup>.

Thus, the whole thrust of Matthys' policies was directed towards ensuring that Rex became a self-contained, inward-looking movement. The Rexist were warned that they must expect to remain isolated from the majority of Belgians and all dreams of leading a vast popular crusade were abandoned or at least postponed until some moment in the distant future <sup>28</sup>. Despite Matthys' announcement in September of a propaganda campaign intended to double the membership of Rex by the end of October <sup>29</sup>, in practice little effort was made to enrol new members and the energies of militants were instead directed towards matters of internal organisation. Having abandoned the unequal struggle for the hearts and minds of their compatriots, Rexist had in effect little choice but to retreat into making their movement a bastion within a hostile world.

This antipathy became ever more pronounced as the year drew to a close. The population seized every opportunity to demonstrate its hostility towards the movement and shops, cafés and other businesses owned by Rexist

were frequently deserted by much of their former non-Rexist clientele while other shopkeepers refused to serve supporters of Rex <sup>30</sup>. One consequence of such discrimination was that some militants began to experience material difficulties and a new organisation, *Solidarité Rexiste*, was established with the aim of helping those in need of assistance. The departure of the *légionnaires* caused further problems by depriving many families of their breadwinner and another body, *Solidarité Légionnaire*, was created to look after the relatives of the absent soldiers <sup>31</sup>.

Scuffles between Rexistists and their opponents had long been commonplace but there was a sudden escalation in this violence in September 1941 when the *chef de cercle* of Rex in Tournai, Paul Gérard, was murdered in the street and a second Rexist militant, Jean Oedekerke, was killed by a parcel bomb sent to the Brussels offices of the *Formations de Combat* <sup>32</sup>. They were the first Rexistists to be assassinated and this sudden and apparently well-organised violence inevitably had considerable repercussions both within and beyond the ranks of the movement. Political assassination was a relative novelty within Belgium and, though few mourned the victims of these attacks, many feared what they might herald <sup>33</sup>. Within Rex, the reaction was one of anger and dismay <sup>34</sup>. Long inured to black lists and death threats, the Rexistists were nevertheless entirely unprepared for this violence which their new leaders tried to blame variously on Communist assassins, agents of the government-in-exile in London and common criminals <sup>35</sup>. Acting swiftly to restore morale, they assured their supporters that these attacks heralded the arrival of the long anticipated "heure de combat". The funerals of the two militants were transformed into demonstrations of Rexist strength and in his orations Matthys promised the mourners that the day of vengeance would soon arrive. Rex, he declared, had now reached the final stage in its quest for power and :

"nous devons accepter nos morts, comme les conséquences naturelles de notre combat et comme les conditions de notre victoire" <sup>36</sup>.

*Tableaux d'honneur* glorifying the Rexist martyrs were inaugurated in many *cercles* but the leadership also prudently obtained a small number of weapons and armed members of the *Formations de Combat* were present at the funeral of Gérard <sup>37</sup>. Nevertheless, although from late 1941, they recognised the need to distribute both arms permits and some hand-guns to vulnerable Rexist leaders, the German authorities remained opposed to any general arming of the Rexistes and discouraged all public display of this weaponry <sup>38</sup>.

In the event, however, the murders of Gérard and Oedekerke proved to be isolated incidents and for some six months there were to be no further attacks. Attention therefore returned to the tasks of internal reorganisation and, as 1941 drew to a close, morale within Rex appears on the whole to have been remarkably high. After the frustrating stalemate of the first year of the Occupation, the attack on the Soviet Union was still regarded as the key event which had revealed the true sense of the international conflict while the *Légion Wallonie* had provided Rex with the means whereby it could win the respect of the German leaders.

Thus, a consensus in favour of collaboration had at last emerged within the movement and even that most cautious of Rexistes, José Streel, now praised Degrelle's declarations in January as an act of remarkable historical prescience <sup>39</sup>. Events, it seemed, were at last moving in their favour and most Rexistes seemed ready to respond positively to Matthys' calls for a new spirit of unity, discipline and sacrifice. A cautious air of optimism was evident in the declarations of the Rexist leadership <sup>40</sup> and when Matthys addressed a rally in Liège in December 1941, he felt able to look to the future with confidence and enthusiasm. Recalling the many disappointments which the movement had

experienced during the previous year, he heralded the creation of the *Légion* as the decisive event which had resolved all of these difficulties and, with the German advances in the East heralding a definitive military victory for the Axis powers, Matthys enthusiastically praised Hitler as the man destined to be the leader of the New Europe <sup>41</sup>.

All Rexist hopes therefore were focussed on the new tactic of military collaboration and in the autumn of 1941 Rex recruited a second military unit, the *Gardes Wallonnes*, which like the *Légion Wallonie* was to form part of the *Wehrmacht*. Its intended tasks were, however, much less ambitious than those of the *Légion*. The *Gardes Wallonnes* were not to be front line troops and would operate only within the jurisdiction of the *Militärverwaltung* in Brussels. In this region (Belgium and the Nord and Pas de Calais in France), they were to guard places of strategic importance such as airfields, bridges and railway lines <sup>42</sup>.

The initiative to create this auxiliary corps had originally come from the local German administrators who wished, as always, to reduce to the minimum the number of German soldiers deployed in the Occupied territories. In the spring of 1941, the *Wehrmacht Kommandostab* in Brussels had approached the leaders of Rex and of the VNV to suggest that they should recruit local military units to take over certain tasks from the German forces. Both Degrelle and the VNV responded favourably. Though the duties of the new soldiers would be mundane, they undoubtedly hoped that the existence of these troops would strengthen their political position <sup>43</sup>.

Thus, during May and June the plans for the new units were finalised and the VNV began to recruit volunteers for the new *Vlaamse Wacht*. Rex, on the other hand, was slower in launching its new corps and it was only on 6 July that Degrelle announced simultaneously the creation of the *Légion Wallonie* and

of the *Gardes Wallonnes*. The *Chef de Rex* did all he could to glorify the modest responsibilities of this auxiliary corps, the name of which had been chosen to recall the Walloon soldiers who had fought in the Habsburg armies. The creation of this "armée de l'intérieur", he claimed with little justification, was an important initiative which confirmed Rex as the only legal political movement in francophone Belgium. The *Gardes Wallonnes* were, therefore, according to Degrelle, not merely German auxiliaries but the nucleus of a future New Order Belgian army <sup>44</sup>.

Despite Degrelle's extravagant claims, the new unit was, however, slow in coming into existence. In the days following his speech, directives were issued to the *cercles* calling for recruitment for the new unit to be completed in a matter of days but they were fully occupied with the creation of the *Légion* and little action was taken. Thus, in mid-July, the *Militärverwaltung* decided to suspend recruitment for the *Gardes Wallonnes* and potential volunteers were directed instead towards the *Légion* <sup>45</sup>. Hence, it was only in September that the Rexist leaders turned their attention once again to the *Gardes Wallonnes*. A new recruitment campaign was launched directed primarily at members of the *Formations de Combat* and, unlike recruitment for the *Légion Wallonie*, little attempt was made to attract non-Rexist into the *Gardes Wallonnes*. The new unit might play a key role in the maintenance of public order within Belgium and the leadership was clearly anxious that the *Gardes* should be composed of reliable supporters of Rex <sup>46</sup>.

Despite the depletion of the *Formations de Combat* by the creation of the *Légion*, a significant number of Rexist militiamen were prevailed upon to join the *Gardes Wallonnes* and the first battalion which assembled at the training camp at Andenne on 17 November was composed of several hundred Rexist <sup>47</sup>. Many of those who joined up were attracted by the well paid and



unheroic employment which the *Gardes* offered within Belgium but the success of this recruitment effort was also further evidence of the enthusiasm which existed within Rex for military collaboration. Some of those who entered the *Gardes Wallonnes* at this time undoubtedly believed that their participation, however modest, in the ranks of the *Wehrmacht* would contribute to the victory of the Rexist cause. Moreover, this political motive was all the more evident because of the mundane responsibilities of the *Gardes*. As José Streel admitted, the guard duties allocated to the new unit could be accomplished equally well by simple mercenaries <sup>48</sup> and few of the idealistic arguments advanced to justify the creation of the *Légion Wallonie* could be applied to the *Gardes Wallonnes*. Far from participating in the crusade to save Europe from Bolshevism, the soldiers in the new unit would be assisting the Germans directly by protecting their installations in Belgium against attacks by Belgian patriots.

Thus, the political importance of the creation of this auxiliary corps was substantial. Much more so than the *Légion*, its creation demonstrated the willingness of ordinary Rexist to be associated with the German cause and it did much to reinforce the reputation of the Rexist as the sinister handmaidens of the Occupying forces. It also demonstrated once again the Rexist leaders' blind faith in the tactic of military collaboration. They believed that they must exploit every opportunity to participate in the German campaigns whatever the cost might be for Rex. In the case of the *Gardes Wallonnes*, this was far from insignificant. The creation of the new unit once again weakened the organisational structure of Rex and, while it was anticipated that the *légionnaires* would return after a brief campaign in the East, the men of the *Gardes Wallonnes* were lost to the movement for the indefinite future.

Above all, recruitment for the *Gardes* confirmed the decline of the *Formations de Combat* into an organisation of only marginal importance. The

total membership of the Rexist militia had fallen to no more than a thousand by the end of 1941 <sup>49</sup>. From Wallonia alone, 900 men had left the *Formations* for service in the *Légion Wallonie* or *Gardes Wallonnes* while many others were reported to have departed because of popular hostility or in order to become voluntary labourers in factories in Germany <sup>50</sup>. In Charleroi, for example, membership of the militia had fallen from 700 to 210 and in many smaller towns - notably Mons and Namur - only small groups of the old, the very young and the infirm remained <sup>51</sup>. Thus, the *Formations* had all but ceased to exist as a national organisation and they remained of some significance only in Brussels, Charleroi and Liège.

The leaders of Rex and of the *Formations de Combat* did their best to rectify this position during the latter months of 1941. The responsibilities of the remaining leaders of the militia were reallocated and a thorough reorganisation of its internal structure was carried out which culminated in the introduction of a simplified hierarchy in January 1942 <sup>52</sup>. In addition, a series of inspections and training exercises was organised and a recruitment campaign succeeded in drawing in a small number of new recruits <sup>53</sup>. Matthys was, however, well aware that these efforts had had only a marginal impact and he commented after the war that the departures of 1941 had robbed the *Formations* of "leurs éléments les plus dynamiques et les plus vigoureux" <sup>54</sup>. A local Rexist official in Brussels made the same point somewhat more colourfully when he observed in November 1941 that the militia had become little more than an "armée Mexicaine" <sup>55</sup>.

The same optimism which led Rexist militants to join the German armies was also evident in the unexpected decision of José Streeel to assume responsibility for the political affairs of Rex. He had been named as

"conseiller politique" during Degrelle's absence <sup>56</sup> but Streeel was a journalist and intellectual with no experience of administrative tasks and at first it seemed unlikely that he would seek to exert much influence over Rex. In the event, however, it was this diffident man, rather than the experienced Pévenasse, who proved the more willing to assume the responsibilities of high office.

Some weeks after the departure of the *légionnaires*, Streeel suggested to Matthys that a *Service Politique* be established within the national headquarters of Rex with responsibility for the political direction of the movement. Streeel proposed himself as the head of the new department and, as he remarked after the war, his new-found enthusiasm for political activity was in part the consequence of "la sorte de ferveur qui gagnait nos milieux" at the time of the creation of the *Légion* <sup>57</sup>. Possessing few of the attributes necessary for a military career, he had had no wish to join the *Légion* but he was anxious to assist the cause of the *légionnaires* by preparing for the acquisition of power within Belgium. Streeel never tired of declaring that all successful seizures of power in the modern world were the fruit of careful preparation and he intended that the *Service Politique* should perform this role by developing the necessary policies as well as infiltrating trusted supporters of Rex into positions of influence throughout central and local government <sup>58</sup>.

Streeel did however also have a second purpose in proposing the creation of the *Service Politique* for he was determined that Rex should remain loyal to its original beliefs and not succumb to the easy temptation of becoming the mere servant of the Occupying forces. As we have seen, he had been deeply unhappy during the previous year at the drift of the movement towards indiscriminate and unprincipled collaboration and, with the appointment of the inexperienced and impressionable Matthys, he feared that Rex could once again

be exposed to the "adventurism" of the Rouleau era. By establishing the *Service Politique*, Streel hoped to create a bastion for his own more moderate and nationalist views and reverse the progressive radicalisation of Rex <sup>59</sup>.

José Streel was, without doubt, the most original thinker active in Rex and, in deciding to pass from the realm of journalism to that of political activity, he was attempting to put into action his long held belief in the need for a profound political and spiritual revolution. His very personal vision of the crisis of modern society had changed little during more than ten years as a journalist and writer and, even during the war, he remained strongly influenced by the formative experiences of his youth. Born in 1911, Streel - like Matthys - was illegitimate and had been raised by his unmarried mother in the industrial town of Jemeppe-sur-Meuse near Liège <sup>60</sup>. A diligent and talented pupil, Streel won a scholarship to attend the University of Liège where he received a doctorate for his theses analysing the ideas of Henri Bergson and Charles Péguy. Other intellectual influences on the young Streel included Barrès, Claudel, Léon Bloy, St. Thomas Aquinas and, inevitably, Charles Maurras, whose works he had discovered at the age of 14 <sup>61</sup>. Streel was no simple Maurrassian but, like many Belgian Catholics of his generation, he found much to admire in the spirit of *Action Française* and, although he would subsequently criticise its rigid and nostalgic ideology, its influence would remain evident throughout his adult life <sup>62</sup>.

During his university days, Streel contributed to a number of Catholic publications as well as becoming president of the Liège federation of the *Jeunesse Etudiantine Chrétienne* and in 1932 he came to the attention of a wider audience through the publication of an essay entitled *Les jeunes gens et la politique*. In this polemical work, Streel posed as the spokesman of a new post-Maurrassian generation of young Catholics alienated from the established

Catholic political party and the spiritual pieties of the *Association catholique de la jeunesse belge*. The need, Streel declared in tones which echoed the stance adopted at the same time by Emmanuel Mounier in France, was to create an engaged and heroic faith more appropriate to the modern age <sup>63</sup>.

Streel had first met Degrelle in 1930 and he soon became a regular contributor to Rexist publications. He was appointed as editor of the weekly "Rex" and later of *Le Pays Réel*, rapidly establishing himself as the principal philosopher of the new political movement <sup>64</sup>. The clarity of his style, the quality of his intellect and the consistency of his views all distinguished Streel from his colleagues in the Rexist press and his writings were appreciated beyond the confines of the movement <sup>65</sup>. Yet Streel always kept himself apart from the political activities of Rex preferring to trust to the talents and judgement of Degrelle. In character, he was very different from the turbulent and extrovert *Chef de Rex*. Shy, hesitant and reserved in conversation, Streel always retained the air of a young provincial somewhat ill at ease in Brussels. He was seen only rarely at the numerous literary and political events of the era and was happiest in the company of a few intellectual friends and of his young family <sup>66</sup>.

The revisionists who have sought to rehabilitate certain pro-German intellectuals have often argued that their heroes strayed inadvertently into collaboration in 1940 because they mistakenly believed that Germany had achieved a definitive military victory. Had he lived, Streel would have had no sympathy for such arguments. He came to regard his espousal of collaboration as the culmination of his intellectual reflections and, though his loyalty to Degrelle and to the Rexist movement was undoubtedly influential in determining his wartime stance, it was his interpretation of modern European history which lay at the heart of his personal justification of collaboration. Streel argued

that since the eighteenth century, Europe had fallen victim to a seductive liberal ideology which had fostered the horrors of unrestrained economic growth and had divided the peoples of Europe from their Christian heritage <sup>67</sup>. Liberalism was, however, a specious creed. Devoted to abstract principles, it ignored the deeper irrational realities which alone could ensure the survival of a civilisation. Hence, it had produced no lasting achievements and had culminated in the early years of the twentieth century in a profound spiritual crisis which manifested itself in the scepticism and nihilism of the intellectual elite and in the disguised barbarism of modern popular culture <sup>68</sup>.

Europe, Streeel believed, was threatened with ruin but fortunately a broad intellectual and political reaction had taken place against the easy pleasures of liberal individualism. This "révolution du vingtième siècle" - of which fascism was only one constituent element - offered the possibility of salvation because it worshipped no abstract creed and based itself on the "realities" of the modern age. As he declared :

"La révolution qui s'accomplit sous nos yeux marque un retour aux réalités empiriques, aux exigences de la vie, à la primauté de l'organique sur l'idéologique" <sup>69</sup>.

As an empirical doctrine, the new revolution, unlike liberalism, did not attempt to impose a common doctrine on the very diverse societies of Europe but instead adapted itself to the distinctive realities of each country. Hence, Streeel argued that its unity arose not from common achievements or institutions but from a shared spirit and moral attitude <sup>70</sup>. This spirit drew its strength from the irrational realities which, as Bergson had demonstrated, lay at the heart of the historical process. Like all great forces in history, the revolution of the twentieth century possessed "une mystique créatrice" which challenged the sterility of liberal rationalism <sup>71</sup>. The revolt against the old order was, thus, a force ordained by neither man nor God but by the historical process itself

and Streel regarded the emergence of this vast movement of regeneration as evidence of the workings of the will of history <sup>72</sup>.

Streel therefore believed that Europe was poised at a crucial moment in its evolution. Though he predicted that events such as Mussolini's march on Rome would in the future be accorded the same importance as the storming of the Bastille <sup>73</sup>, he was not entirely deterministic in his interpretation of history. Even the most remorseless historical force could be destroyed by human ignorance or folly and it remained possible that the New Order would not prevail over the forces of decomposition. Thus, he declared, Europe was presented with a stark choice between progressing towards a new High Middle Ages or collapsing into the barbarism of the Dark Ages <sup>74</sup>.

If European culture did survive, Streel foresaw a new golden age in which the natural, fragile order of civilisation would be restored. He frequently employed organic metaphors describing this new world as one in which communities, purged of the alien, cosmopolitan influences of the liberal era, would regain their unity <sup>75</sup>. There was an indisputably nostalgic air to this vision and, like many seduced by the ideas of Maurras, Streel never freed himself entirely from the spell of a harmonious pre-industrial world <sup>76</sup>. Yet he vehemently denied that he sought to reverse the course of history. The new order, he declared, would not escape from the complexities of industrial society but would overcome them. Above all, Streel fervently believed that the intellectual and political restructuring of society would end the moral and material alienation of the industrial working class from the social order. In the new world, their labour would be valued in human rather than economic terms and a spirit of common service for the community would replace exploitation by plutocratic capitalism <sup>77</sup>.

The new regime would be authoritarian in its principles but Streel's utopian vision had little in common with the oppressive conformity and bureaucratic structures associated with fascist states. There was to be no formal state ideology but instead a new value structure in which selfish individualism was superseded by such virtues as comradeship, loyalty, solidarity and enthusiasm <sup>79</sup>. These were the values of the old Christian civilisation of Europe and Streel was convinced that the establishment of the new order would coincide with a resurgence of the Catholic religion which in the liberal society had become no more than the observance of certain rituals <sup>79</sup>. Nor would there be an intrusive state apparatus. A strong state, a single party and an undisputed leader were all essential for the accomplishment of the revolution but they would subsequently wither away and institutions of local self-government such as corporations would take their place. These would form the basis of a largely devolved society in which the mechanisms of external constraint would be unnecessary and the former contract between governor and governed would be replaced by a united popular community <sup>80</sup>.

Both Streel's interpretation of the history of modern Europe and his vision of the future clearly owed much to the works of other thinkers. In particular, the influence of Bainville and Maurras, as well as of Péguy and Bergson was indisputable. Yet Streel was no plagiarist and he succeeded in combining the diverse influences of his wide reading with his personal experiences to produce a distinctive if rigid critique of the modern age. Often considered to be of less importance than some of his colleagues in the Brussels collaborationist press, Streel was in fact probably the most original thinker to have emerged on the extreme-right of Belgian politics in the 1930s. While men such as Poulet and De Becker had been deeply influenced by foreign ideologies, Streel's ideas always retained the imprint of his involvement in Belgian



intellectual debates of the inter-war years. In particular, his writings mirrored the concerns of many other younger Belgian Catholics who were unhappy with the role of the church as a guardian of the established temporal order and who wished to construct a more positive and active role for their faith.

Belgian Catholics were far from unique in advancing such ideas. In the 1930s, similar dissatisfaction was to be found amongst Catholic students and intellectuals throughout Europe. In revolt against the liberal democratic system, these Catholics often sympathised with aspects of what is now termed fascism but their ideas cannot be understood merely in terms of the conventional dichotomy between fascism and democracy<sup>31</sup>. This two-dimensional vision disguises the diversity and breadth of the intellectual debates of the era and many of these Catholic thinkers regarded themselves as the heirs to a distinctive political tradition which they hoped to resurrect as a third force between liberal democracy and anticlerical fascism. Streeel himself always stressed the distinctively Catholic origins of his ideas and initially had some sympathy with the concept of a "troisième force". Only in the later 1930s as Europe divided into two hostile camps did he come to regard the Catholic intellectual revolt as part of a more general movement of which the fascist movements were the "aile marchante"<sup>32</sup>.

Streeel's originality lay in his anxiety to see all contemporary developments as the enactment of a broad historical process and it was also this which ultimately determined his collaborationist stance. Collaboration with Germany was for him nothing less than a necessity imposed by history which would prevent the collapse of the West in an anarchy of chaos and dissolution. In the early months of the Occupation, Streeel, as we have seen, was reluctant to endorse collaboration fully and his writings at this time went no further than to argue that the military defeat of May 1940 gave Belgium no choice but to

work with Germany. But, with the German invasion of Russia, StreeI abandoned this measured tone and from then on he had no hesitation in portraying the war as an apocalyptic struggle between the forces of regeneration and the materialistic, barbarian enemies of western civilisation <sup>e3</sup>.

This rigid analysis of the nature of the conflict proved to be a prison from which StreeI was never to escape. During the latter years of the war, he recognised that the ascendancy of imperialist and extremist forces in Germany gave little hope that an Axis victory would in fact inaugurate the authentic New Order. In his writings in 1943 and 1944 he made few references to the protagonists in the military conflict and he was increasingly convinced that the real solution to the crisis of modern Europe was moral rather than political in nature <sup>e4</sup>.

But StreeI remained convinced to the last that an Allied victory would only hasten the demise of European civilisation and, despite his alienation from the German cause, he never renounced his views. Thus, from his post-war prison cell he observed with little optimism the reconstruction of Europe, writing in 1945 :

"les Barbares sont aux portes et leurs émissaires sont déjà dans la Cité. L'Occident est menacé de sombrer dans le byzantinisme politique et la dissolution morale" <sup>e5</sup>.

StreeI, however, no longer had a political message to preach. The will of history, in which he had placed so much faith, had failed and he was forced to admit that Europe could be saved only by an unprecedented moral regeneration or by the intervention of divine providence <sup>e6</sup>.

Although he was convinced of the historical necessity of collaboration, StreeI never believed that it was a policy which should be pursued at all costs. StreeI felt a profound loyalty to his country which went much deeper than any repetition of conventional formulas and his writings were

dominated by an insistence that collaboration must always be reconciled with an overriding commitment to the interests of Belgium. These twin loyalties were, he argued, in no way incompatible, for collaboration was essentially a lucid and realistic form of patriotism <sup>e7</sup>. Yet the danger always existed that, in their enthusiasm to work with the architects of the New Europe, the collaborationist minority would neglect their loyalty to their country. Thus, in his journalism, Streel exhorted his New Order audience to avoid all servility in their dealings with the Occupying forces and to guard against the danger of "dénationalisation" <sup>e8</sup>. Collaboration, he optimistically declared, must always be practised in a dignified spirit of partnership :

"La collaboration est une chose. L'aplatissement en est une autre qui confine à la trahison" <sup>e9</sup>.

Streel was especially anxious that collaborationists should not imitate German models. He continued to stress that there was no unitary New Order ideology and that it was the responsibility of each country to develop policies suited to its distinctive situation <sup>e10</sup>. Hence, those extremists who mouthed Germanic phraseology and advocated the introduction of Nazi policies in Belgium were infantile opportunists lacking in both scruples and realism. For example, commenting on those Flemish who talked of "l'espace vital" of their nation, he remarked dismissively :

"Les idées nouvelles sont comme des explosifs qu'il est dangereux de laisser aux mains des enfants. Quand on ne sait comment les manier, il en résulte des catastrophes" <sup>e11</sup>.

For Streel, as for a number of other collaborationists, Germany always remained a distant land of which he knew little. He derived no pleasure from his few contacts with German officials and throughout the war retained an instinctive antipathy to German ideas. They were, in his opinion, the product of an alien culture dominated by a very distinct national psychology and, though

the spirit of the Nazi revolution was to be admired, their application in Belgium would be an unwelcome and doomed enterprise <sup>92</sup>.

Streel's comments were directed principally towards the Rexist movement which he intended should become a bastion of his moderate views. Collaboration, he continually reminded Rexist, must be based on the firm ground of realism and they must reject the temptations of servile imitation :

"l'orthodoxie rexiste ne se mesure nullement à l'enthousiasme qu'on éprouve pour l'uniforme feldgrau" <sup>93</sup>.

Above all, Streel was anxious that Rex should retain its distinctive ideology forged in the years of political struggle before the German invasion. Though he accepted that some minor alterations were unavoidable in order to adapt to new realities, the basic tenets of Rexist beliefs remained valid. In his opinion, the originality of Rexist ideas reflected the distinctive character of Belgium and only by remaining faithful to these ideas would the Rexist ensure their political success <sup>94</sup>.

Matthys accepted Streel's proposal and the *Service Politique* came into operation during the autumn of 1941 <sup>95</sup>. It was intended that the department should be responsible for all of the political activities of Rex and, with the handful of staff at his disposal, Streel created specialised sub-sections responsible for the various areas of public life <sup>96</sup>. Its further expansion was, however, hampered by the perpetual Rexist problem of finance. The *Service Politique* survived only through those donations which Streel was able to collect from businessmen either sympathetic to Rex or anxious to curry favour with the movement and all attempts to give it a sounder financial basis - including an approach to the industrial magnate, the Baron de Launoit, who had helped the Rexist press in 1936 - proved unsuccessful <sup>97</sup>.

Nevertheless, the new service rapidly established itself as the foremost department of the *Etat-Major* bringing a considerably greater degree of central co-ordination to the political activity of Rex than had formerly been the case. Streel combined his direction of the department with his journalistic activities and he therefore delegated much of the administrative work to his deputies while retaining control of its central political direction. Above all, his position as *Chef du Service Politique* gave Streel direct access to Matthys and he soon became the most influential advisor of the *Chef de Rex a.i.* <sup>98</sup>.

Thus, a duumvirate of Matthys and Streel soon began to emerge as the effective leadership of Rex and this change was further reinforced at the end of the year by the appointment of Marcel Dupont as *Chef des Cadres Territoriaux* <sup>99</sup>. Aged 36, Dupont was a former *représentant de commerce* who had long been active in Rex. In his new post, he took charge both of the secretariat and finances of the *Etat-Major* as well as supervising the local Rexist groups and, though the centralisation of these responsibilities had obvious organisational benefits, the nomination of the faithful and unambitious Dupont also had important political consequences <sup>100</sup>. He took over much of the work accomplished by Pévenasse whose *Inspectorat Fédéral du Mouvement* rapidly lost much of its former importance <sup>101</sup>. Thus, both the creation of Streel's *Service Politique* and the appointment of Dupont had the effect of marginalising Pévenasse. As *Inspecteur Fédéral* and *Chef du Cadre Politique* Pévenasse would remain a prominent figure at Rexist rallies <sup>102</sup> but he lacked a power base within the movement and seems to have retained little influence over the formulation of policy.

The reasons for this shift of power are not entirely clear. Pévenasse does not appear to have resisted his demotion and he subsequently left to join the *Légion Wallonie* <sup>103</sup>. Hence, it is possible that he was reluctant

to remain in Belgium at a time when events on the Eastern front seemed to be of pre-eminent importance. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that Matthys and Streeel deliberately sought to reduce the power of their more experienced colleague. Pévenasse was a senior figure with substantial personal support within Rex and Matthys may well have regarded him as a potential threat to his leadership. Moreover, he was an impulsive emotional man who typified the combative and extremist image of Rex which Streeel was anxious to change. Whatever the true reason, Pévenasse's withdrawal was of considerable importance for the future direction of Rex. He was to remain absent from Belgium until 1943 and, by confirming Matthys and Streeel as the effective leaders of the movement, his departure opened the way to the introduction of Streeel's more moderate policies <sup>104</sup>.

A further major influence on the evolution of Rex after the departure of the *légionnaires* was the changing attitude of the *Militärverwaltung* which began for the first time to develop a long-term policy for Wallonia. Faithful to the instructions they had received from Hitler, the *Wehrmacht* administrators in Brussels, had initially regarded the francophone areas of Belgium largely as a future *terre de colonisation* for the Flemish nation where the German armies should simply maintain public order and promote industrial output. This was a strategy which had allowed little scope for political action and, as we have seen, Rex had been forced to stand idly by while the German authorities had worked with the established leaders of society <sup>105</sup>.

In the latter months of 1941, however, the *Militärverwaltung* developed a belated interest in the political potential of the Walloon people. This new policy was principally the work of Reeder who, as always, was allowed considerable freedom of action by the negligent von Falkenhausen. Encouraged perhaps by indications that the leaders of the Reich were coming to regard the

Walloons as a lost Germanic people, the *Militärverwaltungschef* sought to raise the francophone Belgians out of their "politisch-kulturellen Apathie". The Walloons, he declared, had lost their sense of ethnic identity through their dependence on the French intellectual world and he therefore intended to make them more aware of their Germanic origins. Thus, Reeder immediately set about encouraging pro-German cultural activities and he supported those groups such as the *Communauté Culturelle Wallonne* of Pierre Hubermont and even AGRA which were willing to act as the standard-bearers for the new ideas <sup>106</sup>.

Rex, on the other hand, had no place in this cultural process. In Reeder's opinion, it was wedded irredeemably to a pro-Belgian nationalist ideology and he hoped that the pro-German cultural groups would eventually supersede Rex as the basis of collaborationist activity in the region. Nevertheless, Reeder also accepted that his grand design for a cultural reorientation of Wallonia could only be a very long-term goal. Reporting to Berlin on his new strategy, he pointed out that, at least for the immediate future, the *Militärverwaltung* would have no choice but to work with the Rexists. Despite their many faults, they remained the only substantial pro-German grouping and to abandon them after they had sent their elite to fight on the Eastern front would be politically unacceptable. Thus, the other pro-German groups were told to confine their activities to the cultural domain and for the first time the *Militärverwaltung* gave substantial assistance to Degrelle's supporters <sup>107</sup>.

This new policy was, in part, a reflection of the failure of groups such as the MNPW and AGRA to establish themselves as credible alternatives to Rex. It also illustrated, however, the limited options open to the German administrators by the end of 1941. Their overriding concern was to control Belgium with the minimal deployment of German manpower and, while they had

initially been able to rely on the acquiescence of much of the Belgian bureaucracy, the polarisation of political loyalties had brought such cautious cohabitation to an end. Few Belgian officials were now willing to enact German commands and the *Militärverwaltung* turned instead to the VNV and to Rex. Contacts multiplied between the Rexist *cercles* and the German authorities and, for the first time, substantial numbers of Rexist were integrated into local government to act as the executants of German decrees <sup>108</sup>.

This *de facto* alliance between the *Militärverwaltung* and the Rexist would become progressively closer as the war continued. Reeder still hoped to make the Walloon people more aware of their Germanic roots <sup>109</sup> but the latter war years offered little hope for the success of his cultural policy and in practice he was obliged to concentrate on more short-term goals. His enforced alliance with Rex did not, however, cause the President of the *Militärverwaltung* to abandon his distrust of Rex and, more especially, of Degrelle whom he continued to regard as an impulsive and untrustworthy adventurer <sup>110</sup>. Nevertheless, Reeder's often outspoken criticisms disguised his position of weakness. In reality, he was dependent on the assistance of the Rexist who had become the indispensable allies of the German authorities in Wallonia.

This alliance was also not without consequences for Rex. It brought the movement out of its isolated position and gave it a place within the power structure of Occupied Belgium. The Rexist were no longer disruptive outsiders critical of the *status quo* but became - like the members of the VNV in Flanders - an element of the established order. Within Rex, its new quasi-official status discouraged the extremist revolutionary mentality which had been evident during the first year of the Occupation and it contributed to the ascendancy of Streel's more moderate views. On the other hand, by drawing Rex into the administration of Occupied Belgium, it served to reinforce the pro-German stance



of the movement. Collaboration ceased to be a matter of symbolic gestures and grandiloquent declarations but became the principal daily activity and, eventually, the *raison d'être* of Rex.

The efforts of Matthys and Streel to rebuild the Rexist organisation during the autumn and winter of 1941-1942 were quite successful but in February this work was suddenly interrupted by the arrival from Russia of a *légionnaire*, Jean Vermeire, with new orders from Degrelle. The *Chef de Rex's* message stated that the hardships of the Russian winter as well as skirmishes with enemy forces had severely depleted the *Légion* and that several hundred new volunteers must be recruited urgently in order to restore it to its full strength <sup>111</sup>.

These instructions caused some astonishment amongst the Rexist leaders. Though they had been aware of the problems encountered by their comrades in Russia, the creation of the *Légion* had been regarded as a once and for all effort <sup>112</sup>. Nevertheless, there could be no question of ignoring Degrelle's orders and a recruitment campaign was immediately launched with the initial aim of enrolling three hundred new soldiers by the end of February <sup>113</sup>. The Rexists were under no illusion that this would be an easy target to achieve and Pévenasse - who was to play a leading role in the campaign - wrote to militants of the need for "un authentique miracle de Rex" <sup>114</sup>. Their task was made all the more difficult by Degrelle's insistence that only "rexistes sûrs" should be recruited. During the previous months, the *Chef de Rex* had been embroiled in a series of acrimonious disputes with non-Rexist *légionnaires* and he was anxious to consolidate his hold on the *Légion* by ensuring that the new recruits should be reliable supporters of his views <sup>115</sup>.

In an attempt to whip up enthusiasm for the new recruitment campaign, Vermeire, Pévenasse, Matthys and other leaders toured the Rexist

*cercles* during February. In the east, they declared, the German forces were poised for victory and the new recruits would be joining the *Légion* only for the final triumphant offensive before returning to form the political elite of the new Belgium. Thus, the time had come, stated Pévenasse, for those "enfants gâtés" of Rex to prove that they too were willing to risk their lives for the cause and a number of *chefs de cercles* as well as Brahy, the commander of the *Formations de Combat*, and Pévenasse himself were among the first to enrol in the new contingent <sup>116</sup>.

Nevertheless, the campaign met with little immediate success. Recruitment for the *Légion* as well as for the *Gardes Wallonnes* had already absorbed most of those militants - notably from the *Formations de Combat* - who were attracted by a military career and those who had remained behind were, on the whole, unwilling to forsake families and jobs to participate in such adventures. Moreover, while in August 1941 it had appeared that the *Légion* would be participating in a harmless *promenade militaire*, those who chose to join this second contingent were all too aware that they would be drawn into a violent war against a determined enemy <sup>117</sup>.

Faced with this reluctance, the tone of the recruitment campaign changed to one of conscription. Addressing a major rally in Brussels on 22 February, Matthys announced that he was ordering all but a few of the local and national Rexist leaders to join the *Légion*. The success of the *Légion*, he declared, was of paramount importance for the future both of Belgium and of Rex and, though the departure of these experienced men would prejudice much of the work of reconstruction accomplished during the previous six months, this was a sacrifice which the movement must be willing to accept :

"Il importe peu que certains secteurs soient actuellement laissés en friche si à l'heure décisive nous avons ces hommes qui forceront le destin" <sup>118</sup>.

10 March was set as the date for the departure of the new contingent of *légionnaires* and on that day approximately 450 volunteers assembled on the Grand Place in Brussels, before marching past the Rexist headquarters in the avenue du Midi <sup>119</sup>. Unlike the first contingent of volunteers, the new unit was portrayed as unashamedly Rexist in character and it seems that the vast majority were indeed members of the movement. The superficially impressive total had, however, been achieved only by enrolling a considerable number of men from the *Gardes Wallonnes* and, despite the presence of Pévenasse and other senior Rexist officials, the most prominent group in the new unit were 150 or so teenage boys from the *Jeunesses Rexistes* <sup>120</sup>. Some of these short-trousered soldiers were as young as fifteen or sixteen years old and within the *Légion* they formed a distinct unit under the command of their leader John Hagemans, the *Prévôt* of the *Jeunesses Rexistes* <sup>121</sup>.

Although it remains unclear whether it was Degrelle or the Rexist leaders in Belgium who initially decided to enrol these adolescents, the recruitment campaign had from an early stage paid much attention to attracting their support. Special meetings of the *Jeunesses Rexistes* had taken place and the decisions of Hagemans and of several of his assistants to volunteer for the *Légion* were given wide publicity <sup>122</sup>. Strenuous efforts were made to reassure the recruits that they would come to no harm and Hagemans and others were reported to have promised their families that the young soldiers would only make propaganda tours of Germany, the Balkans and liberated areas of Russia before returning to Belgium for the new school year in the autumn <sup>123</sup>. On their arrival in Russia, however, all such assurances were rapidly forgotten and Degrelle insisted that the members of the *Jeunesses Rexistes* must join the other *légionnaires* at the front. Hagemans was apparently outraged by this deception and protested to the *Chef de Rex* about the treatment of his young

followers. His protests were, however, ignored and many of these adolescent soldiers - including Hagemans himself - subsequently died in the battles in the Caucasus region during the summer and autumn of 1942 <sup>124</sup>.

The consequences of the recruitment campaign for the organisation of Rex were predictable. The *Jeunesses Rexistes* were decimated by the departures of their leaders and, though Hagemans' successors attempted to remedy the situation, the youth groups never recovered their former importance <sup>125</sup>. The impact on the adult organisation was also substantial. Rex had once again been deprived of many of its most experienced militants and the impact of these departures was compounded by the decision of Matthys to censure those Rexist leaders who had refused to volunteer for the *Légion*. The *Chef de Rex a.i.* had clearly been annoyed by this spirit of defiance and, a few days after the departure of the new contingent of volunteers, he dismissed a number of officials who had failed to respond to his orders <sup>126</sup>.

Thus, the success of the new recruitment campaign had only been achieved at the price of further weakening the structure of the movement and, ultimately, of sending a large number of Rexist youths to their deaths in Central Asia. By any standard it was a Pyrrhic victory, but few in the Rexist leadership seem to have felt any remorse on learning of these deaths. Collaboration was a harsh world in which there was little place for the weaknesses of emotions and the Rexist leaders remained convinced that only through participating in the military campaigns of the German armies could they obtain the all-important political support of the Nazi leadership. Their eyes fixed unswervingly on this illusory final goal, the Rexistists were doomed to advance ever further into an abyss which would bring them only sorrow, popular odium and, ultimately, disaster for their cause.

### Footnotes : Chapter Three

- (1) TB 18, 21 Dec. 1941, pp. 2063-2064 ; TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2343 ; TB 23, 15 Apr. 1943, p. 2940.
- (2) J. Streeel 'Au sujet de l'article 115' [p. 8] and 'Analyse de l'acte d'accusation : première suite' p. 3, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel.
- (3) *Le P.R.*, 7 Aug. 1941, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.
- (4) *Le P.R.*, 31 July 1941, p. 1, 'La croisade contre le bolchevisme' ; Ch. d'Ydewalle *Degrelle ou la triple imposture*, p. 195.
- (5) Henry Marcovitz Pro Just., 7 Mar. 1946, C2GM, PF 3 ; Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, p. 70, C2GM ; Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 28 Aug. 1945 and Gilbert Delrue Pro Just., 8 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Cour Militaire, Docts. 10 and 13.
- (6) JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (7) Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, pp. 72-73, C2GM.
- (8) Henry Marcovitz Pro Just., 7 Mar. 1946, C2GM, PF 3.
- (9) Anonymous letter 17 Apr. 1987, Private Papers of the Author.
- (10) See notes 7 and 8 ; Ch. d'Ydewalle *Degrelle ou la triple imposture*, p. 195 ; *La Belgique Indépendante* 7 Jan. 1943, cited in C2GM, Fonds INBEL/980 ; Interview between Carl Peeters and José Gotovitch 24 Mar. 1972, p. 48, C2GM, Degrelle now insists that he only acted against Rouleau at the insistence of the other Belgian officers in the *Légion* ; Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988.
- (11) See p. 55.
- (12) Interview between Carl Peeters and José Gotovitch 24 Mar. 1972, pp. 48-49, C2GM ; INBEL 14 June 1942 No. 2, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/1087 ; Anonymous letter 17 Apr. 1987, Private Papers of the Author ; Telegram from Chargé d'affaires at Madrid 10 Feb. 1951, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Brussels, Doct. 11179 ; Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988.
- (13) Orders of Chef de Rex 7 Aug. 1941, C2GM, C 11/100.
- (14) JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. ; Journal de V. Matthys p. 6, C2GM.
- (15) See note 13 ; Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 60, C2GM.
- (16) VM Pro Just., 12 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 48-51 ; Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988 ; R. De Becker *Le livre des vivants et des morts*, p. 70 ; J-M Etienne *Le mouvement rexiste*, p. 72.
- (17) VM Pro Just., 12 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 48-51 ; *La Meuse* 5 Mar. 1947, pp. 1 and 3, 'Des Tueurs rexistes...'
- (18) 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12, p. 35 ; L. Degrelle *Lettres à mon Cardinal*, p. 134 ; Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, p. 74, C2GM.
- (19) Les cahiers verts de José Streeel p. 154, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel ; JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. ; Interview with M. Paul Jamin 11 Dec. 1987 ; R. De Becker 'La collaboration...', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* No. 497-498 (1970), 31 and 59.
- (20) Orders of Chef de Rex 7 Aug. 1941, C2GM, C 11/100. See also Figure Four.
- (21) Journal de V. Matthys p. 6, C2GM.
- (22) *Le P.R.*, 9 Aug. 1941, p. 6, 'Le message du Chef'.
- (23) Message du Chef de Rex a.i. 7 Sept. 1941 and Constant to FC 21 Apr. 1942, C2GM, C 11/134 and 265 ; *Le P.R.*, 4 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Journée Légionnaire' and 12 Sept. 1941, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.
- (24) *Le P.R.*, 16 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Le Chef de Rex a.i....'
- (25) The *chef de cercle* of Brussels-West wrote to Degrelle : "...vous avez eu la main heureuse en choisissant le Chef Matthijs. C'est le meilleur révolutionnaire que nous ayons à Rex. Il a su parfaitement s'imposer" ; Backx to LD 3 Nov. 1941, C2GM, C 11/279.
- (26) Message du Chef de Rex a.i. 7 Sept. 1941, C2GM, C 11/134 ; *Le P.R.*, 10 Aug. 1941, p. 1, 'Les devoirs de la Légion qui reste' and 7 Sept. 1941, pp. 1 and 8, 'Aux côtés de la Légion' ; *National Socialisme* 15 May 1943, p. 4, 'Rapport du Chef des Cadres Territoriaux'.

- (27) *Ibid* ; *Le P.R.* 12 Sept. 1941, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement', 14 Sept 1941, p. 1, 'Nous allons doubler nos effectifs', 17 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Le premier devoir...' and 24 Oct. 1941, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement' ; 'E.M. du mouvement rexiste' [Feb. 1942], C2GM, Fonds INBEL/963.
- (28) *Le P.R.* 2 Sept. 1941, p. 3, 'Les nominations de bourgmestres', 21 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Mesures de protection...' and 21 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'La rencontre des forces nouvelles'.
- (29) Message du Chef de Rex a.i. 7 Sept. 1941, C2GM, C 11/134 ; *Le P.R.* 14 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Nous allons doubler nos effectifs' and 9 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'Réponse à la mort'.
- (30) TB 17, 22 Sept. 1941, p. 1815 ; TB 18, 21 Dec. 1941, p. 2063 ; *Le P.R.* 25-26 and 28 Dec. 1941, p. 2, 'Solidarité Légionnaire'.
- (31) Bulletin des Dirigeants 20 May 1941 and *Vouloir* [1941] No. 1, C2GM, C 11/99 and 323.17 ; *Le P.R.* 2 Aug. 1941, p. 3, 'La "Solidarité Légionnaire"', 12 Aug. 1941, p. 1, 'Pour la "solidarité légionnaire"' and 21 Nov. 1941, p. 1, 'Solidarité Légionnaire'.
- (32) *Le P.R.* 19 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'A toutes les Formations du Mouvement' and 3 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'Jean Oedekerke est tombé...'.
- (33) Plaidoyer prononcé par Victor Matthys devant le Conseil de Guerre de Charleroi p. 2, C2GM, JP 258 ; P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, p. 74.
- (34) *Le P.R.* 7 Oct. 1941, p. 2, 'Les légionnaires jurent de venger...' ; De Zutter to Constant 2 Oct. 1941 and Leclercq to Constant 12 Oct. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Correspondence of légionnaires, Docts. 2 and 3.
- (35) *Le P.R.* 20 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'La victoire seule venge les morts', 21 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Mesures de protection...', 22 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'Les criminels et leurs victimes' and 15 Nov. 1941, p. 1, 'Les "héros" de Tournai' ; Pévenasse to Chefs de Cercles 2 Oct. 1941, C2GM, C 11/289. In fact, the murders were the work of a right-wing patriotic group, acting possibly with the encouragement of British agents : J. Willequet *La Belgique sous la botte*, pp. 124 and 269-271.
- (36) *Le P.R.* 21 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Une foule recueillie a exalté...' and 9 Oct. 1941, pp. 1 and 3, 'Réponse à la mort' ; 'Ordres pour les funérailles du Cde Jean Oedekerke' and 'Le discours de Victor Matthys', C2GM, C 11/290.
- (37) *Le P.R.* 24 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'L'hommage de Rex...' and 26 Nov. 1941, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement' ; Albert Constant Pro Just., 4 July 1946 and Marc Feytaerts Pro Just., 8 Oct. 1944 and 7 Aug. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Docts. 237, 305-309 and 313 ; Le Gorlais to Constant 28 Sept. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Correspondence of légionnaires, Doct. 1.
- (38) Reusch to VM 15 Oct. 1941 and OFK Brussel to EM of Rex 7 Oct. 1941, C2GM, C 11/154 and 220.
- (39) *Le P.R.* 14 Dec. 1941, p. 1, 'Degrelle avait raison'.
- (40) e.g. *Le P.R.* 18 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'Notre caution' ; Backx to LD 3 Nov. 1941 and *Vouloir* Dec. 1941, C2GM, C 11/279 and 323.17.
- (41) *Le P.R.* 23 Dec. 1941, p. 3, 'Deux mille militants liégeois...'.
- (42) 'La Garde Wallonne', 'Conditions d'engagement dans les Gardes Wallonnes' and 'Garde Wallonne : Détachement de Namur', C2GM, C 11/274bis/1, 2 and 7.
- (43) L. Van Daele 'De Vlaanse Wacht Juni 1941 - September 1944' (Rijksuniversiteit Gent Mémoire de licence 1986), pp. 31-41 ; J. Streel 'Au sujet de l'article 115' [pp. 15-16], C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (44) LD to Formations de Combat de Bruxelles 6 July 1941, C2GM, C 11/275 ; *Le P.R.* 5 July 1941, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement', 1 Apr. 1942, p. 3, 'Nos gardes wallonnes' and 24 July 1942, p. 1, 'La gloire des Gardes Wallonnes' ; J. Streel 'Analyse de l'acte d'accusation : première suite' p. 7, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (45) Ile Etendard FC Ordre spécial No. 5 11 July 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 26 ; Georges to Chefs de Cercles 12 July 1941, C2GM, C 11/170 ; Documentation Jans 49 ; *Le P.R.* 19 July 1941, p. 5 and 22 July 1941, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.
- (46) Non-Rexist volunteers were required to join the *Formations de Combat* and for some time Rex tried to keep the recruitment campaign secret. It was only towards the end of October that advertisements began to appear in the press : Ile Etendard FC Ordres hebdomadaires 13 and 27

Sept. 1941 and Ordre spécial 2 Oct. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 28-30 and Documentation Générale, Farde H, Docts. 8 and 11 ; *Le P.R.*, 24 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'Gardes Wallonnes'.

(47) The total number of Rexist volunteers is not known but *Etendard II* of the *Formations de Combat* provided at least 300 volunteers ; Constant to EMF of FC 1 and 5 Nov. 1941 and IIE Etendard FC Ordres hebdomadaires 31 Oct. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 241 and Documentation Générale, Farde H, Docts. 27 and 29.

(48) *Le P.R.*, 25 Jan. 1942, p. 1, 'Les Gardes Wallonnes'.

(49) Exact statistics do not exist but various documents point to FC membership being no more than 1,000 ; Historique de l'organisation des FC and Organisation des moyens de transports 1 May 1942, C 11/263.

(50) Albert Constant Pro Just., 26 Jan. 1946 and Constant to EMF of FC 27 Sept. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 152-153 and Documentation Générale, Farde H, Doct. 9.

(51) *Ibid.* See also p. 244.

(52) Résumé de la réunion d'état-major 7 [Sept.] 1941 and EMF of FC Ordres hebdomadaires 1 Jan. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 28-30 and Documentation Générale, Farde A, Doct. 4-7 ; Historique de l'organisation des FC, C2GM, C 11/263.

(53) e.g. IIE Etendard FC Ordre spécial 11 Oct. 1941 and Ordres hebdomadaires 25 Oct. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Farde D, Docts. 9 and 14-15 ; *Le P.R.*, 24 Oct. and 8 Nov. 1941, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.

(54) VM Pro Just., 25 Nov. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 210-211.

(55) Backx to LD 3 Nov. 1941, C2GM, C 11/279.

(56) See p. 169.

(57) JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. An undated document in the archives of the C2GM is most probably the report submitted by Streel to Matthys proposing the creation of the *Service Politique* : 'Note pour le Chef de Rex a.i...', C2GM, C 11/223.

(58) *Ibid.* ; R. Poulet Prison Diary 12 July 1946 (Private Collection) ; JS 'Note écrite à annexer au procès-verbal de mon audition du 24 mai 1945' 27 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.

(59) JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. See also pp. 75-76.

(60) Questionnaire addressed by Alain Dantoing to Madame Hepp, veuve Streel, pp. 2-3 and J. Streel Mémoire I Famille, Enfance, Jeunesse, C2GM, PS 16 and Fonds José Streel.

(61) JS to Cardinal Van Roey 2 Dec. 1945, C2GM, PS 16 ; JS to [Le Soir] 8 Feb. [1943], Aud. Gén., Doss. JS [Supplementary File 6, Doct. 101].

(62) *Le Soir* 23 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'L'unité dans la diversité' ; *Le P.R.*, 26 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'L'Etat corporatif et l'ordre de demain'. Writing in January 1946, Streel described himself as "un ancien maurrassien" ; JS Letter of 19 Jan. 1946, C2GM, Fonds José Streel. Re. the influence of Maurras in Belgium, see : E. Defoort 'L'action française dans le nationalisme belge 1914-1918' and 'Le courant réactionnaire...', *Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine* VII (1976), 113-150 and VIII (1977), 81-149.

(63) J. Streel *Les jeunes gens et la politique* (Louvain, 1932) ; JS to Cardinal Van Roey 2 Dec. 1945, C2GM, PS 16 ; R. Poulet 'Je pardonne à mes assassins' p. 2, C2GM, PS 16. Re. Mounier, see M. Winock *Histoire politique de la revue "Esprit" 1930-1950* (Paris, 1975).

(64) JS to Cardinal Van Roey 2 Dec. 1945, C2GM, PS 16 ; J-M Etienne *Le mouvement rexiste*, pp. 69 and 72.

(65) R. Poulet Prison Diary 8-9 July 1946 (Private Collection) ; G. Figeys Carnets 21 Feb. 1946, pp. 49-50, C2GM, JP 093.

(66) R. Poulet Prison Diary 8-11 July 1946 (Private Collection) ; JS to [Le Soir] 8 Feb. [1943], Aud. Gén., Doss. JS [Supplementary File 6, Doct. 101] ; J. Willequet *La Belgique sous la botte*, pp. 189-192. Degrelle has often praised Streel, describing him as the Robert Brasillach of Belgium ; L. Degrelle *Lettres à mon Cardinal*, p. 174 ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, p. 304.

(67) JS to Dominique 6 Jan. 1946, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.

(68) J. Streel *La Révolution du vingtième siècle* (Brussels, 1942), pp. 42-59 and 122-126 ; JS Chronique des Instituteurs 7 June 1943, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS [Supplementary File 5, Doct. 41].

Streel felt a deep alienation from the modern age : JS to Père Claeys Bouuaert 3 Feb. 1946, p. 5, C2GM, PS 16 ; Speech prepared by José Streel for his trial [1945], p. 3, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.

(69) JS Chronique des Instituteurs 23 Nov. 1941 and 12 Apr. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Chroniques radiophoniques ; *Le Soir* 26 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'L'essentiel et l'accessoire'.

(70) J. Streel *La Révolution du vingtième siècle*, p. 21 ; *Le Soir* 19 June 1941, p. 1, 'L'Idéalisme, symptôme de décadence' and 9 July 1942, p. 1, 'Le triomphe de l'avenir'.

(71) *Le Soir* 5 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'Le frisson sacré' ; JS Chronique des Instituteurs 5 July 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Chroniques radiophoniques ; J. Streel *La Révolution du vingtième siècle*, p. 60.

(72) *Le Soir* 16 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'La Révolution à travers la guerre' and 6 Mar. 1941, pp. 1-2, 'Quelques mobiles...' ; J. Streel *La Révolution du vingtième siècle*, pp. 7-81.

(73) e.g. *Le P.R.* 30 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'Le siècle du fascisme'.

(74) J. Streel *La Révolution du vingtième siècle*, p. 73 ; *Le Soir* 20 Mar. 1941, p. 1, 'Révolution et Radicalisme' and 30 July 1942, p. 1, 'La fin du Renanisme'.

(75) e.g. J. Streel *La Révolution du vingtième siècle*, pp. 60-64.

(76) Les cahiers verts de José Streel p. 246, C2GM, Fonds José Streel ; *Le P.R.* 11 Feb. 1941, p. 1, 'Les conceptions possibles...'.

(77) *Ibid.*, pp. 254-260 ; *Le Soir* 3 Apr. 1941, p. 1, 'La lutte des classes...' ; J. Streel Chronique des Instituteurs 26 Oct. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Chroniques Radiophoniques.

(78) *Le Soir* 20 Feb. 1941, pp. 1-2, 'La nécessité du Totalitarisme', 9 July 1942, p. 1, 'Le triomphe de l'avenir' and 30 July 1942, p. 1, 'La fin du Renanisme'.

(79) J. Streel *La Révolution du vingtième siècle*, pp. 59, 120-121 and 137-138.

(80) *Ibid.*, pp. 105-117 and 210-211 ; *Le Soir* 27 Feb. 1941, p. 1, 'Le Chef' ; *Le P.R.* 17 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Il ne s'agit pas...' and 14 Mar. 1941, pp. 1-2, 'La nouvelle organisation...'.

(81) The problems created by a two-fold division are illustrated by the recent work of Zeev Sternhell which attempts to incorporate writers as diverse as Mounier and De Man into a uniform fascist ideology ; *Ni droite ni gauche : l'idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris, 1983).

(82) *Le Soir* 26 Feb. 1942, p. 1, 'Le destin de la "troisième force"' ; *Le P.R.* 19 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'Chapelles politiques' ; J. Streel Notice pour mon défenseur [première suite], C2GM, Fonds José Streel.

(83) *Le P.R.* 14 Dec. 1941, p. 1, 'Degrelle avait raison' and 6 May 1942, p. 1, 'La guerre et l'ordre nouveau' ; J. Streel 'Analyse de l'acte d'accusation : première suite' pp. 9 and 11, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.

(84) J. Streel Mémoire : Après mon départ de Rex, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.

(85) Speech prepared by José Streel for his trial [1945], p. 3 and Les cahiers verts de José Streel pp. 31-35, 105 and 237, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.

(86) JS Letter of 19 Jan. 1946, C2GM, Fonds José Streel ; JS to Mgr. Picard 26 Dec. 1945, p. 4, C2GM, PS 16.

(87) *Le P.R.* 8 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'Patriotisme, trahison...'

(88) *Le P.R.* 24 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'L'originalité de Rex'.

(89) *Ibid.* ; *Le P.R.* 31 Jan. 1942, p. 1, 'Mettons à profit...' ; *Le Soir* 30 Jan. 1941, pp. 1-2, 'Les trois mobiles...'.

(90) *Le P.R.* 11 Dec. 1941, p. 1, 'Les petits pays...'.

(91) *Le P.R.* 1 Apr. 1941, p. 1, 'A propos d'espace vital', 8 Nov. 1941, p. 1, 'Nos sentiments et nos intérêts' and 31 Jan. 1942, p. 1, 'Mettons à profit...'.

(92) R. De Becker 'La collaboration...', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* No. 497-498 (1970), 10 ; J. Streel Notice pour mon défenseur [première suite], C2GM, Fonds José Streel ; *Le Soir* 23 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Technique politique...' ; *Le P.R.* 4 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Les étapes du corporatisme' and 15 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'La neutralité est dépassé'.

(93) *Le P.R.* 26 Nov. 1941, p. 1, 'La collaboration et son esprit'.

(94) *Le P.R.* 24 Oct. 1941, p. 1, 'L'originalité de Rex'.

(95) The exact date of the establishment of the *Service Politique* remains unclear. Streel stated that he became the *Chef du Service Politique* in October 1941 but some documents suggest



that it existed as early as September. On the other hand, it appears that the *Service des Nominations* was not immediately absorbed into the new department ; J. Streel 'Observations sur l'acte d'accusation' p. 1, C2GM, Fonds José Streel ; Thysen to Renauld 8 Sept. 1941 and Lambinon to Commission Consultative de l'Enseignement 29 Nov. 1941, C2GM, C 11/226 and PL 1/332.

(96) J. Streel Notice pour mon défenseur (cinquième suite), C2GM, Fonds José Streel ; LC Pro Just., 27 Nov. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 154-155.

(97) JS 'Note écrite...' 27 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. ; LC Pro Just., 12 May 1947 and VM Pro Just., 14 and 20 May 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Enquête Complémentaire, Farde C, Doct. 19.

(98) JS Pro Just., 4 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Cour Militaire, Doct. 12 ; J. Streel 'Au sujet de l'article 115' [pp. 16-17], C2GM, Fonds José Streel.

(99) Once again, the exact date of the appointment is not known but it had taken place by December 1941 : Inspecteur Fédéral to Chefs de Cercles 24 Dec. 1941, C2GM, C 11/182.

(100) LC Pro Just., 21 Mar. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Marcel Dupont, Info., Section 5. All correspondence from the *Etat-Major* to local officials had to be counter-signed by Dupont and he frequently attended local Rexist meetings ; e.g. *Le P.R.* 21 Feb. 1942, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.

(101) In 1942, Jean Georges was temporarily replacing Pévenasse as *Inspecteur Fédéral* but he paid little attention to this task and featured only rarely in correspondence ; *Le P.R.* 25 Mar. 1942, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.

(102) e.g. *Le P.R.* 23 Dec. 1941, p. 3, 'Deux mille militants liégeois...'

(103) See p. 193.

(104) Significantly, when Pévenasse did return, he opposed what he regarded as the undue hesitancy and moderation of the Rexist leaders in Belgium ; see pp. 388-389.

(105) See pp. 63-64 and 102-104 ; A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers IV*, 10-14 and V, 45-51 ; TB 18, 21 Dec. 1941, p. 2020.

(106) TB 17, 22 Sept. 1941, p. 1863 ; TB 18, 21 Dec. 1941, pp. 2021 and 2064.

(107) *Ibid.*, pp. 2061-2064.

(108) See pp. 223-236.

(109) See, for example : TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, p. 2758.

(110) See, for example : Reeder to OKH 26 Jan. 1943, C2GM, Procès von Falkenhausen, Doct. 117 ; Reeder to Keitel 19 Nov. 1943, C2GM, C 11/124bis, Doct. 11.

(111) *Le P.R.* 11 Feb. 1942, p. 3, 'L'appel du Chef de Rex'. The number of able *légionnaires* had fallen to only 350 by February 1942 : Légion Belge "Wallonie" Historique p. 7, C2GM, W 4 ; Pierre Pauly Pro Just., 20 June 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Info., Doct. 18.

(112) J. Streel 'Au sujet de l'article 115' [p. 10], C2GM, Fonds José Streel. Some demobilized *légionnaires* had already returned to Belgium and reported on their experiences in Russia ; e.g. *Le P.R.* 13 Jan. 1942, p. 3, 'Deux légionnaires exaltent...'

(113) *Le P.R.* 11 Feb. 1942, p. 1, 'La Légion vous attend !'

(114) Pévenasse circular 17 Feb. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Doct. 90bis.

(115) *Ibid.* ; J. Streel 'Au sujet de l'article 115' [pp. 10-11], C2GM, Fonds José Streel.

(116) See note 114 ; *Le P.R.* 11 Feb. 1942, p. 1, 'La Légion vous attend !', 17 Feb. 1942, p. 3, 'Les rexistes de Charleroi, Mons, Tournai et La Louvière...' and 18 Feb. 1942, p. 1, 'La magnifique réponse du Hainaut...'

(117) As in August 1941, Rexist were often discouraged from volunteering by the attitude of their families. One wife wrote to her husband : 'On veut vous envoyer mourir au front russe ; je ne veux pas que tu parte...Tu dois quitter ce mouvement et ne pas aller à la Légion Wallonie' ; *L'Avenir du Luxembourg* 6 Nov. 1946, pp. 1-2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre'.

(118) *Le P.R.* 24 Feb. 1942, pp. 1, 3 and 4, 'Notre Légion de l'Est...' and 'Le discours du Chef a.i.' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis*, II 85-86.

(119) *Le P.R.* 11 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'Pour la Patrie et pour l'Europe'. On the morning of the parade, the Rexist offices were damaged by a bomb attack and another small bomb exploded during

the parade injuring some Rexist bystanders : P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis*, II 106-107 ; Police Report of 10 Mar. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 118 ; *Le P.R.* 17 Mar. 1942, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement'. Re. the number of volunteers, see : Légion Belge "Wallonie" Historique p. 20, C2GM, W 4 ; Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 25 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 64-70. *Le P.R.* reported that the contingent was divided into 6 platoons, each composed of 75 men : *Le P.R.* 11 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'Pour la Patrie et pour l'Europe'. Reeder stated, perhaps inaccurately, that only 380 volunteers had been recruited : TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2346.

(120) Pierre Houpline Pro Just., 4 Mar. 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse, Cour Militaire, Doct. 1b ; *Le P.R.* 15 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'Malgré les départs...'. Apparently, many more *Gardes Wallonnes* had wished to depart but were retained in the country on the orders of the German authorities. In the summer, however, approximately 190 *Gardes* were permitted to join the *Légion* : *Le P.R.* 6 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'Six cents légionnaires se sont inscrits...', 23 July 1942, p. 1, 'Nouveau départ de volontaires...' and 26 Aug. 1942, p. 4, 'Un nouveau contingent...'.  
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(121) Légion Belge "Wallonie" Historique p. 20, C2GM, W 4 ; *Le P.R.* 11 Mar. 1942, p. 3, 'La Jeunesse continue...', 28 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'Dans Bruxelles ensoleillée...' and 12 Feb. 1943, p. 1, 'Nos héros...' ; Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 28 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Cour Militaire, Doct. 10. Degrelle has stated with some exaggeration that the contingent was composed almost exclusively of the *Jeunesses Rexistes* : J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, pp. 277-278.

(122) *Le P.R.* 13 Feb. 1942, p. 1, 'Pour le service du Chef...', 19 Feb. 1942, p. 3, 'La J.N.S. de Liège...' and 26 Feb. 1942, p. 3, 'Notre groupe de combat...'.  
.

(123) Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 25 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 64-70 ; Gilbert Delrue Pro Just., 8 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Cour Militaire, Doct. 13 ; *L'Avenir du Luxembourg* 6 July 1946, pp. 1-2, 'Les joyeux compères...'.  
.

(124) A persistent rumour asserts that Hagemans, overcome with remorse at these deaths, deliberately sought his own death : Henry Marcovitz Pro Just., 7 Mar. 1946, C2GM, PF 3 ; Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 28 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Cour Militaire, Doct. 10.  
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(125) Documentation Jans 303 ; *Le P.R.* 19 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Nos jeunesses'. Hagemans returned briefly to Belgium in April in an attempt to solve the problems of the Rexist youth organisation : *Le P.R.* 18 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'Le prévôt de la J.R....'.  
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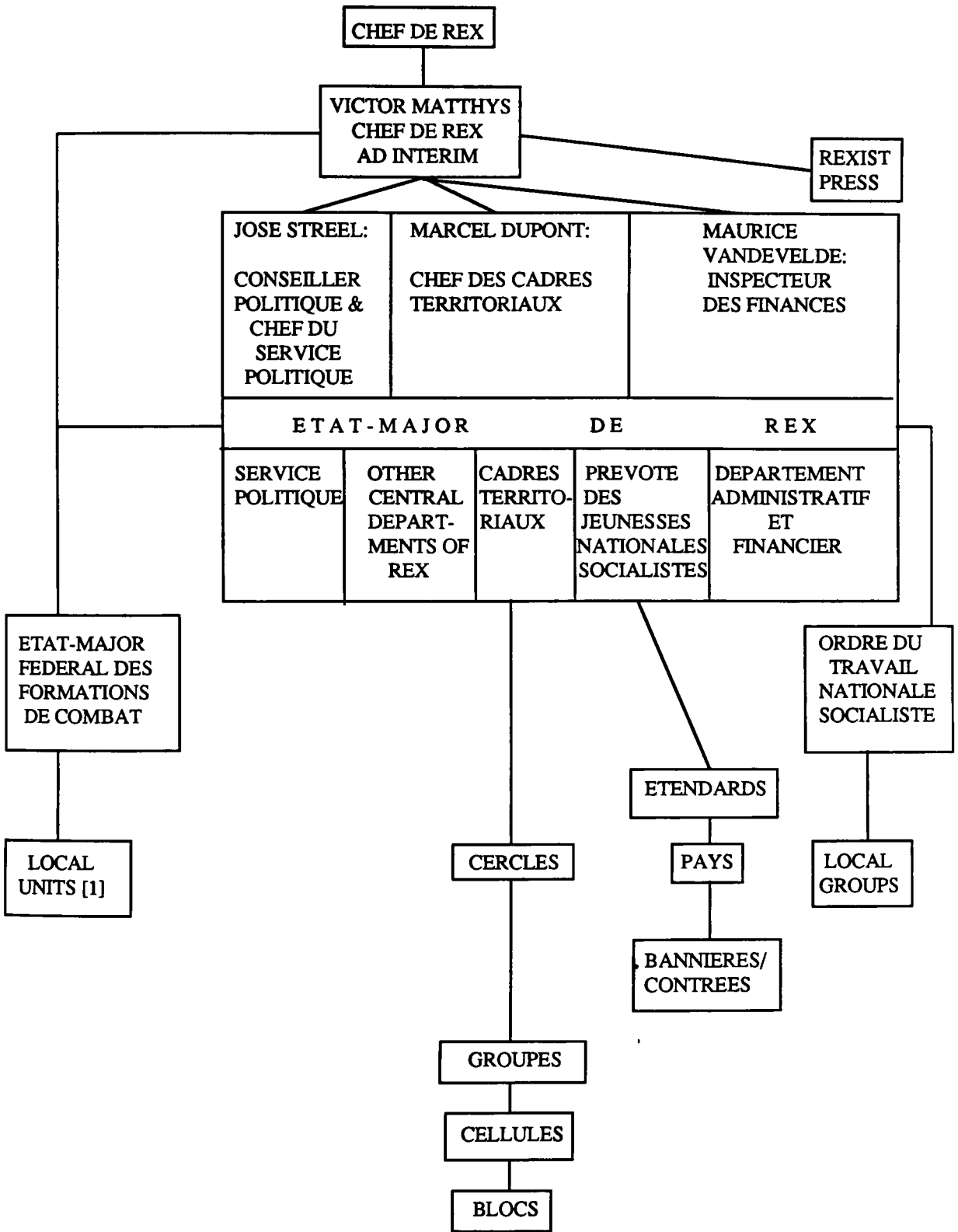
(126) *Le P.R.* 19 Mar. 1942, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.  
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#### CHAPTER FOUR : SPRING - AUTUMN 1942

In popular memory, collaboration is recalled principally as the unscrupulous pursuit and abuse of power. The image of the collaborator as an arrogant, ambitious figure who profits from the presence of the German armies to exert arbitrary, dictatorial control over his compatriots while at the same time servilely executing the least German command - however irksome or harmful it might be - is an image which recurs throughout Occupied Europe. It is, however, one which is at considerable variance with the position of the Rexists during most of the period of the German Occupation of Belgium. Rex - under Degrelle's leadership - was indeed engaged in the pursuit of power at almost any cost and, during the final year of German rule, it would come close to attaining its goal. But for most of the Occupation, the Rexists remained a marginal group who had to content themselves with only the semblance of power. Their closer relationship with the *Militärverwaltung* did bring them some tangible rewards but these fell far short of what they had hoped for. German support for their political ambitions continued to evade them and in its absence the Rexists always lacked much of that arrogant confidence commonly associated with pro-German collaborators. They remained instead a frustrated group unable to enact their revolution and trapped in a political situation which, as the war progressed, came to seem less and less promising.

This nervous, defensive mood was particularly evident in 1942 during Degrelle's long absence on the Eastern front. With the departure of Pévenasse to join the *Légion*, a period of transition within Rex had drawn to a close. Matthys and Streel were securely established as the leaders of the movement and they seemed well placed to relaunch Rex as a dynamic political force within Occupied Belgium. Both the network of *cercles* introduced in mid-1941 and the changes

FIG. 5 THE STRUCTURE OF REX: JANUARY 1942- EARLY 1943



Note: [1] Successive recruitment campaigns for military units had severely weakened the local units of the *Formations de Combat* and most of the remaining groups were responsible directly to the *Etat-Major Federal*.

which had taken place in the central headquarters of Rex enabled the leadership to exercise more effective control over the wide range of Rexist activities. Though, as Streel observed, Rex remained a somewhat chaotic confederation where a superficially imposing hierarchy often disguised what he described as "la plus aimable pagaille" <sup>1</sup>, a definite improvement had taken place and, with the appointment of loyal, unambitious men such as Dupont and Constant to key positions, the movement was no longer threatened by a resurgence of the bitter personal rivalries so evident during 1941.

Yet, despite these advantages, much of Matthys' and Streel's energies during 1942 were devoted not to new initiatives but to defending the existing position of Rex. This reflected the sense of insecurity and foreboding which increasingly enveloped the movement as the German Occupation entered its third year. The early months of 1942 were in this respect a crucial watershed. In late-1941, as we have seen, Rexist morale was probably higher than at any time during the previous year <sup>2</sup> but, as it became evident that the war on the Eastern front and the creation of the *Légion Wallonie* had in fact done little - at least in the short term - to undermine the political stalemate within Occupied Belgium, so the mood of the Rexistes changed to one of pessimism and frustration.

This was all the more striking because it was in marked contrast to the ebullient, aggressive stance of the VNV which continued to expand and whose leaders remained convinced that they would before long be the undisputed masters of the country <sup>3</sup>. But Rex remained in almost every respect the poor cousin of the VNV in the collaborationist world and its leaders had few reasons to view events with similar confidence. Doomed apparently to remain an isolated, marginal group, the Rexistes no longer felt entirely confident that, in a much more uncertain world, they were indeed the men of the future.

A major reason for Rexist unease was the uncertainty which continued to surround German intentions towards Belgium. The leaders of the Reich had still given no indication of their post-war plans but the policies of the *Militärverwaltung* appeared to suggest that francophone Belgium would either be absorbed into the Reich or placed under Flemish control. For a Rexist movement which remained strongly committed to a unitary Belgian state, neither option was attractive and, despite the constraints imposed by German censorship, Streel and other Rexistists hinted at the difficulties which this ominous silence created for those who wished to work with the German authorities <sup>4</sup>.

Uncertainties over the outcome of the war added to Rexist unease. In early-1942, they seem to have remained confident that a knock-out blow by German forces remained possible <sup>5</sup> but the subsequent reverses suffered by the Axis forces undermined this optimism. Rexist journalists had to admit that Germany had lost the initiative and, as the *Wehrmacht* commenced defensive preparations on the French and Belgian coasts, they attempted to discount the rumours of an imminent Allied invasion <sup>6</sup>. Yet, despite their best efforts to reassure militants that the military developments were of no great importance, the minds of many Rexistists were undoubtedly turning towards uncomfortable Napoleonic analogies and, for the first time, their leaders were privately contemplating the possibility of a German military collapse <sup>7</sup>.

Streel's journalism also reflected this uncertain atmosphere. There were, he now admitted, many possible outcomes to the current conflict <sup>8</sup> but, taking refuge in his deterministic vision of history, he reassured his readers that an Allied victory would be no more successful in arresting the New Order revolution than had been Wellington's victory at Waterloo in preventing the liberal revolution of the nineteenth century. Historical forces were based on profound realities and their remorseless development could not be disrupted by

the accidental defeat of the German armies <sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, uncertainty even permeated Streeel's justifications of collaboration which he no longer presented as an unavoidable necessity arguing instead that it was a wager both on the outcome of the war and on the attitude which would be adopted by the Germans towards Belgium. There was no guarantee of success and the Rexists could only hope, like Pascal pondering the existence of God, that their stance would be vindicated by subsequent events <sup>10</sup>.

In this uncertain atmosphere, Rex no longer possessed a strategy for the immediate acquisition of power. Rumours of an imminent Rexist *coup d'état* continued to circulate intermittently in Brussels <sup>11</sup> but Matthys clearly lacked the authority to launch any such challenge to the *status quo* and the Rexist leaders merely made vague threats that, should the possibility present itself, they would not fail to take decisive action <sup>12</sup>. Nothing, however, suggested that political changes could be expected in Belgium in the near future and only the *Légion Wallonie* seemed to offer any real cause for optimism. During 1942, Rexist hopes came to focus more and more on the *légionnaires* who they believed would eventually win German support for their cause as well as acting as a decisive military force in any eventual conflict with their political adversaries in Belgium. Thus, many ordinary Rexists looked forward enthusiastically to the return of the *Légion* believing that it would at last provide Rex with the opportunity to seize power <sup>13</sup>.

The return of the conquering heroes was, however, continually postponed. Throughout 1942, the *Légion* was embroiled in a series of bloody conflicts on the Eastern front where it was frequently to the fore in German offensives. Unlike most of the other foreign units who fought in Russia, the Walloon *légionnaires* soon acquired a reputation as disciplined and courageous soldiers <sup>14</sup> but this was achieved only at a considerable cost. In late-February,

almost 200 *légionnaires* were killed or wounded in a single battle and its subsequent role in the summer offensive in southern Russia led to the deaths of many more soldiers from the ravages of disease and of enemy action. Thus, despite the reinforcements sent from Belgium, by October the effective strength of the *Légion* had been reduced to only approximately 200 men <sup>15</sup>.

The Rexistists were painfully aware of the cost of this military adventure. News of the first substantial losses reached Brussels in late-March and throughout the year obituary notices for *légionnaires* were a prominent feature of the columns of *Le Pays Réel* <sup>16</sup>. Many of those who died were the relatives or friends of militants and, as communication with the front was difficult, there was often a long and agonising wait before they received news of their loved ones <sup>17</sup>. Grief and mourning became all too familiar rituals in the Rexist world and the activities of the *cercles* were inevitably overshadowed by this concern for the *légionnaires*. Memorial services were held in honour of the dead and visits were organised to those wounded soldiers hospitalized in Brussels <sup>18</sup>. Expressions of solidarity with the volunteers in Russia took myriad forms. Collections of money, of warm clothing and even of material such as skis were organised and numerous parties were held for the families of the *légionnaires* <sup>19</sup>.

Yet there was in reality little that could be done to help the distant soldiers and the leaders of the movement sought instead to focus attention on the need to restore the internal structure of Rex <sup>20</sup>. Once again, a new generation of leaders had to be found and the search for volunteers to fill vacant posts within the *Etat-Major* extended even to non-Rexist supporters of New Order ideas. At a local level, there was a chronic shortage of candidates for responsible positions and it was only with considerable difficulty that the network of *cercles* was maintained. In these circumstances, external activity was



necessarily limited and once again a proposed propaganda campaign was postponed indefinitely <sup>21</sup>.

This concern with internal organisational matters never, however, caused Streeel to lose sight of his central ambition of establishing Rex as a bastion of moderate collaborationist opinion. As *Chef du Service Politique* and the principal leader writer of *Le Pays Réel*, Streeel was well placed to influence the direction of the movement and he was at pains to stress after the war that most Rexist political initiatives during 1942 had formed part of his personal strategy for the reorientation of the movement <sup>22</sup>. For reasons which it is easy to understand, Streeel undoubtedly exaggerated his moderating influence but it was, nevertheless, no mere illusion summoned up to impress his post-war judges. Under his control, a modest change did indeed take place in the political direction of Rex. Streeel halted the increasing radicalism which had been so evident during 1941 and the opportunism of Rouleau and Degrelle gave way to a more coherent - and limited - definition of collaboration. This was a change which did not go unnoticed beyond the ranks of Rex. One New Order observer noted "l'orientation fermement nationale" which Rex had adopted during 1942 and other non-Rexist collaborationists began to consider an alliance with a movement which they had formerly considered to be the epitome of unprincipled collaboration <sup>23</sup>.

Streeel's strategy depended to a large extent on the continued absence of Degrelle who would have been unlikely to have given his support to the cautious policies of the *Chef du Service Politique* <sup>24</sup>. Plans for a visit by Degrelle to Belgium did, however, come to nothing and, as he freely accepts, his position on the Eastern front gave him little opportunity to exert any control over Rexist activities <sup>25</sup>. During most of 1942, the *Chef de Rex* was fully absorbed by his responsibilities - and intrigues - within the *Légion* leaving

the front only once when in June he made brief visits to Berlin, Rome and Bucharest <sup>26</sup>. In the German capital, Degrelle held discussions with a number of officials including representatives of the Foreign Affairs and Propaganda ministries as well as with a delegation from Belgium composed of Matthys, Paul Colin who controlled the New Order newspapers *Le Nouveau Journal* and *Cassandra* and Alfred Lisein, the *Chef des Cadres Politiques* of Rex <sup>27</sup>.

When he met these Belgian emissaries, Degrelle was in an ebullient mood boasting that he would soon be more powerful than Mussert, the Dutch collaborationist leader. But, far from providing them with clear political instructions, Degrelle proved to be interested only in his attempts to win German support and in the future of the *Légion* <sup>28</sup>. In particular, he was anxious to obtain permission to begin recruitment for the *Légion* amongst the Belgian prisoners of war still imprisoned in Germany and, in his discussions with Matthys and his colleagues, he appears to have talked largely of his exploits at the front. Clearly, the *Légion* was already beginning to monopolise his thoughts and, when he spoke of the anticipated revolution in Wallonia, it was the *Légion* rather than Rex which he envisaged playing the leading role. Speaking to Matthys, he commented :

"La Légion . . . est l'école du Mouvement, l'école précieuse, l'école indispensable pour tous ceux qui voudront affronter les responsabilités de la Révolution" <sup>29</sup>.

In the absence of any significant advice from Degrelle, responsibility for the political direction of Rex lay firmly in the hands of Matthys and Streel. But, while Streel's intentions were well defined, the position of Matthys was less clear. The *Chef de Rex a.i.* was in no sense a nominal figure-head and, though he allowed considerable freedom of action to Streel, he always retained control of the overall political direction of Rex. Moreover, Matthys was never a whole-hearted supporter of Streel's policy of

moderation. Though he was no extremist, Matthys' instincts were more radical and the violent rhetoric of his speeches was often in marked contrast to the more cautious formulations of Streel <sup>30</sup>.

Thus, throughout 1942, the *Chef du Service Politique* could never take the support of his superior for granted and he had to counter the influence on Matthys of a number of more radical advisors. Typical of these was Léon Van Huffel. This curious figure was a young historian and journalist who had rapidly become after May 1940 an exponent of extreme pro-German views. He had worked originally on De Becker's *Le Soir* until his radical opinions had caused his dismissal and, although he was never a member of Rex, Van Huffel subsequently became the Berlin correspondent of *Le Pays Réel*. He had long been in contact with SS officials in Brussels and he profited from his position in the German capital to develop close links with the leaders of the SS <sup>31</sup>. Van Huffel was a pedantic and irredeemably serious man who had fully accepted the contention of Nazi intellectuals that the Walloons were a Germanic race. As such, he had no sympathy either for Belgian nationalism or for Degrelle's dream of a resuscitated Burgundian empire and advocated that Wallonia should be integrated into a pan-Germanic empire <sup>32</sup>. He travelled regularly to Brussels in an attempt to convince the Rexist leaders that their espousal of nationalist pro-Belgian views was leading the movement into an impasse. Nobody in Berlin, Van Huffel insisted, considered the survival of a Belgian state to be a serious possibility and, with the SS becoming an ever more powerful force within the Reich, it was essential that Rex should seek its support <sup>33</sup>.

Van Huffel's influence was limited and, though Matthys was impressed by his arguments, Streel was usually able to ensure the support of the *Chef de Rex a.i.* for his more cautious policies <sup>34</sup>. Nevertheless, Van Huffel's views reflected the uncertainty which existed within Rex as to the political stance it

should adopt. Its choice of collaboration had certainly been emphatic and was largely irreversible but, in the nervous atmosphere fostered by the movement's failure to make significant political progress, there remained much to be resolved as to the form which that collaboration should take. While all agreed on the need to participate in German military campaigns, no such consensus existed as to how far the Rexists should be willing to go in other possible areas of collaborationist activity.

This underlying tension between the rival attractions of pro-Belgian moderation and Germanic extremism was to remain a major current in the history of Rex during 1942. Thus, for example, the ideological positions adopted by Rex at this time oscillated between themes traditional to the Rexist struggle and innovations drawn from the new language of German National Socialism. This division should certainly not be exaggerated for on many issues it proved easy to reconcile long-standing Rexist rhetoric with the ideas and slogans of Nazi propaganda. Nevertheless, there were significant differences between the ideologies of the two movements which reflected their very different intellectual origins. The two principal influences on pre-war Rexism had been French right-wing thinkers such as Maurras and the anti-democratic intellectual currents within inter-war European Catholicism. Other factors, notably the distant appeal of Mussolini's Italy, had also played a less important role but in this network of influences German National Socialism had had almost no place. Certainly, the Rexists considered Hitler's Germany to be part of the movement for a New Order in Europe but their admiration for its achievements was always mitigated by their hostility towards the traditional enemy of Belgian independence as well as an overwhelming ignorance of what always remained for them a profoundly alien land. Until 1940, Rex had had little exposure to Nazi ideas and when Rexists and German National Socialists

encountered each other during the war years they often found themselves speaking profoundly different languages born out of separate intellectual traditions.

Thus, the intellectual tensions within Rex in 1942 principally concerned the rival attractions of tradition and of innovation. But these tensions also served to highlight long-established differences within Rex. As a protest movement, it had always attracted the support of people of very differing views and the tensions of the war years served to highlight these divisions. In addition, the intellectual divisions evident within Rex were complicated by considerations of tactics and even of simple survival. The evolution of the war, the isolated position of Rex and its consequent dependence on German favour were all factors which pushed the movement remorselessly towards an extremism born out of fear and by 1944 Rexist ideology would consist of little more than the repetition of slogans devised by the German propaganda machine <sup>35</sup>.

In 1942, however, this process was far from complete and the movement remained poised rather awkwardly between its past loyalties and the necessities of the present and future. Thus, writers such as Streel continued to portray Rex as a royalist and nationalist movement. When paying tribute to the heroism of the *légionnaires*, for example, he was careful to stress that they were fighting not for Germany or for Europe but for their country and Streel's entire justification of Rexist activities was based on their benefits for *le bien commun* of Belgium <sup>36</sup>. Moreover, while certain of the smaller francophone collaborationist groups rejected a unitary Belgian state and instead made much of their loyalty to the Walloon people, Streel dismissed the entire notion of a Walloon popular community as absurd :

"Il n'existe pas de nationalité wallonne, ni de conscience nationale wallonne, ni de communauté populaire wallonne. . .

La Wallonie n'est qu'une expression géographique, sans aucun contenu populaire positif" 37.

Such declarations to some extent set the tone for the rest of the movement and, responding to the accusations of treason from their compatriots, Rexist journalists and militants were frequently at pains to demonstrate their nationalist credentials 38. But by 1942 other loyalties were beginning to compete for a place in Rexist hearts. The funeral notices in *Le Pays Réel*, for example, declared that the fallen *légionnaires* had given their lives not only for Belgium but also for Europe and the National Socialist revolution and at Rexist meetings the portraits of Léopold III now shared their place of honour with photographs of Degrelle and of Hitler 39.

Streel was disturbed by the increasing role accorded to these other loyalties. For him, Hitler was no more than the leader of a foreign state and, although he accepted European integration as a historical necessity, he was cautious about advocating a united New Order Europe 40. Other Rexist - including Matthys - were, however, much less hesitant. In much Rexist propaganda, little reference was by now made to the King or to the Belgian state and the Rexist were instead presented as dedicated European soldiers owing unconditional loyalty to Hitler, "le Chef et le Guide du Continent" 41. Thus, while many militants still paid lip-service to the language of nationalism, the real focus of their loyalties was shifting remorselessly from the Belgian tricolour and the royal prisoner in the Chateau of Laeken to the leaders and swastika of the Third Reich.

Similar tensions surrounded the importation of Nazi racial terminology into Rexist propaganda. Rexist had long been concerned about the need to defend the health of the community through what they termed "social medicine" 42 but the jargon of pseudo-scientific racialism had never played a

prominent role in the movement. Yet, despite warnings from Streeb that Rex must remain faithful to the distinctive character of its pre-war ideology <sup>43</sup>, a certain racialist hue did gradually come to colour Rexist propaganda. Much of this was rather superficial and there was no real attempt to adopt in their entirety the biological theories of the Nazis. But they were willing to employ its language and stereotypes presenting, for example, the Anglo-Americans and their Soviet allies not only as ideological enemies but also as degenerate racial groups. Moreover, at the same time, one of the most influential Rexist journalists, Jean Denis, wrote a long series of articles for *Le Pays Réel* in which he ingeniously tried to demonstrate that Nazi racialism was in no sense incompatible with Rexist beliefs <sup>44</sup>.

And with this racialism came inevitably a heightened anti-semitism. Ever since 1940, the alleged dangers posed by the Jews had become a prominent feature of Rexist propaganda as well as the subject of discussions at local Rexist meetings <sup>45</sup>. Employing themes drawn from the standard repertoire of European - and more especially francophone - anti-semitism, the image they presented of the Jews was the familiar one of a dark force unscrupulously exploiting every opportunity to advance themselves at the expense of the non-Jewish majority. They were parasites whose corrupting influence on public morals must be countered by Draconian measures which would destroy their power and wealth <sup>46</sup>. Unpleasant as it was, this rhetoric was entirely unoriginal. It was, in effect, no more than a restatement of the anti-Jewish sentiments of the Dreyfus era and its exploitation by the Rexists was in part a reflection of the popularity which such journalistic anti-semitism had acquired during the inter-war years amongst those Belgians attracted by French right-wing political ideas <sup>47</sup>.

Gradually, however, prejudice and crude rabble-rousing gave way to a more integral and racial anti-semitism. Biological science replaced social and economic grievances as the basis for their attacks and, rather than merely calling for a special statute for the Jewish community, Rex now advocated the physical expulsion of this malignant racial group from Europe <sup>48</sup>. The reasons for this change were in part crudely opportunistic for the Rexist leaders seem to have believed that anti-Jewish campaigns were one means of increasing their support amongst the working class <sup>49</sup>. But it also reflected the Rexist infatuation with Nazi ideas and more especially the personal enthusiasm of Matthys who was well known amongst the Rexist leaders for his anti-semitic opinions <sup>50</sup>. In an uncompromising article in *Le Pays Réel* in December 1941, the *Chef de Rex a.i.* criticised those who sought to discriminate between assimilated and non-assimilated Jews. All Jews, he declared, were identical and the only possible solution was the root and branch destruction of their power <sup>51</sup>.

Matthys' radical opinions were, however, consistently opposed by José Streel who once again voiced the concerns of more moderate Rexist. The Jewish community in Belgium, he noted, was relatively small and the measures initiated by the German authorities, while necessary, were sufficient to neutralise harmful Jewish activities. Streel therefore opposed calls for additional legislation and denounced manifestations of "vulgar" anti-Jewish rabble-rousing <sup>52</sup>. Though he shared in the anti-semitic assumptions current throughout the movement, Streel always regarded the influence of the Jews as more cultural than political. Their power was in his opinion a legacy of the ascendancy of liberal ideas and he did not believe that it would be countered most effectively by repressive legislation <sup>53</sup>. Hence, during the latter war years, he would protect individual Jews from the German police while at the same time advocating the elimination of Jewish influences from European civilisation <sup>54</sup>.



Alongside radical anti-semitism another consistent leitmotif of Nazi wartime propaganda was a crude workerist socialism and, as with the Jewish issue, this also led to tensions within Rex between radicals anxious to imitate Nazi ideas and those who preferred to remain faithful to more traditional Rexist views. From its outset, the movement had adopted the rhetoric and ideals of "social Catholicism" with a vigour which was rare in Belgian Catholic life. The Rexists had energetically denounced the material and, more especially, the spiritual sufferings of the industrial working class and they called for the workers to be accorded an honoured and respected place in society <sup>55</sup>. Their attitude was, however, that of a movement composed largely of the middle classes and Rexist expressions of sympathy for the lot of working people were often couched in the language of paternalism and usually stopped short of support for their more pressing material demands.

During the war years, however, the Rexists shed much of their former reticence. Ever since early-1941, Rexist propaganda had concentrated on attracting the support of the working class and under the leadership of Matthys the movement made much of its commitment to a radical socialist revolution as well as continually attacking the selfish - and anglophile - industrialists <sup>56</sup>. While all Rexists could agree on denouncing the wealthy elite, divisions soon appeared when Matthys, seconded on occasions by Degrelle, adopted a class war rhetoric which seemed to imply an exclusive identification with the interests of the workers against those of the bourgeoisie <sup>57</sup>. Many Rexists were unhappy at this condemnation of the middle class world which had spawned the Rexist movement and to which many of its militants still belonged. Streel and Jean Denis, for example, insisted that it was not the bourgeoisie which should be destroyed but, rather, "l'esprit bourgeois" with its egotistical and unheroic mentality <sup>58</sup>. Thus, while Matthys called for a violent workerist revolution,

Streel used his column in *Le Pays Réel* to defend the interests of the lower middle class calling repeatedly for special legislation to protect small businessmen against the threat posed by large enterprises <sup>59</sup>.

In the latter years of the war an unsophisticated Nazi-inspired socialism dominated Rexist propaganda, yet, though they energetically denounced Marxist and liberal ideas as a corruption of "le droit fil du socialisme", they never succeeded in defining their own vision of a socialist New Order <sup>60</sup>. Despite the endless outpourings in the Rexist press, the radicalism of Matthys and his colleagues amounted to no more than an incoherent *mélange* of empty slogans coupled with vague promises that their socialism would respect "the personality of man" while ensuring the ascendancy of community interests over those of individuals <sup>61</sup>. Nevertheless, even these generalities were sufficient to worry those, like Streel, who were reluctant to see any change in central Rexist beliefs. Though the *Chef du Service Politique* praised socialism as a means of achieving the twin goals of national integration and of social solidarity, he was careful to portray this as entirely different from the left-wing ideologies of the pre-war era. Socialism, he insisted, should be regarded more as a method of social organisation than as a political creed <sup>62</sup>. Thus, rather than sharing in the workerist rhetoric of Matthys, Streel insisted that the New Order would respect property rights and would benefit the peasantry and the *petite bourgeoisie* just as much as the workers <sup>63</sup>. For Streel, unlike Matthys, Rex was still a movement of the traditional right and he continued to advocate the corporatist ideas which had been such an important feature of pre-war Rexist propaganda. While accepting that many corporatists had not placed sufficient emphasis on the role of the state, he argued that the basic social unit of any successful New Order must be self-governing corporations <sup>64</sup>.

Thus, on many important issues, the position of Rex was confused. A bewildering array of conflicting loyalties competed for the support of the Rexists who were uncertain whether they were clear-sighted patriots serving the King and the national interest, Catholic idealists pursuing Augustine's vision of an ideal Christian state, the soldiers of a unified New Order Europe or the avant-garde of a violent Nazi revolution. Such confusion was not wholly new but nor was it ultimately of any great significance. While the Rexist rhetoric of the 1930s had reflected a real sentiment amongst sections of the population, the Rexist ideology of the war years lacked not only clarity but also plausibility and relevance. Their insistence that a New Order of justice and liberation would emerge from collaboration with the very German forces who were responsible for such widespread oppression and suffering could appeal only to those blinded to realities by great naïvety, unscrupulous ambition or obstinate loyalty to an outdated pre-war ideal.

The ideological disputes within Rex during the war years were no more than a quarrel in a vacuum. They no longer reflected ideas current beyond the ranks of the movement as the pre-war fashion for an authoritarian remodelling of the political structures of Belgium had evaporated rapidly during the German Occupation. Only a few conservatives fearful of a Communist *coup d'état* still advocated such reforms, while for the overwhelming majority of Belgians the experiences of the war years had nurtured a renewed faith in the values of liberty, of free expression and of government by consent. While still critical of the failings of the pre-war regime, they envisaged constitutional reforms which would increase rather than circumscribe popular participation and the organisations of the Resistance had replaced foreign authoritarian regimes as the model which many wished to see emulated in Belgian political life <sup>65</sup>. Thus, popular hostility to Rex reflected more than its choice of collaboration.

Rexist propaganda was also profoundly at variance with the popular mood and its ideas could find no echo in a population which dismissed them as the irrelevant relic of an outdated intellectual fashion.

This profound separation from the aspirations and concerns of most ordinary Belgians also had a major influence on the internecine intrigues which in Belgium - as elsewhere in Occupied Europe - were a prominent feature of the collaborationist community. Though with the departure of many of its more turbulent spirits Rex had attained a certain internal peace, conflict between the movement and other pro-German groups intent upon usurping its position as the principal standard-bearer of collaboration in francophone Belgium would be evident throughout 1942. In the absence of any decisive political or military events to absorb their attention and isolated from the majority of the population, the collaborationists turned inwards upon themselves to engage in unedifying petty squabbles which did no more than demonstrate their total dependence on German favour.

The attitude adopted by Rex during these conflicts also provided further evidence of the tensions within the movement between those militants anxious to rush ahead with collaboration and those who wished to hold back from identifying totally with the German cause. Although, as we have seen, the Rexist leaders had energetically opposed the efforts of De Becker and his colleagues to supplant Rex <sup>66</sup>, they had initially been surprisingly tolerant of those other groupings which had emerged on the fringes of the collaborationist world during 1941. Groups such as the *Amis du Grand Reich Allemand* (AGRA) and the *Mouvement National Populaire Wallon* (MNPW) were composed for the most part of Rexist renegades yet the Rexist leaders were at first willing to work with them so long as they did not challenge their political supremacy. Thus, for

example, they adopted a conciliatory attitude towards the pro-German cultural organisation, the *Communauté Culturelle Wallonne* (CCW) led by a Socialist journalist and novelist, Pierre Hubermont. This had been set up in 1941 and, though the Rexist leaders were critical of the emphasis which it placed on a distinctively Walloon cultural identity, they allowed Rexist militants to participate in the branches of the CCW and there was some contact between the two organisations on cultural and social matters <sup>67</sup>.

Relations were also good between the Rexist and the extremists of the Antwerp-based anti-semitic league "*Défense du Peuple*" led by René Lambrichts which was gradually extending its operations to francophone Belgium. A number of members of "*Défense du Peuple*" served in the *Légion Wallonie* and at a local level, members of Rex frequently participated in the activities of the league and Rexist delegates attended its meetings <sup>68</sup>. Such collaboration was encouraged by the leaders of "*Défense du Peuple*" who, despite their self-proclaimed extremism, seem to have been anxious to build some form of alliance with the Rexist movement <sup>69</sup>. Matthys also encouraged this *rapprochement*. He fully shared in their anti-Jewish prejudices and, when Streel published an article in December 1941 critical of crude anti-semitism, Matthys not only wrote a rejoinder to it but also apparently met representatives of "*Défense du Peuple*" to reassure them of his support. A few days later, he used the occasion of a public Rexist rally to declare that Rex and the anti-semitic league were allies fighting for a common cause <sup>70</sup>.

The ascendancy of Streel brought this policy of cohabitation to an abrupt end. Articles by him in *Le Pays Réel* in January 1942 denounced the frenetic extremism of the smaller collaborationist groups and he rapidly instituted a policy of clear-cut opposition to their activities <sup>71</sup>. This was first evident in Liège where a *comité de coordination* composed of local

representatives of all pro-German groupings had been established under the patronage of the German *Propaganda Staffel*. It was hoped that this committee would end the long history of collaborationist rivalries in Liège and in February Antoine Leclercq of the MNPW proposed that the three principal political movements represented on the committee - namely Rex, AGRA and the MNPW - should sign an accord of mutual co-operation <sup>72</sup>. The reaction of the Rexist leaders was, however, unambiguous. Claiming that they were the only official political movement in Wallonia, they rejected Leclercq's proposal out of hand suggesting that the members of these other organisations should abandon their activities and apply to join the Rexist *cercle* in Liège <sup>73</sup>.

A few weeks later, Streel and his colleagues launched a major national initiative intended to assert the hegemony of Rex within the collaborationist community. With a vitriol which was remarkable in a press operating under German censorship, the *Chef du Service Politique* - seconded enthusiastically by other Rexist journalists - launched a furious verbal assault on their rivals. Rex, they proclaimed, was the only rallying point for New Order revolutionaries and the other groups were merely "l'inévitable écume de toutes les révolutions" which would be swept away by future developments <sup>74</sup>. Their leaders represented nobody but themselves and, whilst some might be simple-minded enthusiasts or "demi-intellectuels", most of these latter-day Jacobins were base opportunists whose extremist rhetoric often masked a Masonic or francophile past <sup>75</sup>. According to the Rexist press, they were "kleptomanes" and "derviches hurleurs" who, having belatedly rallied to National Socialism, sought to acquire a spurious credibility by posing as the advocates of total collaboration <sup>76</sup>.

A circular sent to Rexist cadres by Matthys and Streel on 1 June clearly set out their new attitude. In line with Streel's strategy of charting a

more moderate course for Rex, this circular stated that members of the movement should resign from those groups such as *Défense du Peuple* whose radical views were at variance with those of Rex. These ideological scruples were not, however, the only motive for this new stance. Neither AGRA nor the MNPW was more than a fraction of the size of Rex but Streel and, apparently, Matthys were justifiably concerned that both movements hoped eventually to supplant Rex. Therefore, they ordered that all offers of co-operation from these groupings be rejected :

"Tous contacts, tout rapprochement, toute 'coordination' seront brutalement refusés" 77.

The impact of this circular soon became apparent. Relations with *Défense du Peuple* deteriorated rapidly and, even if not all Rexists immediately followed the instructions of their leaders, few members of Rex appear to have remained active in the anti-semitic league which began instead to develop closer links with AGRA and the MNPW 78. Even relations with Hubermont's CCW were effected. The June circular deplored what Streel and Matthys claimed were the political ambitions of this cultural organisation and an order appears to have been issued to Rexist militants to resign from the CCW 79. The Rexist leaders were especially annoyed by the attempts of the CCW to nominate its supporters for posts in local and central government. Rex regarded such positions as its own monopoly and, in a letter to Romsée at the Ministry of the Interior, Streel described the candidates proposed by the CCW as pro-Walloon extremists whose appointment would be prejudicial to the integrity of the Belgian state 80.

It was, however, always for AGRA that Rex reserved its greatest hostility. Early in 1942, control of this grouping had passed to two new leaders, Scaillet and Gérits, who reorganised the movement in order to give it a

much more explicitly political role <sup>e1</sup>. Under their aggressive leadership, AGRA posed as a movement of extremist revolutionaries whose publications combined a slavish imitation of Nazi propaganda with a crude populist socialism. It rejected the concept of a united Belgian state and, exploiting the racial theories of National Socialism, it claimed that the Walloons were a lost Nordic race which should be integrated into the German Reich <sup>e2</sup>. Popular support for AGRA was non-existent and, although small branches of the movement existed in the principal towns of Wallonia, it was only in Liège that it was able to operate with any success. Contemporary estimates of its membership in 1942 varied between 1,200 and 2,500 but the quality of these members was open to question. The unsophisticated demagogy of its leaders and the substantial material benefits offered to members attracted recruits who were described by one New Order observer as "un véritable mercenariat" <sup>e3</sup>.

Although a highly corrupt organisation led by unscrupulous opportunists, AGRA constituted the most serious challenge to Rex since De Becker's abortive efforts in May 1941. By adopting an extremist stance, its leaders hoped to attract the support of those German agencies - such as the SS - who were distrustful of Rex's Catholic origins and its cautious pro-German stance. Thus, they hoped to imitate the success of the *DeVlag* movement in Flanders which, from very modest origins, rapidly emerged in 1942 and 1943 through the patronage of the SS as a serious rival to the more moderate VNV <sup>e4</sup>. From mid-1942 onwards, Rex therefore launched various initiatives intended to prevent AGRA from emerging as a fully-fledged political movement. Rexist militants were forbidden from joining the rival movement and in the columns of *Le Pays Réel*, it was denounced for its openly annexationist policies. In addition, Rex systematically opposed all candidates nominated by AGRA for posts



in local government and Rex tried to convince the German authorities to end their modest support for AGRA <sup>66</sup>.

These measures were not, however, an immediate success. The leaders of AGRA were not easily intimidated by the Rexist leaders and, while protesting that they had not sought conflict, they continued to boast that they were the only pure National Socialist revolutionaries <sup>66</sup>. In reality, Scaillet and Gérits appear to have considered AGRA to be principally a vehicle for their self-enrichment but their response demonstrated the confidence of the AGRA leadership in 1942. The movement benefited from the influential assistance of its allies in the radical collaborationist press of Charleroi and, despite Rexist efforts, appears to have been able to retain the support of its members and, most importantly of its German supporters <sup>67</sup>. Hence, although AGRA never acquired anywhere near the importance of *DeVlag*, it remained a small but vocal critic of Rex and only in 1943 would a very different Rexist movement prove better able to act against its extremist rival <sup>68</sup>.

For Streel, these conflicts with small groups of extremists were a distraction from what he considered to be the principal priorities for Rex. Foremost amongst these was the appointment of Rexist militants and their supporters to positions of responsibility in central and local government. This would, he believed, have important benefits for the movement by helping the largely inexperienced Rexist to prepare for the tasks they would face after a New Order revolution as well as fostering a more moderate spirit within Rex by bringing militants into contact with the difficulties of public administration <sup>69</sup>. Rex had, however, been slow to benefit from the changes being made in the governmental personnel of Occupied Belgium. Since the first months of 1941, the *Militärverwaltung* and the German-appointed *secrétaire-*

*général* of the Ministry of the Interior Gérard Romsée, had dismissed a considerable number of public office-holders and had replaced them with Flemish Nationalists and other New Order figures. But neither the German authorities nor Romsée had been keen to provoke public anger by appointing Rexists to positions of authority and during 1941 only a handful of Degrelle's supporters were chosen for posts in central and local government <sup>90</sup>.

Streel was determined to rectify this problem and as early as September 1941 he had published an article in *Le Pays Réel* attacking Romsée's reluctance to appoint Rexists to governmental posts <sup>91</sup>. In addition, he made the nomination of supporters of Rex the principal priority of his new *Service Politique*. Every effort was made to encourage militants to apply for posts in all areas of public administration and close links developed between the *Service Politique* and the New Order staff of the Ministry of the Interior. Regular weekly meetings took place between officials of the two institutions and they worked together to identify those Rexists suitable for nomination to governmental posts <sup>92</sup>.

The results of Streel's initiatives soon became evident. In the autumn of 1941, a number of Rexists were appointed to posts in local government and officials of the movement were optimistic of their chances for future success <sup>93</sup>. In fact, Romsée and his advisors remained reluctant to nominate Rexists to important positions in central government but they do seem to have accepted that at least in local administration there was no longer any alternative to appointing members of Rex to positions of authority <sup>94</sup>. Thus, during the subsequent winter, the pace of the replacement of local officials such as *bourgmestres* and *échevins* (town mayors and aldermen) appears to have quickened substantially and supporters of Rex featured prominently amongst the new appointees <sup>95</sup>.

The exact extent of this change is difficult to quantify but it was clearly evident from Rexist documents. While in early-1942, Streeel had still been complaining that Rexistists were absent from many areas of public administration, local Rexistists were soon reporting that they had taken control of numerous communes <sup>26</sup>. Articles in *Le Pays Réel* praised the achievements of Rexist nominees and in August 1942 the *chef de cercle* of Mons was able to announce that almost all communes in the Borinage with a population of over 5,000 were administered by a Rexist *bourgmestre* <sup>27</sup>. The success achieved in the Mons area may have been exceptional but the long lists of local government officials attending Rexist events bear witness to the extent of the changes which had taken place in Wallonia. For example, a national rally held in Brussels in October was reported to have been attended by almost three hundred Rexist *bourgmestres* and *échevins* <sup>28</sup>.

The importance of this change can hardly be overestimated. Throughout francophone Belgium, local communities found that their elected officials had been summarily dismissed by a decree of the Ministry of the Interior and that Rexist militants and their sympathisers had taken control of the *Hôtel de Ville*. This transfer of power inevitably provoked a major change in attitudes towards the Rexistists. Long shunned and ridiculed by the majority of the population, they now stood at the centre of public life. Their powers were substantial and their pronouncements concerning food rationing, public order and a host of other matters of local concern were to have a direct impact on the well-being of many communities.

As well as replacing the personnel of local government, Romsée and the *Militärverwaltung* introduced a number of structural reforms intended to create a more centralised and hierarchical system of administration. The most important of these was the creation of a series of *grandes agglomérations* to

administer the principal cities of Belgium. These replaced the former chaotic network of autonomous urban communes with a new single administration which was responsible for an entire conurbation. The need for such a rationalisation had long been widely accepted but the arbitrary manner of its introduction was widely resented and, whatever advantages they might bring, these new authorities were widely perceived as collaborationist institutions established to serve German aims <sup>99</sup>.

During 1942, four such *grandes agglomérations* were established in francophone Belgium to administer La Louvière, Charleroi, Liège and Brussels. The Rexist leaders were keen to control these powerful new authorities but the commissariat created by the Ministry of the Interior to oversee their establishment was not sympathetic to the Rexist cause and there was no shortage of other candidates from within and even beyond the collaborationist community anxious to serve as members of the new authorities <sup>100</sup>.

Nevertheless, the new *bourgmestres* appointed in La Louvière and Charleroi were Rexist and in both cities Rex emerged with a clear majority within the council chamber <sup>101</sup>. These cities were, however, in the Hainaut region where Rex was the only substantial pro-German grouping. In Liège, the situation was very different and the establishment of the new council of Grand Liège was preceded by bitter rivalries between the candidates of several different organisations <sup>102</sup>. When they were eventually announced in November, the appointments attempted to achieve a balance between these groups. Three Rexist *échevins* were appointed but the new *bourgmestre* and one other alderman were only loosely connected with Rex while six further *échevins* were from non-Rexist groupings <sup>103</sup>. Within a few weeks, however, the new mayor and three of the aldermen resigned after receiving threats from Resistance groups and their replacement by a Rexist *bourgmestre* and two additional pro-Rexist *échevins*

ensured that Rex dominated the new council <sup>104</sup>. In the case of Brussels, on the other hand, Rex did have to accept a subsidiary role. It had hoped that one of its former senators, Léon Brunet, would be chosen as the *bourgmestre* of the capital but the VNV and the *Militärverwaltung* firmly opposed the appointment of a francophone mayor. Thus, a Flemish *bourgmestre* was nominated and, although Brunet became the *premier échevin*, only two other Rexist aldermen were appointed <sup>105</sup>.

Rexist infiltration of local government was accompanied by a gradual extension of its control over the institutions of provincial administration. In the province of the Hainaut, a supporter of Rex, Leroy, had been allowed to usurp the position of provincial governor in the summer of 1940 but in general the German administrators had initially been content to leave the provinces in the hands of moderate non-political figures <sup>106</sup>. Their increasing obstruction of German policies did, however, convince Reeder that changes were necessary and in March 1942 the governors of Namur and Liège were replaced by two New Order nominees, the Prince de Croy and Georges Petit. De Croy had been a supporter of Van Severen's *Verdinaso* movement while Petit, despite being a former Rexist candidate, was only loosely connected with Rex <sup>107</sup>. Nevertheless, both men's nominations had received the support of Streel's *Service Politique* and in 1943, Rex was able to extend further its hold over the provincial administrations when one of its supporters, Gillès de Pélichy, was named as governor of Brabant. This included Brussels in its area and the appointment was intended by the German authorities to balance the nomination of a Flemish mayor in the capital <sup>108</sup>. Finally, in the spring of 1944, another supporter of Rex, Dewez, was appointed as governor of the rural province of Luxembourg <sup>109</sup>.

Yet, although all five francophone governors had been appointed with Rexist support, they did not on the whole prove faithful executants of the

orders of the movement. De Croy frequently sought to restrict Rexist influence in his province <sup>110</sup> and Leroy, the governor of Hainaut, was at most only lukewarm in his support for Rex. He attended Rexist functions sporadically and was on very bad terms with the local leaders of the movement who deplored his opportunism and *ancien régime* mores. As the war proceeded, he distanced himself still further from the Rexist cause and, ever anxious to curry favour with the winning side, he cultivated good relations with a Resistance intelligence network <sup>111</sup>.

The unreliability of these governors was to some extent offset by Rexist influence within the delegations of *députés permanents* which worked alongside the governors. The former democratically-elected provincial *députés* were gradually replaced by Rexist nominees who by 1944 controlled the delegations in the provinces of the Hainaut, Liège and the Luxembourg <sup>112</sup>. In certain cases, these Rexist *députés* became a major political force in the provincial administration. This was, for example, true of Joseph Pévenasse in the Hainaut and especially of Jean Georges in Namur whose personal power threatened to eclipse De Croy. In addition, the provinces were subdivided into a number of *arrondissements* which were administered by an official whose powers had formerly been largely nominal. During the war, however, their responsibilities were increased and the former appointees were gradually replaced by advocates of New Order ideas. By 1944, seven of these *chef d'arrondissements* were supporters of Rex <sup>113</sup>.

The infiltration of Rexist into central government was never as successful as in provincial and local administration. Some militants did acquire posts of secondary importance in governmental ministries <sup>114</sup> but by 1942 no supporter of Rex had been appointed to the *collège* of *secrétaires-généraux* which acted as the effective internal government of Belgium during the German

Occupation. In August 1942, however, partial recompense was made for this situation with the appointment by the German authorities of Edouard De Meyer as *secrétaire-général* of the Ministry of Public Works. De Meyer was nominally of pro-Rexist sympathies but he was essentially a technocrat and engineer and he made little impact on the *collège* <sup>116</sup>.

Their failure to acquire real political influence in central government was all the more galling for the Rexistists because of the success of the VNV in obtaining the appointment of its own supporters - notably Romsée and Leemans - to key positions in the *collège* of *secrétaires-généraux*. At this most important level of government, the Rexistists seemed doomed to remain impotent outsiders and, in their frustration, they blamed their failures on the New Order staff of Romsée's Interior ministry <sup>116</sup>. The head of the *cabinet wallon* of the Ministry of the Interior, Delvaux, was considered to have allowed the Flemish Nationalists a virtual monopoly over certain areas of government and in March 1942 Matthys and Streel unsuccessfully approached Romsée to suggest that he dismiss Delvaux and appoint in his place Alfred Lisein, the *Chef des Cadres Politiques* of Rex <sup>117</sup>.

Rexist criticisms of Delvaux may have been partly justified but the real reason for the exclusion of their supporters from central government lay not with the Ministry of the Interior but with the *Militärverwaltung*. Reeder might have accepted that Rex should be assisted in Wallonia but he remained reluctant to appoint its militants to positions in central government. Though many ministries remained in the hands of their pre-war bureaucrats, he was largely satisfied with the position which had been achieved by 1942. There were few instances of open conflict between the German authorities and the *secrétaires-généraux* and, as he reported to his superiors in Berlin, the appointment of members of the VNV to certain important posts had enabled the

*Militärverwaltung* to withdraw from much of the day to day administration of Belgium <sup>118</sup>.

Thus, Reeder felt little incentive to appoint to high office Rexist who for the most part also lacked the relevant qualifications. No member of Rex could, for example, rival the accomplishments of Romsée who had attended the universities of Louvain, Berlin and Paris and had been a VNV parliamentary deputy since 1929 <sup>119</sup>. Throughout its history, Rex had remained a movement of journalists, intellectuals and the provincial middle classes who, though suited for political polemic or local administration, were unqualified for the more demanding responsibilities of national government. The most attractive prizes were therefore always to remain beyond their grasp and the Rexist leaders could only incite their followers to emulate the Jews by exploiting every opportunity, however modest, to infiltrate governmental institutions <sup>120</sup>. The *Service Politique* sought to intervene in all areas of administration even to the extent of vetting appointments to public museums and it had some success in ensuring the nomination of supporters of Rex to those New Order public institutions which were established with German approval during the Occupation. Thus, Rexist were, for example, prominent in the *Office National du Travail*, the *Commissariat à l'Education Physique* and the various corporatist guilds which were supposed to represent different trades and professions <sup>121</sup>.

The tentacles of the *Service Politique* did, however, also extend far beyond the formal institutions of government. No public office was too obscure to escape the attention of Streel and his colleagues who were frequently willing to expend an inordinate amount of effort on ensuring the appointment of a supporter of Rex to a seemingly unimportant post. Education was, for example, one area where they were especially anxious to exert their influence. Political interference in educational appointments in Belgium has long been commonplace



and, like the Vichy government in France, the Rexists held the schools responsible for many of the ills of pre-war Belgium. Thus, the movement was keen to ensure the promotion of teachers who supported its vision of a new more moral system of education purged of the influences of individualism and effete intellectualism. Lists of suitable candidates were drawn up and the *Service Politique* worked closely with the *Commission Consultative de l'Enseignement* which Romsée had established to vet appointments to vacant teaching posts <sup>122</sup>. Yet, despite its New Order composition, this commission proved reluctant to accept quiescently all Rexist nominations and supporters of the movement only ever remained a small minority within the teaching profession. Despite efforts by Rex to influence the appointment of school inspectors and administrators, no substantial educational reforms were introduced and it was left to individual Rexist teachers to do what they could to influence their very reluctant pupils <sup>123</sup>.

Of more obvious value to the movement was the appointment of its supporters to posts in the judiciary and the police. The judicial system was considered by the Rexists to be one of the key bastions of the democratic *ancien régime* but the German-appointed *secrétaire-général* of the Ministry of Justice, Gaston Schuind, was firmly opposed to Rex and the movement had only very limited success in obtaining the appointment of its men to positions in the judiciary <sup>124</sup>. The situation in the police was, however, more encouraging. Rexist *bourgmestres* and *échevins* were frequently anxious to reinforce their precarious authority by appointing supporters of Rex to posts within the communal police forces and the *Service Politique* encouraged militants to sit the police entrance examinations as well as ensuring the appointment of former army officers of pro-Rexist views to the new police training-schools <sup>125</sup>.

It was, however, the infiltration of the national paramilitary police, the *Gendarmerie*, which most interested the Rexist leaders. Since mid-1941, the *Militärverwaltung* and the Ministry of the Interior had begun to expand and reform this police force with the intention of making it a more reliable means of ensuring public order within Belgium. A Flemish officer of New Order views, Colonel Van Coppenolle, was appointed in October 1941 to enact these changes and at the same time Rex was given permission to recruit 200 of its supporters to serve as officers in the *Gendarmerie* <sup>126</sup>. A number of Rexistists did subsequently enter the *Gendarmerie* training-school at Vottem-lez-Liège where their provocative behaviour soon brought them into conflict with the other trainees but this recruitment was always on a small scale and a Rexist circular in October 1942 admitted that few militants had shown any interest in joining the force <sup>127</sup>. Nevertheless, encouraged by the organisational reforms introduced by Van Coppenolle, Rex made infiltration of the *Gendarmerie* a major priority in the autumn of 1942. The *Service Politique* attempted to gather information on the political views of all of the officers in the force and the *cercles* were instructed to bring pressure on militants to convince them to choose service in the *Gendarmerie* in preference to any other collaborationist career <sup>128</sup>. In order to counter the decline in public order, the Ministry of the Interior intended to recruit as many as 1,500 new *gendarmes* in Grand-Bruxelles and Wallonia and the favouritism shown towards New Order elements was evident in the decision to allow these new recruits to belong to approved political organisations <sup>129</sup>.

In response, more Rexistists did enter the *Gendarmerie* but never on the scale hoped for by Van Coppenolle and the Rexist leaders. Throughout Belgium, about 1,500 new recruits had been enrolled by 1943 and, according to Reeder, most of these were members of collaborationist groupings <sup>130</sup>. These new *gendarmes* were, however, too few and too isolated to transform the overall

character of the *Gendarmerie* which remained a centre of anti-German sentiment. The few supporters of Rex in the force were a beleaguered group and, though the *cercles* were encouraged to maintain close contact with them <sup>131</sup>, these Rexist *gendarmes* were of little real benefit to the movement.

Yet, though its benefits for the movement frequently seemed meagre, the appointment of supporters of Rex to posts in public administration was to remain a major theme of Rexist activities for the remainder of the Occupation <sup>132</sup>. It absorbed the time and energies of many of the officials of the movement and to some extent filled the vacuum left by the collapse of their hopes of a Rexist revolution. One of its many consequences was to change the social character of Rex. In the past, Rexist militants had been drawn from a wide variety of social and professional backgrounds but, as the infiltration of state institutions gathered pace, many Rexist came to share a common experience in public administration. This contributed to a "professionalization" of Rex. From a movement of part-time enthusiasts, it became an organisation of full-time militants whose positions in central or local government enabled them to devote themselves entirely to the Rexist cause.

Control of those militants appointed to public offices was a major concern of the Rexist leaders. Some of those who acquired a post with the assistance of Rex soon chose to forget their debt to the movement and, in order to counter such behaviour, all Rexist nominated to positions in government were required to swear an oath of allegiance to Rex as well as contributing a fixed proportion of their income to the movement <sup>133</sup>. In addition, towards the end of 1941 a *Cadre Politique* was created to group all Rexist appointed to public offices. Directed at first by Joseph Pévenasse and, after his departure, by Alfred Lisein, this body was intended to provide Rexist office-holders with a clear status within the movement <sup>134</sup>. Local *cadres politiques* were formed in

many of the Rexist cercles and these met regularly in order to facilitate political control of office-holders as well as enabling them to exchange practical information <sup>135</sup>.

The emphasis which the Rexist leaders placed on the infiltration of public administration confirmed the popular belief that the Rexistists were opportunists intent upon profiting from the German presence to advance their own interests. But Rexist propagandists were at pains to rebuff this accusation. Unlike the democratic political parties, they claimed that their purpose was not to obtain lucrative posts for their supporters but to use these public offices for the benefit of the entire community :

"Pour nous une fonction publique n'est pas une 'place' honorifique ou rémunératrice qui doit flatter la vanité ou satisfaire les appétits d'un agent électoral ; c'est un poste de combat pour le bien de la communauté" <sup>136</sup>.

During what they claimed was a crucial time for the future of Belgium, it was essential that the institutions of government should be in the hands of competent administrators. Thus, they argued that it was their duty to expel from office the incompetent and corrupt nominees of the democratic *ancien régime* in order to inaugurate a new era of efficient "depoliticized" administration. Reports in *Le Pays Réel* publicised the instances of flagrant corruption which Rexist appointees had uncovered and boasted of how in Rexist-controlled communes "la politicaille du village" had been replaced by "bonne et sage administration" <sup>137</sup>. Rexist *bourgmestres* and *échevins*, they claimed, were dedicated technocrats whose experience in business and industry equipped them to introduce new principles of order and discipline into the archaic structures of government <sup>138</sup>.

The reality did not often accord with this ideal. Some Rexist office-holders were indeed well-intentioned if rather ineffectual men who sought to

serve the interests of the community, caused little harm and were willing to help those in trouble with the German authorities. A very few even seem to have achieved a certain measure of popularity and received only minimal prison sentences after the liberation <sup>139</sup>. But there were many other examples of Rexist *bourgmestres* and *échevins* who exploited these positions of authority to their own ends. Despite the promises of a new honesty in local government, many of the appointees showed favouritism towards fellow Rexist or embezzled public funds in order to finance a profligate - or debauched - style of life <sup>140</sup>. Many New Order authorities spent money extravagantly on grandiose projects of public works and an air of incompetence and corruption pervaded the whole Rexist administration of local government <sup>141</sup>. Far from winning over their hostile compatriots, the new appointees were despised as German stooges and there were many examples of Rexist office-holders working closely with the German authorities or even acting as informers and agents for the Sipo-SD <sup>142</sup>. But the overwhelming impression is less one of unredeemed evil than of pompous, ineffectual arrogance. Having at last acceded to power, the Rexist appointees rejoiced in the trappings of power attending official functions in their Rexist uniforms or raising the flag of the movement over the town hall <sup>143</sup>.

As Rexist infiltration of the manifold branches of public administration was largely the responsibility of José Streel, it was inevitable that it should have reflected his wish to chart a more moderate course for the movement. From his position as *Chef du Service Politique*, Streel tried to ensure that Rexist of moderate views were appointed to the more important positions of authority preferring on occasions to support the nomination of non-Rexist rather than of extremist members of his own movement <sup>144</sup>. The impact of this policy was, however, always very limited. Because of the small number of militants at his disposal, Streel was never able to exclude from public office

all those Rexists with whose views he did not agree and it was more often Romsée's Ministry of the Interior which vetoed applications by the more extreme supporters of Rex. Moreover, once appointed to positions in central or local government, even the most moderate Rexists often resorted to desperate radical measures in a vain attempt to reinforce their authority <sup>145</sup>.

Streel's failure to influence to any significant extent the selection of Rexists to serve in public administration well illustrated the problems which confronted his entire policy of moderation. Any attempt to restrain Rex from adopting a categorically pro-German stance ran counter to the logic of the polarised situation in Occupied Belgium where a small collaborationist minority remained isolated from the patriotic majority of the population. Streel hoped to straddle this divide in the illusory hope that Rex could occupy a middle ground which had in fact long since disappeared. Thus, throughout 1942, the movement was confronted by a number of issues which presented Streel and his colleagues with a stark choice between pro-German collaboration and anti-German patriotism.

The first of these points of conflict concerned the always difficult relations between the pro-German minority and the Catholic Church. In early-1942, they were once again brought into conflict by the contentious issue of funerals for members of New Order organisations. As we have seen, the Church authorities had already ordered in 1941 that uniformed members of such groups should not be allowed to participate in Church services <sup>146</sup>. This issue was, however, given a new immediacy by the deaths of supporters of Rex and the VNV in battles on the Eastern Front. The funerals and memorial services for these men would inevitably take on a political character and problems immediately arose in February over the arrangements for the funeral of Tollenaere, the head of the VNV militia who had died in Russia <sup>147</sup>.

The first such incident to involve Rex occurred early in April when a priest refused to officiate at the funeral of a *légionnaire* at Châtelet and a German military chaplain had to be called upon to direct the service <sup>148</sup>. A conference of bishops on 10 April apparently decided on a firm stance against the New Order groups and within a few days similar problems arose at other funerals at Châtelineau, Braine l'Alleud, Frameries and Fleurus as local *curés* refused to permit delegations of uniformed Rexists to attend the services or to allow flags or non-liturgical music to be used for what they deemed to be political ends <sup>149</sup>. The reaction of the Rexist leaders was one of predictable outrage. Articles by Streel and Ernest Jamin in *Le Pays Réel* denounced the inveterate politicking of the Catholic hierarchy and accused the Church of hypocrisy in imposing Draconian conditions on Rexist funerals while allowing funerals for members of Resistance groups to be turned into patriotic demonstrations <sup>150</sup>.

It is not difficult to see why the stance of the Church provoked such anger. The Rexists believed that the fallen *légionnaires* had given their lives for their country and yet they were to be permitted only semi-secret funerals more appropriate for common criminals than for putative national heroes <sup>151</sup>. It was, moreover, an issue of especial importance for those Rexists who still regarded themselves as sincere Catholics. They had looked with sorrow on the estrangement of Rex from the Church and had long hoped that some form of reconciliation would prove possible. Streel, for example, had consistently argued for an alliance between the Church and the advocates of New Order ideas. He stressed the many points of convergence between such ideas and the teachings of the papacy contained in the encyclicals 'Rerum Novarum' and 'Quadragesimo Anno' and called on his fellow collaborationists to recognise that the Catholic faith should be accorded a privileged position in a New Order Belgium <sup>152</sup>.

Degrelle too had seemed concerned by the strained relations with the Church and he apparently wrote to Cardinal Van Roey from the front in early 1942 in the hope of effecting a reconciliation with the Catholic bishops <sup>153</sup>. But the violence of the dispute over the funerals for *légionnaires* soon destroyed any possibility of a *rapprochement*. A torrent of articles in the Rexist press attacked the Church leaders for having deliberately provoked conflict with the movement. By refusing to make any concessions to the feelings of the Rexistists, they claimed that the Belgian Catholic hierarchy had once again proved that it was unable to rid itself of its absurd loyalty to a democratic *ancien régime* which had brought the Church so many material and political spoils while undermining the spiritual bases of the Catholic faith <sup>154</sup>.

At a superficial level, much of this rhetoric recalled the origins of the Rexist movement. Now, as then, they spoke of raising the Church above temporal self-interest to a higher realm where it would be better able to accomplish its central spiritual duties <sup>155</sup>. But, while in the mid-1930s, the Rexistists had been the apostles of a mood of Catholic renewal, they were now a marginal, extremist group who used such ideas largely as a convenient means of attacking an institution opposed to their political ambitions. José Streel was unusual amongst the Rexist leaders in having remained faithful to the original Catholic spirit of Rex. Much more typical was Matthys who, though he too had entered Rex as a young enthusiastic Catholic, had long since ceased to demonstrate any more than a token loyalty to the faith. Ideas of a spiritual regeneration no longer seemed relevant to most Rexistists and, like Matthys, they merely genuflected in the direction of the Catholic faith while engaging at every opportunity in crude attacks on the power of the Church <sup>156</sup>.

The subsequent evolution of the dispute over funerals reinforced this attitude. On 24 April, Matthys wrote to Van Roey proposing that Brussels



cathedral be used for a memorial ceremony for all of the Rexist dead and asking for clarification of the conditions under which priests were authorised to officiate at funerals. The Cardinal's response was, however, uncompromising. The cathedral could not be used for such a service and no priest would participate in any funeral which had the character of a political event <sup>157</sup>. Once again, it was the attitude of the *Militärverwaltung* which seems to have been decisive in resolving this conflict. As during the earlier disputes between the Church and the New Order movements, the German administrators preferred the path of conciliation with the bishops rather than supporting their collaborationist protégés. Peace and order remained the overriding priorities for Reeder and his colleagues and it seems likely that they prevailed upon the Rexistists to end their conflict with the Church <sup>158</sup>. In an abrupt reversal of their former stance, the Rexist *Etat-Major* advised its followers on 28 April that all future funerals for *légionnaires* should be officiated over by a military chaplain of the *Wehrmacht* and that the proposed memorial service would now be held under German auspices in a barracks in Brussels <sup>159</sup>.

The Church had good reason to be satisfied with the resolution of this conflict. In a series of speeches and pastoral letters during the spring and summer of 1942, the bishops reiterated their uncompromising position <sup>160</sup> while absolving themselves of all responsibility for events at those funerals conducted by German chaplains. The Rexistists, on the other hand, had suffered a further humiliating reverse and in a number of angry articles in *Le Pays Réel* they demonstrated their frustration <sup>161</sup>. They were, however, powerless to force the Church to modify its stance and nearly all subsequent Rexist funerals were conducted by German military chaplains <sup>162</sup>. Only rarely could one of the small number of pro-Rexist priests be prevailed upon to brave the wrath of his superiors by officiating at Rexist funerals and, although officials of the

movement sometimes attempted to negotiate with priests over the arrangements for particular funerals, it was generally only the threat of physical violence which caused reluctant priests to conduct such services <sup>163</sup>.

The use of German military chaplains to bury their dead demonstrated how the Rexists had become social pariahs and it was scarcely surprising that local priests should have been a major target for Rexist ire. Their political intrigues were denounced at local meetings and supporters of Rex were encouraged to send reports on priests who delivered anti-German sermons to their superiors <sup>164</sup>. As had been the case earlier in the Occupation, attempts by uniformed Rexists to attend communion services were frequently a cause of disputes and in July 1943 Degrelle deliberately sought confrontation by attending mass in his home town of Bouillon dressed in German military uniform. The priest refused to administer the sacraments to Degrelle whereupon the *Chef de Rex* and his henchmen dragged the priest out of his church and imprisoned him in the cellar of the Degrelle family home. The German authorities ensured the release of the priest but the Church reacted by excommunicating the *Chef de Rex*, a measure which Degrelle was subsequently able to have reversed by the German military chaplaincy <sup>165</sup>. Thus, the Rexists had opted for open conflict and, speaking at a rally in Charleroi in August 1942, Matthys indicated that Rex no longer sought a compromise with the clergy :

"Il y a un temps pour tout. Nous n'adjurons plus personne ; nous ne demandons plus rien. Nous observons et nous enregistrons. Lorsque la possibilité nous en sera donnée, nous agirons et les ennemis de la révolution paieront!" <sup>166</sup>.

Thus, whatever the hopes of Streeel, the realities of the political situation in Occupied Belgium conspired to force Rex into an ever more isolated position. Shunned by the established institutions of Belgian society - such as the Catholic Church - and the focus of widespread popular hostility, the Rexist

community increasingly took on the appearance of a beleaguered camp. The decision of Matthys to organise a "mobilisation" of Rexist militants was symptomatic of this defensive mentality. In a letter sent to all Rexist on 5 May, the *Chef de Rex a.i.* encouraged militants to sign a personal commitment to be mobilised in the service of the movement in the event of an emergency. In order to prepare them for this task, those Rexist who made such a commitment were required to attend a two week military training course at Contich near Antwerp under the direction of officers of the *Wehrmacht* and *Gardes Wallonnes* <sup>167</sup>.

In part, this initiative was intended to rebuild some form of Rexist militia after the virtual collapse of the *Formations de Combat*. Unlike the VNV which in 1942 was able to deploy thousands of uniformed men on the streets of Brussels in a demonstration of its strength <sup>168</sup>, Rex possessed no substantial paramilitary organisation. But the principal purpose of this mobilisation was defensive. Looking to the future with some trepidation, Matthys and his colleagues hoped that the creation of an elite corps of militants who had undergone military training would enable the movement to defend itself against the dangers posed by a Resistance uprising or a landing by Allied troops <sup>169</sup>.

The first training camp, held at the end of May, was reserved for members of the *Formations de Combat*. Under the supervision of their leader, Albert Constant, 233 Rexist militiamen attended the camp where almost all successfully completed the course of basic military and police training <sup>170</sup>. At the outset it had been intended that those Rexist who had attended the camp would form a *Garde Wallonne supplétive* controlled by the movement which would be mobilised in an emergency <sup>171</sup>. However, while the members of the *Formations* were at Contich, further discussions with the *Militärverwaltung* resulted in it being decided that the newly-trained Rexist would instead join the German-

controlled *Hilfsfeldgendarmerie*. This part-time auxiliary police force had originally been composed of German citizens resident in Belgium but in early 1942 the *Militärverwaltung* decided that in view of the general decline in public order it should be expanded to include "zuverlässigen Flamen und Wallonen" <sup>172</sup>. The Rexist training programme at Contich presented the German authorities with a convenient opportunity to enrol the first Belgian members of this new police force and the Rexist leaders had little choice but to accept the German order <sup>173</sup>. Its announcement to the members of the *Formations de Combat* at Contich did, however, arouse a great deal of opposition. A number of the militiamen had already been unhappy at the harsh conditions in the camp and many - including Constant - were angry that they had apparently been duped into becoming auxiliaries of the German police <sup>174</sup>.

Nevertheless, although it was now apparent that those militants trained at Contich would be no more than agents of the German authorities, the Rexist leadership pressed ahead with the mobilisation programme. A special unit, the *Service M*, was established in the Rexist *Etat-Major* to oversee its development and circulars instructed local Rexist officials to make it their principal priority <sup>175</sup>. Already, the training courses at Contich were being seen as only the first step towards a more general militarisation of Rex and in July and August the *Service M* asked the *cercles* to provide details of arms and petrol dumps, of potential safe houses and of members willing to participate in unspecified "sacrifice missions" <sup>176</sup>.

But it was the courses at Contich which were to remain the keystone of the mobilisation programme and three further camps were held there for Rexist during the autumn of 1942 <sup>177</sup>. The reluctance of many militants to attend these camps now that they were linked to service in the German police did, however, remain a problem. Matthys wrote twice to all those who had signed

mobilisation agreements insisting that they must honour their promises <sup>178</sup>. Nevertheless, a significant number of Rexists failed to attend the camps <sup>179</sup> and many of those who did do so subsequently refused to join the *Hilfsfeldgendarmerie*. Thus, the difficulties encountered by the mobilisation programme demonstrated that not all Rexists had yet become unconditional supporters of the Nazi cause. To assist the German police in their work was a step which many remained reluctant to take. Though they were willing to serve in the German forces when - as in the case of the *Légion Wallonie* or *Gardes Wallonnes* - that service seemed directly related to the achievement of Rexist political goals, many militants clearly remained conscious of the need for a limit to such collaboration.

No further camps were organised after 1942 but efforts continued to convince Rexists to enter the *Hilfsfeldgendarmerie*. According to Matthys, 85 to 90% of those trained at Contich subsequently did so and German and Rexist reports prove that as many as several hundred Rexists were serving as part-time German police auxiliaries <sup>180</sup>. Matthys was at pains to stress that most of these did no more than assist with minor public order duties during the summer of 1944 <sup>181</sup>. But in certain localities, the enthusiasm of Rexist officials or of German commanders led to the *Hilfsfeldgendarmerie* playing a more active role. In Namur and Dinant, for example, regular bimonthly exercises were held and after the liberation a number of Rexist *Hilfsfeldgendarmes* were prosecuted for their participation in German operations which had led to the arrests of Resistance fighters and of men evading German labour conscription measures <sup>182</sup>.

The participation of Rexist militants in the *Hilfsfeldgendarmerie* left unresolved the problem of how the movement could recreate a militia capable of protecting its militants and of accomplishing any future seizure of power. This issue would remain a central preoccupation of the Rexist leaders throughout the

remainder of 1942 and, in the absence of any alternative, their attention returned to some form of renovation of the *Formations de Combat*. In February 1942, Albert Constant had been appointed to head the *Etat-Major* of the *Formations* and he laboured to instil greater discipline and organisation into the depleted ranks of the militia <sup>1e3</sup>. His efforts received the encouragement and support of Victor Matthys who in a series of speeches and circulars exhorted all able-bodied Rexist to enrol in the *Formations*. Only through service in the ranks of the militia, he declared, could these militants fulfil their obligations to the Rexist cause <sup>1e4</sup>.

These efforts were largely in vain. Recruitment for the *Légion Wallonie* and *Gardes Wallonnes* had already absorbed many young Rexist men and few of the older more experienced militants seemed willing to join an organisation which was regarded, even within Rex, with some derision. Thus, despite Matthys' hopes that the militia would be able to present an imposing front at the national rally planned for October in Brussels, few new recruits appear to have been attracted and the *Formations de Combat* continued to consist of little more than small isolated groups of men <sup>1e5</sup>.

These largely ineffectual attempts at reform did, however, serve to highlight differing views within Rex as to the purpose which such a militia should serve. For his part, Constant tended to regard the *Formations de Combat* as a surrogate national army which existed to preserve public order and to act as a "rassemblement national" for all men of goodwill <sup>1e6</sup>. Matthys, on the other hand, had no sympathy for such ideas. He argued that Rex, as an isolated minority, had no need of a "garde civique" but should instead create an aggressive and explicitly political militia modelled on the Nazi SA and SS <sup>1e7</sup>. These differences gradually caused Constant to lose the confidence of Matthys who described him dismissively as a "paperassier" devoid of political

judgement <sup>188</sup>. In January 1943, demoralised by his disputes with Matthys and distrustful of Degrelle's radical rhetoric, Constant offered his resignation as the head of the *Formations* <sup>189</sup>. It was promptly accepted by Matthys but, by depriving the militia of its most effective organiser, Constant's departure merely made even more intractable the problem of re-establishing an effective Rexist paramilitary force.

This task was made all the more urgent by a resurgence in Resistance violence. After the isolated incidents in September 1941, armed assaults on supporters of Rex recommenced in the spring of 1942 and from then on the periodic reports sent by Reeder to his superiors in Berlin catalogued an accelerating spiral of attacks on Rexist militants and buildings <sup>190</sup>. In response, the Rexist leaders attempted as best they could to ensure the protection of their supporters. In February 1942, they obtained an additional number of arms permits from the German authorities but the acquisition of weapons was still difficult and most Rexist *dirigeants* remained unarmed in the face of increasingly audacious Resistance attacks <sup>191</sup>. Local Rexist groups also sought to improve their security: elaborate precautions were adopted at meetings and bodyguards were appointed to protect vulnerable leaders <sup>192</sup>. But most Rexist regarded such measures as ineffectual and, as early as June 1942, the idea was raised by militants in La Louvière of gathering together all of the local supporters of Rex in a protected camp <sup>193</sup>. The increasing level of assaults also led for the first time to calls for the central leadership to instigate reprisal attacks on Resistance militants and their patrons. Within the *cercles*, the legitimacy of such counter-attacks was much discussed. In Braine l'Alleud, for example, Rexist officials called on their followers to adopt a stance of stoic self-restraint in the face of all provocations but elsewhere -

such as in Philippeville - plans for reprisal attacks were already well advanced <sup>194</sup>.

The Rexist leaders shared in the exasperation felt by their supporters. There was no official policy of authorising reprisals <sup>195</sup> but Matthys, in particular, believed that Rexist must respond in kind to the Resistance attacks. When, in June the Rexist *bourgmestre* of Ransart and former *Chef de Cercle* of Charleroi Jean Demaret was shot dead in his office by a Resistance militant disguised as a *gendarme* <sup>196</sup>, Matthys' immediate emotional reaction was to order a reluctant Constant to organise a reprisal killing of a local magistrate. The head of the *Formations de Combat* did subsequently visit Charleroi but, despite the enthusiasm of certain local Rexist, the matter was allowed to drop <sup>197</sup>. Nevertheless, the threat made by Matthys in his address at the funeral of Demaret was emphatic. Rex, he declared, had been too passive in its reaction to such murders and the time had now come to act :

"Je déclare donc que chaque fois qu'un Rexiste tombera, un de nos ennemis sera abattu" <sup>198</sup>.

Such threats were often repeated by Matthys during the subsequent months. In August, when two Rexist serving in the German armed forces shot dead civilians who they claimed had insulted them, the *Chef de Rex a.i.* issued an *Ordre du Jour* for the *Jeunesses Rexistes* and *Formations de Combat* praising their actions which, he claimed, marked "une étape dans l'histoire du Mouvement" <sup>199</sup>. And in September, in a speech at Tournai as well as in a strongly worded article in *Le Pays Réel*, Matthys reiterated his support for decisive action. The Rexist, he declared, had been deprived of the protection of the police and judicial authorities and, while they accepted the deaths of their comrades as the cost of the achievement of their revolutionary goals, they were therefore justified in resorting to the primitive morality of revenge :



"Des soldats savent combattre mais aussi abattre. . . Certains de nos camarades ont déjà montré l'exemple. Ne pleurons pas, ne gémissons pas, préparons-nous au combat, passons aux actes!" 200.

The bloody language of Matthys' threats was not, however, matched by equivalent actions. Rex possessed neither the will nor, more especially, the means to respond in kind to the Resistance violence. In Spa on 20 September, members of the *Formations de Combat*, acting apparently on orders received from Matthys' office, did sack the home of the democratically-elected *bourgmestre* whom they accused of complicity in a wave of attacks on local Rexists 201. But the orders from the Rexist headquarters specified that the *bourgmestre* himself should not be assaulted and, despite their categorical public statements, Matthys and his colleagues remained unwilling to authorise violent attacks. They preferred to hope that firm action by the German or even the Belgian authorities would put an end to the violence. Indeed, after the impulsive threats of the summer, Matthys was to become considerably more cautious in his public statements and gave no encouragement to those Rexists who wished to engage their patriotic fellow-citizens in open combat 202.

There was little discernible public sympathy for those Rexists who fell victim to the Resistance assaults. Some Belgians did regard such attacks as premature or counter-productive but most had accepted the necessity of patriotic violence and in general they applauded the Resistance assassination campaigns 203. Unlike the anonymous representatives of the Occupying forces, the followers of Degrelle were clearly identifiable targets and the assassination of a local Rexist leader frequently seemed to do more than any distant Allied military victory to raise popular morale. Convinced that the emerging alliance of Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States would eventually defeat German Reich 204, many Belgians also drew comfort from

dreaming of the bloody purge which would accompany the final liberation. In innumerable clandestine publications there were calls for the total extermination of "cette vermine immonde" which had betrayed the country and the violence of these threats prompted two middle-class observers to remark apprehensively in 1942 :

"On craint que la guerre finie, il se produise dans notre pays de terribles remous. L'esprit de vengeance est poussé au paroxysme et, à entendre ce qui se colporte, les représailles s'exerceront sans aucune pitié" <sup>205</sup>.

Popular antipathy towards the Rexists continued to escalate remorselessly in all areas of public and private life. Their rallies were shunned, their funerals heckled and their marches disrupted <sup>206</sup>. Many continued to lose their jobs or found their businesses deserted by their non-Rexist clients <sup>207</sup>. At school, the children of Rexists were insulted by their classmates or even by their teachers ; their post was intercepted and doctors were accused of neglecting the Rexist sick in their care <sup>208</sup>. Even in the distant Stalags in Germany where many francophone members of the Belgian army continued to languish, the Rexist detainees were insulted or attacked <sup>209</sup>.

As their friends and families deserted them <sup>210</sup>, most Rexists felt they had little choice but to withdraw from the outside world into the protective bosom offered by the German forces. The vision of a moderate, principled and limited collaboration presented by Streeel may still have accorded with the wishes of many Rexists but for most it was no longer a viable possibility. Some, intimidated by popular hostility and the dangers of Resistance attack, chose to desert from Rexist ranks and, in contrast to the VNV which was still expanding and growing in confidence, the overall trend in Rexist membership in 1942 appears to have been downwards <sup>211</sup>. But most Rexists chose to remain within the movement and they reacted to the need for closer co-

operation with the German forces with differing degrees of enthusiasm. The difficulties encountered by the mobilisation programme demonstrated the reluctance of many to become too closely associated with the German police but at a more superficial level other Rexists gave an impression of unconditional support for the Nazi cause by applauding frenetically at any mention of Hitler or by giving their children incongruous Germanic names <sup>212</sup>.

Above all, the Rexists increasingly adopted the attitudes of a group which stood outside the rest of the community. Seeking to draw what benefits they could from this isolated position, militants claimed exemption from the requisitioning and rationing imposed on the civilian population and even questioned whether they should pay taxes to the Belgian authorities <sup>213</sup>. Clearly, many felt that such privileges were no more than a just reward for the dangers to which they were exposed and Rexist propaganda encouraged this mentality by portraying Rex as a revolutionary elite struggling to impose their will on an alien population. This crude elitism featured prominently in collaborationist rhetoric throughout Occupied Europe but it rarely reached such extremes as in Rexist speeches and publications. All historical events, the supporters of Degrelle were continually reminded, were the work of a determined minority willing to counter its opponents with force <sup>214</sup>. Thus, the Rexists were encouraged to regard themselves as the "légionnaires du front de l'intérieur" and incessant struggle and violent conflict became the dominant images of the movement <sup>215</sup>. All talk of a peaceful revolution was banished and, instead, militants were encouraged to dream of the decisive day of action when "baïonnette au canon" they would finally crush their opponents <sup>216</sup>. The slogans, iconography and even the songs of Rex reflected the harshness of their rhetoric. Though the sardonic cartoons of "Jam" still recalled the student iconoclasm of the early years of Rex, much more typical of the new spirit of

the movement was the song "Fer, Sang et Feu" distributed to the supporters of  
Rex in 1942 :

"Gardons toujours nos glaives  
Brillants pour le combat  
Préparons-nous sans trêve  
Car le sang coulera.

Craignons la peur traîtresse  
Et non pas la douleur.  
Ni pitié, ni faiblesse,  
Durcissons notre cœur.

Fer, sang et feu,  
Combat pour l'idéal" 217.

#### Footnotes - Chapter Four

- (1) J. Streeel 'Au sujet de l'article 115' [p. 17], C2GM, Fonds José Streeel. See also Figure Five.
- (2) See pp. 173-174.
- (3) P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, pp. 76-77 and 103-105.
- (4) e.g. *Le Soir* 19 Mar. 1942, pp. 1 and 3, 'Les difficultés de l'avenir' ; *Le P.R.*, 25 July 1942, p. 1, 'Notre pari'.
- (5) *Le P.R.*, 21 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'Voilà le printemps...'
- (6) *Le P.R.*, 24 Apr. 1942, p. 8, 'Harceler n'est pas débarquer' and 21 July 1942, p. 1, 'Le problème du second front'.
- (7) *Le P.R.*, 12 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Nous gagnerons la guerre des nerfs' and 25 Aug. 1942, p. 3, 'Une magnifique réunion...' ; JS Chronique des Instituteurs, Radio Bruxelles 25 Oct. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS (Supplementary File No. 5).
- (8) *Le Soir* 18 June 1942, p. 1, 'Les faux convertis'.
- (9) *Le Soir* 23 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'Il y a modérés et modérés'.
- (10) *Le P.R.*, 25 July 1942, p. 1, 'Notre pari' and 30 Aug. 1942, p. 3, 'Le pari de la collaboration'.
- (11) *Le P.R.*, 10 May 1942, p. 1, 'Le 10 mai'.
- (12) Bulletin des dirigeants No. 4, 15 Dec. 1941, C2GM, C 11/184 ; *Le P.R.*, 5 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'La situation présente' ; J. Streeel 'Observations sur l'acte d'accusation' p. 4, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel.
- (13) TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2343 ; Extract from report of *Sipo-SD* 15 June 1942, GRMA T 501 173 125.
- (14) *Le P.R.*, 2 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'Combats glorieux et sanglants...' and 11 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'Onze Croix de Fer...' ; TB 21, 15 Sept. 1942, p. 2555 ; Informations reçues de Belgique 9 Dec. 1942, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/964.
- (15) Légion Belge "Wallonie" Historique pp. 12-31, C2GM, W 4 ; TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2346 ; *Le P.R.*, 10 Aug. 1943, p. 4, 'Une émouvante cérémonie...'
- (16) *Le P.R.*, 20 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'La glorieuse offensive...' and 14 Apr. 1942, p. 2, 'Nécrologie' ; J. Streeel 'Au sujet de l'article 115' [p. 11], C2GM, Fonds José Streeel.
- (17) *Le P.R.*, 24 Mar. and 8 Oct. 1942, p. 2, 'Chronique de la Solidarité Légionnaire'.
- (18) e.g. *Le P.R.*, 15 Sept. 1942, p. 1, 'Le Cercle de Tournai...' and 4 Oct. 1942, p. 2, 'Service Légionnaire'.
- (19) *Le P.R.*, 10 Jan. and 12 Dec. 1942, p. 1, 'Un léger sacrifice...', 10 Mar. 1942, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement' and 29 Nov. 1942, p. 1, 'La Légion Wallonie...'
- (20) *Le P.R.*, 14 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'Avec la Légion' and 11 Aug. 1942, p. 3, 'L'inauguration de la permanence J. Demaret'.
- (21) EMF of FC Ordres hebdomadaires 19 Sept. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Farde C, Doct. 4-5 ; TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2343 ; G. Figeys Mémoire [1944], C2GM, JP 093 ; P. De Ligne 'Résumé des rapports mensuels de nos correspondants en province : juillet 1942' 18 Aug. 1942, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/964 ; *Le P.R.*, 7 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'Les occasions de servir'.
- (22) JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945 and 'Note écrite...' 27 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (23) De Ligne to VM 25 Jan. 1943, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye. See pp. 261-263.
- (24) JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (25) Berger to Himmler 2 Apr. 1942, GRMA T 175 131 2651893 ; Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988.
- (26) *En Avant* Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Camarades ouvriers' ; *L'Effort Wallon* 28 June 1942, p. 1, 'Degrelle à Berlin'. No surviving official documentation confirms that Degrelle visited Rome and Bucharest but these visits are referred to in *Le Pays Réel* as well as in private correspondence : Informations reçues de Belgique 9 Dec. 1942, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/964 ; *Le P.R.*, 25 July 1942, pp. 1-2, 'Reprenant son commandement au Front de l'Est...' and 13 Sept. 1943, p. 1, 'Le Chef de Rex exhorte ses militants'.

- (27) Journal de V. Matthys p. 7, C2GM ; *La Meuse* 5 Sept. 1945, p. 1, 'Conseil de Guerre' ; TB 21, 15 Sept. 1942, p. 2554.
- (28) Reeder to DKH 26 Jan. 1943, C2GM, Procès von Falkenhausen, Doct. 117.
- (29) *Le P.R.* 30 June 1942, p. 1, 'Rencontre avec le Chef' and 1 July 1942, p. 1, 'A Berlin avec Léon Degrelle...' ; *En Avant* Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Camarades ouvriers'.
- (30) e.g., see p. 214-216.
- (31) *Le Soir* 8 and 16 June 1946, p. 2, 'Les Conseils de Guerre' ; Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles, Procès-Verbal de l'audience publique, 6 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Jugement et Appel.
- (32) *L'Effort Wallon* 28 June 1942, p. 3, 'L'idée de la nation dans l'histoire de Belgique'.
- (33) *Le Soir* 16 June 1946, p. 2, 'Les Conseils de Guerre' ; JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. ; J. Streel Mémoire : Après mon départ de Rex, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (34) JS 'Note écrite...' 27 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (35) See pp. 389-393.
- (36) *Le P.R.* 31 May 1942, p. 1, 'Les prisonniers et les Légionnaires', 21 July 1942, p. 1, 'La collaboration dans la camaraderie' and 31 July 1942, p. 1, 'Les nouveaux modérés...'.
- (37) *Le P.R.* 14 June 1941, pp. 1 and 6, 'Politiciens et Aventuriers' and 23 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'L'impasse à éviter'.
- (38) *Le P.R.* 11 July 1942, p. 1, '"Nous, wallons..."' and 30 July 1942, p. 2, 'La défense de la musique belge...' and p. 4, 'Le Cercle de Tournai...'. Articles in *Le Pays Réel* related the glorious traditions of Belgian history : e.g. *Le P.R.* 19 Apr. 1942, p. 3, 'Les "Anciens Belges" étaient-ils des "barbares"?' and 4 Oct. 1942, p. 4, 'Les Belges au service...'.
- (39) *Le P.R.* 26 May 1942, p. 2, 'Une soirée récréative chez les Gardes Wallonnes' and 4 Oct. 1942, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement'. Robert Poulet wrote to Streel to protest at this trend ; Poulet to JS 27 May 1942, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (40) *Le P.R.* 15 July 1942, p. 1, 'L'Europe aux Européens', 11 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'L'Europe et la Patrie...' and 30 Sept. 1942, p. 1, 'Besoin de grandeur'.
- (41) *Le P.R.* 23 Dec. 1941, pp. 3 and 6, 'Deux mille militants liégeois...' and 3 Apr. 1942, pp. 1 and 3, 'La prestation de serment de la Brigade Motorisée...'.
- (42) *Le P.R.* 27 Feb. 1941, pp. 1 and 3, 'Le Racisme, la Race et la Médecine Sociale'.
- (43) *Le Soir* 26 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'L'essentiel et l'accessoire' ; *Le P.R.* 11 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'Nos combats'.
- (44) *Le P.R.* 28 Sept. 1941 Magazine, 'Un représentant de la civilisation...bolcheviste', 5 Oct. 1941, pp. 1 and 3, 'Les funérailles de Jean Oedekerke', 7 Nov. 1941, p. 2, 'Racisme biologique et spirituel', 9 Jan. 1942, p. 2, 'Mystique raciale' and 16 Jan. 1942, p. 2, 'La race : essence de l'Etat'. See also Jean Denis 'Mémoire justificatif d'un condamné à mort' pp. 187-188, Aud. Gén., Doss. Jean Denis, Info., Doct. 53.
- (45) See pp. 68-69 ; *Le P.R.* 4 July 1941, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement'. The cartoons published by "Jam" in the Rexist press frequently featured hostile portrayals of Jews : e.g. *Le P.R.* 24 June 1941.
- (46) *Le P.R.* 4 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Comment des Juifs se camouflent...' 8 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'Le danger juif' and 5 June 1942, p. 1, 'Secouons le joug d'Israël'.
- (47) See, for example, the comments of Léo Moulin on the popularity of anti-semitic ideas in the University of Louvain in the 1930s : *Pourquoi Pas ?* 23 Nov. 1983, p. 93, 'Le cas Robert Poulet...'.
- (48) *Le P.R.* 23 June 1942, p. 1, 'Les étoiles jaunes' and 23 July 1942, p. 1, 'De quoi vivent-ils ces juifs ?'
- (49) German anti-semitic propaganda films had attracted a substantial audience in Brussels and Wallonia during the winter of 1940-1941 : M. Steinberg *L'étoile et le fusil : la question juive 1940-1942*, pp. 169-171.
- (50) LD to his family 31 Oct. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Pièces à Conviction, Doct. 31-33.
- (51) *Le P.R.* 6 Dec. 1941, p. 1, 'Les juifs seront matés' and 27 Oct. 1942, p. 2, 'Une grande manifestation...'. See also M. Steinberg *L'étoile et le fusil : la question juive 1940-1942*, pp. 34-35 and 149-150.

- (52) *Le P.R.* 5 Dec. 1941, p. 1, 'Anti-sémitisme d'état', 1 Aug. 1942, pp. 1 and 6, 'Les forces hostiles au nouvel ordre' and 7 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Sabotage judiciaire'.
- (53) *Le Soir* 9 July 1942, p. 1, 'Le triomphe de l'avenir'.
- (54) Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Procès-verbal de l'audience publique 6 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Jugement et Appel ; JS to [Humblet] 31 Oct. 1945, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel.
- (55) e.g. L. Degrelle *Les Taudis* (Louvain, 1929).
- (56) *Le P.R.* 15 Oct. 1941, p. 2, 'Le scandale du CCI' and 18 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'Démagogie capitaliste'.
- (57) *En Avant* Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Camarades ouvriers' ; *Le P.R.* 27 Oct. 1942, p. 2, 'Une grande manifestation...'
- (58) *Le P.R.* 10 Dec. 1941, p. 1, 'Le statut de la propriété immobilière' and 17 July 1942, p. 1, 'L'esprit bourgeois et le bétail électoral'.
- (59) e.g. *Le P.R.* 9 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Industrie et artisanat', 5 Nov. 1941, p. 1, 'Le chômage du petit commerce' and 9 Jan. 1942, p. 1, 'Et les classes moyennes ?'.
- (60) *Le P.R.* 22 July 1942, p. 2, 'Qu'est-ce que le socialisme ?'.
- (61) *En Avant* Aug. 1942, p. 2, 'Victor Matthys...a parlé à Charleroi' ; *Le P.R.* 31 July 1942, p. 2, 'Socialisme'.
- (62) J. Streeel *La révolution du vingtième siècle*, pp. 149-191 ; *Le P.R.* 30 Oct. 1942, pp. 1 and 4, 'Notre socialisme', 8 Nov. 1942, p. 1, 'L'ordre nouveau sera socialiste' and 27 Nov. 1942, pp. 1 and 4, 'Socialisme ancien et nouveau'.
- (63) *Ibid* ; J. Streeel *La révolution du vingtième siècle*, pp. 162-172.
- (64) JS Chronique des Instituteurs 10 May 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Chroniques Radiophoniques ; *Le P.R.* 4 Sept. 1941, p. 1, 'Les étapes du corporatisme'.
- (65) P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, pp. 63-64, 94-98 and 123-125 ; J. Willequet *La Belgique sous la botte*, pp. 127-142.
- (66) See pp. 129-133.
- (67) R. De Hoe to Hubermont 24 July 1942, C2GM, W 3/73 ; *Le P.R.* 6 Mar. 1942, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement' ; VM Pro Just., 14 Mar. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 210-213. In addition, Hubermont stated his intention in February 1942 of joining the new contingent of *légionnaires*. However, he subsequently repented of this decision and remained in Belgium : *Le P.R.* 24 Feb. 1942, p. 4, 'Le discours du Chef a.i.' ; P. Hubermont 'Mémoire remis à Me. Thomard', C2GM, W 3/71.
- (68) *L'Ami du Peuple* 8 Nov. 1941, p. 2, 'Notre meeting anti-juif...', 22 Nov. 1941, p. 4, 'A Soignies...' and 3 Oct. 1942, p. 3, 'Le légionnaire Lucien Abrassart'. See also p. 150.
- (69) *L'Ami du Peuple* 11 Oct. 1941, p. 2, 'Une conférence de Me. Lambrichts à Liège' and 18 Oct. 1941, p. 2, 'Légion Wallonie'.
- (70) *L'Ami du Peuple* 20 Dec. 1941, p. 1, 'Tout est bien...qui finit bien' ; *Le P.R.* 6 Dec. 1941, p. 1, 'Les juifs seront matés' and 23 Dec. 1941, p. 3, 'Deux mille militants liégeois...' ; M. Steinberg *L'étoile et le fusil : la question juive 1940-1942*, p. 150.
- (71) *Le P.R.* 4 Jan. 1942, pp. 1-2, 'Les grandes heures de Rex en '41' and 31 Jan. 1942, p. 1, 'Mettons à profit...' ; JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (72) Procès-Verbal Comité de Coordination 5 Feb. 1942, Leclercq to Dalldorff 4 Apr. 1942 and Text of Leclercq's proposed accord, C2GM, C 13/7.
- (73) Lodewick to Leclercq [undated] and 'Propositions confidentielles du Chef du MNPW à Monsieur le Capitaine Dalldorff...' 26 May 1942, C2GM, C 13/7.
- (74) TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2343 ; *Le P.R.* 11 Aug. 1942, p. 3, 'L'inauguration de la permanence J. Demaret' and 22 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Effectifs réduits' ; *Le Soir* 7 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'L'avenir est aux modérés'.
- (75) *Le P.R.* 18 June 1942, p. 1, 'Partout les mêmes intrigants et sots, gonflés de vanité : les convulsionnaires', 31 July 1942, p. 1, 'Les nouveaux modérés et les extrémistes' and 9 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Unité sacré et indivisible'.
- (76) *Le P.R.* 17 June 1942, p. 1, 'L'excès de zèle...' and 28 June 1942, p. 1, 'Convertis et kleptomanes'.
- (77) VM to Cadres Territoriaux 1 June 1942, C2GM, C 11/146.

- (78) *L'Ami du Peuple* 27 June 1942, p. 2, 'L'activité de la ligue' and 4 July 1942, p. 2, 'Notre meeting à la Brasserie Flamande'. Paul Jamin attended a meeting of *Défense du Peuple* at this time and well recalls Lambrichts' fury at the new stance of Rex ; Interview with M. Paul Jamin 11 Dec. 1987.
- (79) See note 77 ; TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2343 ; A. Van Hal to CCW 9 July 1942 and R. De Hoe to Hubermont 24 July 1942, C2GM, W 3/73.
- (80) Streel to Romsée 9 Oct. 1942 and Hubermont to Romsée 27 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 4/3 and 353.
- (81) TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2343 ; Gaillard to KK of Namur 22 Apr. 1943, C2GM, C 5/27.
- (82) *Notre Combat* 1 Oct. 1942, p. 8, 'Ce que pense l'AGRA'.
- (83) Report on AGRA, Doct. PP14 B 11 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 5/29 ; TB 21, 15 Sept. 1942, p. 2554 ; P. De Ligne 'Résumé des rapports mensuels de nos correspondants en province' 18 Aug. 1942, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/964.
- (84) See p. 264.
- (85) TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2343 ; JS to Romsée 9 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 4/353 ; VM Pro Just., 14 Mar. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 210-213 ; Journal de V. Matthys p. 9, C2GM.
- (86) *La Gazette de Charleroi* 25-26 July 1942, 'Qu'est-ce que l'AGRA ?' cited in C2GM, C 5/32 ; *Notre Combat* 1 Oct. 1942, pp. 1 and 5, 'Devons-nous accepter comme membres...?'
- (87) *Le Journal de Charleroi* 28 July 1942, p. 1, 'Un mouvement digne de sympathie' and *Mons-Tournai* 24 Aug. 1942, 'Première manifestation de l'AGRA à Bruxelles' cited in C2GM, C 5/32. The conflict between AGRA and Rex was always most intense in Liège where the members of the Rexist *cercle* apparently applied *en bloc* to enter AGRA during the summer of 1942. This application was refused by the AGRA leadership ; Gaillard to KK of Namur 22 Apr. 1943, C2GM, C 5/27.
- (88) See pp. 317-320.
- (89) J. Streel Notice pour mon défenseur : cinquième suite, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (90) Lambinon to Chef adjoint of Dinant 16 Sept. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Charles Lambinon, Inst., Doct. 70 ; *National Socialisme* 15 May 1943, p. 4, 'Rapport du Chef des Cadres Territoriaux'.
- (91) *Le P.R.* 2 Sept. 1941, pp. 1 and 3, 'Les nominations de bourgmestres'.
- (92) Pévenasse to Chefs de Cercles 20 Nov. 1941, C2GM, C 11/181 ; JS 'Note écrite...' 27 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. ; VM Pro Just., 21 May 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Enquête Complémentaire, Farde C, Doct. 20-26 ; *Le Soir* 13 May 1947, p. 4, 'Les Conseils de Guerre'.
- (93) *Le P.R.* 8 Nov. 1941, p. 2, 'Hommes d'Ordre Nouveau...' ; *National Socialisme* 15 Apr. 1944, p. 8, 'Antoine Dupont...' ; Chef du Service des Nominations to Chefs de Cercles of Namur, etc. 12 Nov. 1941, Aud. Gén., Doss. Charles Lambinon, Inst., Doct. 18.
- (94) P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis* I, 507.
- (95) See, for example, the regular announcements which appeared in the columns of local newspapers ; e.g. *La Légia* of November and December 1941.
- (96) *Le P.R.* 1 Jan. 1942, p. 1, 'L'année qui vient', 5 Feb. 1942, p. 3, 'Les premiers résultats...' and 5 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'La situation présente'.
- (97) *Le P.R.* 25 Aug. 1942, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.
- (98) *Le P.R.* 27 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'Une grande manifestation...'. See also *Le P.R.* 22 May 1942, pp. 1 and 3, 'Une grande journée...'
- (99) W. Ganshof van der Meersch *Réflexions sur la répression*, pp. 25-27.
- (100) JS to Louis Abrassart 16 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 11/231 ; JS Pro Just., 4 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Cour Militaire, Doct. 12.
- (101) In Grand La Louvière, a pro-Rexist *bourgmestre* (Gorain) presided over a *collège* of six *échevins* which contained three Rexists (Fourmois, Duhainaut and Hubert) ; *Moniteur Belge* 22 Aug. 1942, p. 5162 ; *Le Journal de Charleroi* 13 Sept. 1946, p. 4, 'Enfin, la Bande Duquesne va payer', 21 Feb. 1947, p. 5, 'Les échevins de l'ex-Grand La Louvière' and 5 Mar. 1947, p. 3, 'Conseil de Guerre de Charleroi'. The *collège* of Grand Charleroi was composed of ten nominees, of whom six were Rexists : the *bourgmestre*, Teughels, and five *échevins*, Denis, Desclin, Englebin, Grevesse and Sarlet. Two other *échevins*, Dujacquier and Ligot, appear to have had pro-Rexist sympathies ; *Le P.R.* 1 Sept. 1942, p. 2, 'Le nouveau collège échevinal...' ; *Le Journal de Charleroi* 30 June and 1 July 1945, p. 1, 'Les échevins du 'Gross Charleroi'...' and



- 10 and 24 July 1945, p. 1, 'Conseil de Guerre de Charleroi' ; *Informations administratives et politiques* Sept. 1943, pp. 9-12, 'Le service social communal'.
- (102) See note 80.
- (103) *La Légia* 7-8 Nov. 1942, p. 3, 'Le nouveau Collège...' ; *Le P.R.* 8 Nov. 1942, p. 2, 'Les nouveaux échevins'.
- (104) *La Légia* 23 Nov. 1942, p. 2, 'Le bourgmestre de Liège...' ; *Le P.R.* 20 Jan 1943, p. 3, 'Les nouveaux échevins...' and 7 Mar. 1943, p. 1, 'Notre camarade Dargent...' ; *Journal des Tribunaux* 23 Sept. 1945, pp. 466-469, 'Conseil de Guerre de Liège'. The Rexist majority was composed of Dargent and of four *échevins*, Bomans, Fréson, Froment and Tavier. In addition, another *échevin*, Boutier, was reported to have subsequently joined Rex.
- (105) TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, p. 2754 ; *Le P.R.* 27 Sept. 1942, p. 1, 'Le Grand-Bruxelles...' ; VM and LC Pro Just., 20 and 24 May 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Enquête Complémentaire, Farde C, Docts. 19 and 20-26 ; *Le Soir* 5 Mar. 1946, pp. 1-2, 'Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles' and 10 Mar. 1946, p. 3, 'Les Conseils de Guerre'. Only one *échevin*, Bottemanne, was a member of Rex but his colleague, Gillès de Pélichy, was a friend of Degrelle and a reliable supporter of the movement.
- (106) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, p. 195.
- (107) TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2360 ; *Le P.R.* 29 Mar. 1942, p. 1, 'Les nouveaux gouverneurs...' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis II*, 154-155 ; *Le Journal de Charleroi* 29 Oct. 1945, p. 1, 'Jean Hancotte et le Prince de Croix...' ; *La Meuse* 7 Feb. 1945, p. 1, 'Conseil de Guerre de Liège' ; JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (108) TB 25, 15 Nov. 1943, pp. 3435-3436 ; VM Pro Just., 20 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 55-58.
- (109) TB 27, 10 Apr. 1944, p. 3861 ; *L'Avenir du Luxembourg* 21 Feb. 1946, p. 1, 'Au Conseil de Guerre'.
- (110) *Vers l'Avenir* 9-10 Mar. 1946, p. 3, 'Au Conseil de Guerre de Namur' ; *Sambre et Meuse* 5 Sept. 1946, p. 2, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur'.
- (111) The *cadre politique* of the *cercle* of Mons described Leroy as a "rexiste-ersatz en demi-teintes" while another Rexist said of him in 1944 "il mérite une balle dans la tête" ; Cercle de Mons, Cadre Politique, Meetings of 22 and 29 May 1942, C2GM, C 11/321.10 ; *Le Courrier de l'Escaut* 14 July 1946, p. 1, 'Conseil de Guerre de Tournai (A)' ; *Vers l'Avenir* 11 and 20 and 21 Apr. 1946, p. 2, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur'.
- (112) TB 21, 15 Sept. 1942, pp. 2566-2567. In the Hainaut, three pro-Rexist *députés* were appointed in 1941 to be joined later in the Occupation by two more. In Liège - as in the Luxembourg - three Rexist served as *députés permanents* while in Namur at least two Rexist *députés* were appointed. In the Brabant, one *député* was Rexist.
- (113) *Informations administratives et politiques* Sept. 1943, p. 32, 'Activité des Cadres Politiques' ; TB 26, 1 Mar. 1944, p. 3635.
- (114) The exact number of Rexist working within central government is not known. For some statistics of the situation in 1944, see p. 326. Some pro-Rexist *fonctionnaires* also attended Rexist rallies : *Le P.R.* 18 Jan. 1943, p. 1, 'La cérémonie' and 4 May 1943, p. 1, 'Le Chef de Rex glorifie le travail'.
- (115) *Le P.R.* 15 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'M. De Meyer est nommé...' ; Mémorandum aux autorités allemandes [Autumn 1943], C2GM, C 11/324.
- (116) VM Pro Just., 14 and 21 May 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Enquête Complémentaire, Farde C, Docts. 19 and 20-26.
- (117) *Le Soir* 28 and 30 May 1947, p. 5, 'Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles'.
- (118) TB 18, 21 Dec. 1941, pp. 2000 and 2003 ; TB 21, 15 Sept. 1942, p. 2517.
- (119) *Le Soir* 2 Apr. 1941, p. 2, 'Nos nouveaux Secrétaires-Généraux'. See also p. 122.
- (120) Simar to Chefs de Groupes 21 Nov. 1942, C2GM, C 11/321.8.
- (121) VM to Daye 24 Apr. 1942, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye ; JS to Chefs de Cercles 29 Oct. 1942 and Communication de l'Office National du Travail, C2GM, C 11/225 and C 11/318.2 ; *La Meuse* 11 Sept. 1946, p. 2, 'L'Office du Travail...' and 12 Sept. 1946, p. 2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre' ; *Le*

- Journal de Charleroi* 17-18 May 1947, p. 3, 'Le procès de l'Office du Travail' ; *Le P.R.*, 25 June 1943, p. 1, 'Le Commissaire aux Sports...'
- (122) Inspecteur Fédéral to Chefs de Cercles 11 June and 29 Aug. 1941 and JS and Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 29 July 1942, C2GM, C 11/169, C 11/175 and C 11/226 ; *Le P.R.*, 4 Sept. 1941, p. 3, 'Plus de nominations politiciennes...' ; *Le Soir* 1 Apr. 1947, p. 4, 'Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles'. See also the collection of letters in C2GM, PL 1/332.
- (123) Simar to Chefs de Groupes 18 July 1942 and JS to Abrassart 16 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 11/321.8 and 231 ; Commission Consultative de l'Enseignement to Corporation Nationale de l'Education 17 Oct. 1941 and Constant to Département de Nominations 31 Mar. 1942, C2GM, PL 1/332 ; *La Meuse* 6 July 1945, p. 1, 'A la deuxième chambre...'
- (124) *Le P.R.*, 19 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'La conspiration des robins' ; Simar to Chefs de Groupes 21 Nov. 1942, C2GM, C 11/321.8 ; Mémoire aux autorités allemandes [Autumn 1943], C2GM, C 11/324.
- (125) Inspecteur Fédéral to Chefs de Cercles 24 July and 15 Sept. 1941 and JS to Chefs de Cercles 9 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 11/172, 178 and 228.
- (126) R. Van Doorslaer 'La police belge et le maintien de l'ordre en Belgique occupée', *Revue du Nord* Numéro Spécial (1987), 75-78 ; Inspecteur Fédéral to Chefs de Cercles 1 Oct. 1941, C2GM, C 11/180.
- (127) JS and Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 26 June 1942 and JS to Cadre Politique 20 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 11/228.
- (128) *Ibid* ; JS to Chefs de Cercles 9 Oct. 1942 and JS to Abrassart 16 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 11/228 and 234 ; JS to Cadre Politique 2 Dec. 1942 and JS to Chefs de Cercles etc, 17 Dec. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS [Supplementary File 7, Docts. h and k] ; *Le Soir* 28 Mar. 1947, p. 5, 'Le procès Romsée'.
- (129) See note 127 ; Romsée to EM of Gendarmerie 19 Nov. 1942 cited in INBEL 23 Mar. 1943, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/965.
- (130) R. Van Doorslaer *Op. cit.*, 77 ; TB 23, 15 Apr. 1943, p. 2962.
- (131) JS and Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 20 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 11/228. See also p. 330.
- (132) *Journal de V. Matthys* p. 8, C2GM.
- (133) Bulletin des dirigeants 20 May 1941 and Inspecteur Fédéral to Chefs de Cercles 20 Nov. 1941 and undated, C2GM, C 11/99, 181 and 185 ; P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis I*, 507-508. Married men were required to contribute 5 % and single men 10 % to Rexist funds.
- (134) Inspecteur Fédéral to Chefs de Cercles 24 Dec. 1941 and 15 Jan. 1942, C2GM, C 11/182 and 183 ; J. Streel 'Observations sur l'acte d'accusation' p. 2, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (135) Reports of meetings of local *cadres politiques* featured regularly in *Le Pays Réel*. The minutes of the *cadre politique* of Mons are preserved in C2GM, C 11/321.10.
- (136) *Le P.R.*, 2 Sept. 1941, pp. 1 and 3, 'La nomination de bourgmestres' and 14 Nov. 1941, p. 1, 'Les instituteurs et le personnel'.
- (137) *Le P.R.*, 1 July 1941, p. 3, 'Le Borinage qui renaît', 7 Feb. 1942, p. 2, 'Le bourgmestre n'admet plus de favoritisme', 9 June 1942, p. 3, 'Des édiles qui sont sans pitié...' and 2 Aug. 1942, p. 2, 'Les awirs ont aussi leur maieur rexiste' ; A. Delattre *Mes Souvenirs*, pp. 319-320.
- (138) *Le P.R.*, 12 June 1942, p. 3, 'Un maieur rexiste', 19 July 1942, p. 8, 'A Verviers...' and 26 July 1942, p. 6, 'A Arlon...'
- (139) *Le P.R.*, 27 May 1942, p. 1, 'La propagande par les actes' ; *Vers l'Avenir* 9 Apr. 1946, p. 3, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur' and 30-31 May 1946, p. 2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre de Namur' ; A. Lemaire *Le crime du 18 août* (Couillet, 1947), pp. 41-43.
- (140) *Le P.R.*, 2 May 1941, p. 3, 'L'arrestation de V. Van Doorne' ; *La Meuse* 18 May 1945, p. 2, 'Les usurpateurs du Grand-Liège...' ; J. Wynants 'Verviers, l'autorité communale...', *Cahiers* II, 174.
- (141) *La Meuse* 26 May 1945, pp. 1-2, 'Le Grand-Liège...' ; Allgemeine Übersicht 16 Mar. 1942, p. 4219.
- (142) *Vers l'Avenir* 9 Apr. 1946, p. 1, 'La Gestapo de Dinant...'

- (143) *La Meuse* 18 May 1945, p. 1, 'Les usurpateurs du Grand-Liège...' and 19 July 1946, p. 2, 'Fréson, échevin usurpateur...'.  
 (144) Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Procès-Verbal de l'audience publique 6 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Jugement et Appel ; Journal de V. Matthys p. 8, C2GM ; J. Streel 'Observations sur l'acte d'accusation' pp. 3-4, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.  
 (145) VM Pro Just., 20 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 55-58 ; JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. ; J. Streel Notice pour mon défenseur ; cinquième suite, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.  
 (146) See p. 140.  
 (147) Chanoine Leclef *Le Cardinal Van Roey et l'occupation allemande*, p. 99.  
 (148) *Le P.R.* 11 Apr. 1942, p. 3, 'In memoriam' and 14 Apr. 1942, pp. 1 and 6, 'Les funérailles de nos héros' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis II*, 171. An earlier funeral of a *légionnaire* had apparently passed off without incident : *Le Soir* 2 Feb. 1942, p. 3, 'Un service funèbre...' ; *Cassandra* 1 Feb. 1942, p. 10, 'A la mémoire...'.  
 (149) *Le P.R.* 18 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'La série continue', 21 Apr. 1942, p. 4 and 25 Apr. 1942, p. 3, 'Un service funèbre...' ; Chanoine Leclef *Op. cit.*, pp. 100-101 ; *Le diocèse de Tournai sous l'occupation allemande*, pp. 147-148 ; C. Chevalier 'La presse francophone et l'église catholique', p. 162.  
 (150) *Le P.R.* 24 Apr. 1942, p. 4, 'Quand le cardinal Ratti...' and 30 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'Les bénédictions sont réservés à MM, les assassins'. See also Questionnaire addressed by Alain Dantoing to Madame Hepp, veuve Streel, p. 10, C2GM, PS 16.  
 (151) *Le P.R.* 22 May 1942, p. 3, 'Une grande journée de foi rexiste'.  
 (152) *Le P.R.* 10 Jan. 1941, p. 1, 'Aider à construire', 28 Sept. 1941, pp. 1 and 6, 'Mieux vaut la concorde...' and 14 May 1942, p. 1, '"Rerum Novarum"...' ; *Le Soir* 27 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'La constante catholique en Belgique'.  
 (153) Interview between Jean Vermeire and José Gotovitch 25 Mar. 1971, p. 90, C2GM.  
 (154) *Le P.R.* 23 May 1942, pp. 1 and 6, 'Les huit propositions de M. le Chanoine', 4 June 1942, p. 1, 'La paix des consciences...' and 12 June 1942, p. 1, 'Illusions, déceptions...'.  
 (155) *Le P.R.* 4 June 1941, pp. 1 and 3, 'Les Catholiques et l'Ordre Nouveau' and 2 Aug. 1941, p. 1, 'Une offensive qui se précise'.  
 (156) *Le P.R.* 27 Oct. 1942, p. 2, 'Une grande manifestation de force et de foi'.  
 (157) Chanoine Leclef *Op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.  
 (158) TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2315.  
 (159) Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 28 Apr. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Marcel Dupont, Info., Doct. 17.  
 (160) Chanoine Leclef *Op. cit.*, pp. 104-105 ; *Le diocèse de Tournai sous l'occupation allemande*, pp. 147-148.  
 (161) *Le P.R.* 28 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Y a-t-il sur le plan religieux...?' and 22 Sept. 1942, p. 1, 'Le plus pur des sacrifices'.  
 (162) *Le P.R.* 8 May 1942, p. 1, 'Hommage solennel...' and 15 Sept. 1942, p. 1, 'Le Cercle de Tournai'.  
 (163) *Le P.R.* 18 July 1942, p. 1, 'Un crime contre le pays' and p. 3, 'Une mise au point...' and 2 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'A la mémoire...' ; INBEL 29 Oct. 1943, No. 2134, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/967.  
 (164) *Le P.R.* 30 July 1942, p. 4, 'Le Cercle de Tournai...' ; Chef de Groupe Bruxelles Centre to Chefs de Cellules 13 June 1944, C2GM, C 11/323.19.  
 (165) *Le P.R.* 8 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'L'attitude regrettable d'un prêtre' ; TB 25, 15 Nov. 1943, pp. 3416-3417 ; P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis III*, 246-247 and 277-278 ; INBEL 8 Mar. 1944, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/980.  
 (166) *Le P.R.* 11 Aug. 1942, p. 3, 'L'inauguration de la permanence J. Demaret'.  
 (167) VM to Cadres Territoriaux 5 May 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 138 ; Constant to FC 25 Apr. 1942, C2GM, C 11/265 Série I ; Documentation Jans 271.  
 (168) *Le P.R.* 14 July 1942, p. 3, 'Onze mille hommes des milices du VNV...'.  
 (169) See note 167 ; VM Pro Just., 25 Nov. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 210-211.

- (170) Siméon Pro Just., 15 Dec. 1946, C2GM, JB 20 ; VM to Constant 6 May 1942 and Documentation Jans 52 in Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Documentation J, Docts. 43 and 47-50 ; Constant to FC 20 June 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale II, Farde F, Doct. 4-5.
- (171) Constant to FC 25 Apr. 1942, C2GM, C 11/265 Série I ; Albert Constant Pro Just., 29 Jan. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 154-155.
- (172) TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2384.
- (173) Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 91-92, C2GM.
- (174) Albert Constant Pro Just., 2 Oct. 1945 and 18 Apr. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Docts. 86-87 and 219-220.
- (175) Jacobs to Chefs de Cercles 30 May and 3 June 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Marcel Dupont, Info., Docts. 82-83 and 84.
- (176) Simar to Chefs de Groupes 8 Aug. 1942, C2GM, C 11/321.8.
- (177) Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 17 Oct. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Marcel Dupont, Info., Doct. 73.
- (178) VM to mobilisation candidates [25 Sept. 1942] and Oct. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Documentation J, Doct. 54 and C2GM, C 11/149.
- (179) Documentation Jans 271 ; Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 5 Nov. 1942, C2GM, C 11/217.
- (180) VM Pro Just., 24 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 205 ; MV Ch. Einsatz von Landeseinwohner in unmittelbaren Wehrmachtsdiensten 1 July 1943, GRMA T 175 80 2600715-2600726 ; TB 24, 1 Aug. 1943, p. 3159 ; VM to mobilisation candidates Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 11/149.
- (181) Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 91-92, C2GM.
- (182) FC Période d'Instruction 6 Sept. to 3 Oct. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale II, Farde G, Doct. 3-4 ; *Sambre et Meuse* 12 July 1946, p. 2, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur' ; *Vers l'Avenir* 12 July 1946, p. 5, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur' ; *La Meuse* 20 June 1947, p. 2, 'Conseil de Guerre'.
- (183) EMF of FC Ordres hebdomadaires [Feb. 1942] and 4 July 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Farde A, Doct. 9 and Documentation Jans 14 ; Constant to FC 21 Apr., 29 June and 30 Nov. 1942, C2GM, C 11/265, Série I.
- (184) VM to mobilisation candidates [25 Sept. 1942], Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Documentation J, Doct. 54 ; Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 14 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 11/217 ; *Le P.R.* 15 Sept. 1942, p. 1, 'Le Cercle de Tournai...'
- (185) Re. its local structure, see Documentation Jans 14 ; Périodes d'Instruction 9 Aug. to 5 Sept. 1942 and 6 Sept. to 3 Oct. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Farde D, Doct. 18 and Farde G, Doct. 3-4 ; VM 3 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 206.
- (186) Albert Constant Pro Just., 2 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 86-87.
- (187) VM Pro Just., 3 Oct. 1945 and 29 Aug. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 206 and Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 327.
- (188) *Ibid.*
- (189) Albert Constant Pro Just., 22 July 1945 and Constant to FC 27 Feb. 1943, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 70-71 and Documentation Générale, Farde A, Doct. 11.
- (190) e.g. TB 20, 15 June 1942, p. 2314 ; TB 21, 15 Sept. 1942, p. 2507.
- (191) Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 24 Feb. 1942 and Secrétariat du Chef de Rex a.i. 17 Apr. 1942, C2GM, C 11/220 and C 11/144 ; Charles Peeters Pro Just., 27 May 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Marcel Dupont, Info., Section 7.
- (192) P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis* II, 461 ; Léon Bertrand Pro Just., 13 Dec. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 274-276.
- (193) *Le Journal de Charleroi* 7 Jan. 1947, p. 2, 'La brigade policière rexiste...'
- (194) VM and Albert Constant Pro Just., 12 Feb. 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 283-284 ; Simar to Chefs de Groupes 18 July 1942, C2GM, C 11/321.8 ; *Vers l'Avenir* 8 and 9 Nov. 1946, p. 4, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur'.

- (195) Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Procès-Verbal de l'audience publique 14 Nov. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Pièces d'Audience, Doct. 20.
- (196) *Le P.R.* 4 July 1942, p. 1, 'Jean Demaret a été assassiné'.
- (197) VM and Albert Constant Pro Just., 27 Dec. 1946 and 12 Feb. 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Docts. 280-281 and 283-284.
- (198) *Le Journal de Charleroi* 7 July 1942, p. 2, 'Les funérailles de M. J. Demaret'.
- (199) Documentation Jans 14.
- (200) *Le P.R.* 15 Sept. 1942, p. 1, 'Le Cercle de Tournai...' and 24 Sept. 1942, pp. 1 and 4, 'Après un an de patience'.
- (201) EMF of FC Ordres hebdomadaires 26 Sept. 1942 and Gustave Urban and Eugène Otten Pro Just., 24 Sept. and 9 and 22 Oct. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 339-341 and Pièces entrées après la mise en prévention, Docts. 40, 44 and 46.
- (202) See pp. 307-308.
- (203) P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, pp. 101-103 ; J. Gotovitch 'Guerre et libération, jalons pour une étude' in *Le parti communiste de Belgique (1921-1944)* (Brussels, 1980), p. 68.
- (204) P. Struye *Op. cit.*, pp. 106-107.
- (205) P. Delandsheere and A. Goms *La Belgique sous les Nazis II*, 188-189 ; P. Struye *Op. cit.*, p. 126.
- (206) e.g. *Le P.R.* 11 Aug. 1942, p. 2, 'Les funérailles émouvantes de deux Gardes Wallonnes' and 25 Aug. 1942, p. 3, 'Une magnifique réunion...'.
- (207) *Le P.R.* 8 Apr. 1942, p. 3, 'Plusieurs camarades du Mouvement...' and 6 Aug. 1942, p. 2, 'Un coiffeur rexiste'.
- (208) *Le P.R.* 22 Apr. 1942, p. 1, 'Les brimades dans les écoles' and 7 July 1942, p. 2, 'Le martyre de deux vaillantes rexistes'.
- (209) e.g. *Le P.R.* 3 Mar. 1942, p. 3, 'Les rexistes dans les Stalags'.
- (210) e.g. *Le P.R.* 13 Mar. 1942, p. 2, 'Chronique de la Solidarité Légionnaire' and 11 Apr. 1942, p. 2, 'Chronique du Mouvement' ; *La Belgique Indépendante* 9 July 1942, cited in C2GM, Fonds INBEL/980.
- (211) P. Struye *Op. cit.*, pp. 103-105 ; *Le Courrier de l'Escaut* 19 July 1946, p. 2, 'Conseil de Guerre de Tournai (A)'.
- (212) *Le P.R.* 30 Jan. 1942, p. 2, 'Ordres de la Prévôté' and 24 Feb. 1942, p. 1, 'Notre Légion de l'Est...'.
- (213) *Le P.R.* 5 and 28 Dec. 1941, p. 2, 'Chronique de la Solidarité Légionnaire'.
- (214) *Le P.R.* 1 Sept. 1942, p. 3, 'Journée d'études...'.
- (215) *Le P.R.* 8 July 1942, p. 3, 'Le noble exemple de Jean Demaret', 18 July 1942, p. 3, 'L'officier de liaison de la Légion Wallonie...' and 25 Aug. 1942, p. 3, 'Une magnifique réunion...'.
- (216) *Le P.R.* 13 Feb. 1942, p. 2, 'Chronique de la Solidarité Légionnaire' ; L. Degrelle *Feldpost* (Brussels, 1944), pp. 150-151.
- (217) Constant to FC 24 Apr. 1942, C2GM, C 11/264.

## CHAPTER FIVE : AUTUMN 1942 - JANUARY 1943

For many collaborationist groups in German-Occupied Europe, the final months of 1942 marked a decisive turning-point. The evolution of the military conflict, the ascendancy of extremist forces within the Third Reich, the polarised loyalties within almost all Occupied countries and the Allied resolve - announced at the Casablanca conference - to achieve the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany had all destroyed what little room for manoeuvre had remained open to these groups. Thus, as the war entered upon its fourth winter, they were forced to choose between entering into unlimited collaboration with the Third Reich or withdrawing into passive neutrality. The time for hesitation or ambivalence was at an end '.

This choice was particularly clear in the case of Rex. Since October 1941, Streel's tireless efforts to limit Rex to some form of "moderate" collaboration had not been without success. The process of infiltrating the institutions of government, the ideological positions adopted by the movement as well as its dealings with the German authorities and with other New Order groups had all reflected his views. But Streel's activities had been continually undermined by the more radical instincts of other Rexists as well as by the broader military and political situation. Separated from the majority of the Belgian population, Rex existed in a political vacuum where the movement appeared to be drawn remorselessly towards an ever more extreme and isolated position.

Thus, during the final hectic months of 1942 Streel redoubled his efforts to make Rex a bastion of his own views. The central element of his strategy was the creation in September 1942 of a *Conseil Politique* of Rex. Acting with the support and encouragement of Matthys, the *Chef du Service*

*Politique* intended that this consultative body should be composed principally of non-Rexist collaborationists of pro-Belgian sympathies from public administration and the German-censored press <sup>2</sup>. Its initial purpose was to improve co-operation between Rex and these moderate elements but both Streel and Matthys hoped that it would be the first stage in the creation of an expanded Rexist movement. As Streel explained after the war :

"Je voulais passer du cadre étiqué du rexisme à quelque chose de nouveau qui aurait reçu une nouvelle appellation et fait appel à un nouveau personnel. Dans ce but je m'efforçai par des contacts personnels de grouper autour du mouvement des sympathies prêtes à s'affirmer dans le cadre d'une formation plus vaste" <sup>3</sup>.

The first meeting of the *Conseil Politique* held on 25 September was attended by representatives of the Brussels collaborationist press including Paul Colin and Pierre Daye from *Le Nouveau Journal* and Raymond De Becker and Pierre De Ligne of *Le Soir*, as well as Letesson of the Liège newspaper *La Légia*. Also present were Paul Garain of the New Order *Union des Travailleurs Manuels et Intellectuels* (UTMI), representatives of the pro-German *Ordre des Médecins* and *Commission de la Bourse*, Ernest Delvaux of the Ministry of the Interior, De Meyer, the pro-Rexist *secrétaire-général* of the Ministry of Public Works, and members of New Order local authorities <sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, no representative from the more radical pro-German newspapers or from the small extremist groups such as AGRA, the MNPW or *Défense du Peuple* was invited to join the new organisation.

The initial success of the *Conseil Politique* owed much to the military and political situation. For men such as Colin and De Becker, the evolution of the war had undermined their principal justification of collaboration as a patriotic necessity imposed by the German military victory. Moreover, the political eclipse of the King and of the advocates of royal

authoritarianism as well as the ascendancy of radical forces in the Third Reich hostile to a unified Belgian state made it extremely unlikely that, in the event of a German victory, they would achieve their goal of a New Order Belgian state. Finally, these journalists could no longer claim to represent a significant body of opinion within Belgium. The tide of popular support for some form of New Order had receded abruptly while the division of the country into two mutually hostile camps of pro-Allied patriots and pro-German collaborationists had destroyed the centre ground of moderate realistic opinion which they had sought to represent <sup>5</sup>.

Thus, these New Order journalists had been left stranded as prophets without a cause. If they were not to withdraw totally from collaboration, they had little choice but to attempt a *rapprochement* with Rex which, for all its faults, remained the sole significant pro-German grouping in francophone Belgium and offered the only hope of exercising some control over German policies. From the spring of 1942, there had been indications that men such as De Becker, Poulet and Colin were now anxious to reach some form of agreement with their erstwhile enemy. Streeel encouraged this process. He met Robert Poulet to discuss the possible content of a common political programme and in *Le Pays Réel* he was careful to praise the proposals advanced by De Becker for the structure of a future Belgian state <sup>6</sup>. Thus, when the *Conseil Politique* was proposed, these journalists welcomed it as an opportunity to escape from their impotent marginal position. Robert Poulet, who remained somewhat estranged from Rex, did not join the *Conseil* but in a series of articles in *Le Nouveau Journal* he called for the urgent creation of a *parti unique* of all pro-German forces in which Rex would play the leading role <sup>7</sup>. De Becker's reaction was even more favourable. Under the headline "En marche vers l'unité", the editor of *Le Soir* praised the declarations of the Rexist leaders which, he claimed, demonstrated



that all francophone collaborationists in Belgium now spoke "un véritable langage commun, issu d'une réelle communauté d'idéal" <sup>8</sup>.

The counterpart to the creation of the *Conseil Politique* was a gradual *rapprochement* between Rex and the Flemish nationalist movement, the VNV. Since the accord of May 1941, relations between the two groups had deteriorated rapidly. The VNV had violated almost immediately the spirit if not the wording of the agreement by seeking to extend its activities to Wallonia. Many Flemish Nationalists had long regarded francophone Belgium and northern France as part of *l'espace vital* of the Flemish nation and they were especially anxious to encourage ethnic consciousness amongst those many Belgians of Flemish origin resident in the francophone south of the country. Thus, in the summer of 1941, the VNV appointed a leader for "Wallonie en Zuid-Vlaanderen" and began to publish a monthly journal entitled *Ons Vaderland* for distribution in francophone Belgium <sup>9</sup>. Yet, although the VNV subsequently boasted that it had 155 local groups in Wallonia (predominantly in the Hainaut), few of these Flemish exiles in fact proved susceptible to the blandishments of the VNV and its activities in francophone Belgium never met with much success <sup>10</sup>.

Nevertheless, they were sufficient to arouse the ire of the Rexists. In August 1941, Streef denounced the "foyers de trouble" which the VNV was seeking to establish in southern Belgium and Rexist militants were warned to be vigilant for any evidence of VNV activity <sup>11</sup>. Squabbles over the future status of Brussels and the influence of the VNV in certain areas of public administration also effected relations between the two movements and by January 1942 the Rexists seemed anxious to end the May accord which they described as no more than a temporary arrangement based on "considérations d'opportunité" <sup>12</sup>.

Yet by the summer, this atmosphere of hostility had almost completely evaporated. Writing in *Le Pays Réel* in July 1942, Streeel praised the moderate stance adopted by the VNV towards Brussels and in October Matthys noted that the differences between Rex and the Flemish nationalist movement had all but disappeared <sup>13</sup>. The reasons for this *rapprochement* are not difficult to identify. In the hostile environment which existed by 1942, it was clearly to the mutual advantage of both movements to work together. Moreover, the leader of the VNV, Staf De Clercq, died suddenly in October 1942 and under the leadership of his successor Hendrik Elias the Flemish Nationalists renounced much of their former imperialist and anti-Belgian rhetoric in favour of working within the institutions of the Belgian state <sup>14</sup>.

This evolution was further encouraged by the development of *DeVlag* (the *Duits-Vlaamse Arbeidsgemeenschap*), a radical grouping led by Jef Van de Wiele which rejected Flemish independence in favour of the incorporation of Flanders into the German Reich. Formerly a purely cultural organisation, *DeVlag* received the energetic support of the SS and it was at their instigation that Van de Wiele decided in October 1942 to establish *DeVlag* as a mass political movement <sup>15</sup>. In response to this direct challenge, the leaders of the VNV began to look to the New Order groups in francophone Belgium to form a common front against the threats posed by annexation and the activities of German-sponsored radicals <sup>16</sup>. Streeel met Elias on several occasions during the autumn of 1942 and, though these meetings resulted in few concrete achievements, they apparently revealed a considerable convergence of views <sup>17</sup>.

Streeel reinforced these efforts by continuing to attack the advocates of total collaboration. His articles in *Le Pays Réel* during the autumn of 1942 were more outspoken than ever before. Frequently using events in France as a means of making thinly disguised comments on the Belgian political situation,

he declared that extremism was for some people an illness or even a profession. Rather than continuing to drift at the mercy of events, Rex, he insisted, must counter these dangerous opportunists by fostering a union of moderate and patriotic collaborationists :

"Il s'agit aujourd'hui de distinguer ceux qui veulent une collaboration effective dans la loyauté et la dignité, de ceux qui sont prêts à livrer notre peuple aux plus dangereuses aventures" <sup>10</sup>.

Streel believed that this projected union must be based on a categorical commitment to a bilingual federal Belgian state. The structure of the future German-dominated Europe remained undecided but, if the Belgian collaborationist minority acted with clear and confident determination, he remained optimistic that Belgium would prove able to recover in the New European Order the pre-eminence it had once enjoyed in the 15th and 16th centuries as the *carrefour* of Europe. The bleak alternative, Streel warned, was that the country would be dismembered by Flemish and Walloon extremists and that it would sink into the protectorate status of a Croatia, Montenegro or "sous-Slovaquie" <sup>11</sup>.

Streel's apocalyptic attitude was not, however, entirely shared by Matthys. Like most Rexists, the *Chef de Rex a.i.* regarded such matters of strategy as less important than the survival of the Rexist movement in the immediate future. Thus, though he supported the initiatives of the *Chef du Service Politique*, Matthys saw his principal priority during these months as the regeneration of Rex after the difficulties of the spring and summer. To this end, Matthys decided to hold a national rally on 25 October, the first such event since the dramatic meeting at Liège in January 1941. The venue for this show of strength was in itself significant. The Rexist leaders were anxious to counter the impression that Brussels was a Flemish city and they decided to

hold the meeting in the vast Palais des Sports in the capital, the scene of many of Degrelle's most dramatic pre-war meetings <sup>20</sup>.

In deference to the sensibilities of the Flemish Nationalists and their allies in the German administration, the rally was officially described as no more than a meeting of the three Brussels *cercles* of Rex <sup>21</sup>. But, in reality, it was attended by several thousand militants who had travelled to the capital from all areas of francophone Belgium <sup>22</sup>. The Rexist leaders may have initially hoped that Degrelle would be able to address the meeting in person but, in the event, his return from the East was once again postponed and he was able to send only a brief message of support to the assembled Rexistists <sup>23</sup>. In his absence, the centre-piece of the rally was a major speech by Matthys. He reassured his audience that, whatever the vagaries of the military struggle, the triumph of their cause was ineluctable. Even in the unlikely event of a British victory, he declared, nothing could prevent the formidable social revolution which was developing and of which the Rexistists were the pioneers. But Matthys warned that the enactment of this revolution was not imminent. Unable to offer any hope of an end to the frustrating *status quo*, the *Chef de Rex a.i.* could only once again advise his supporters to devote themselves to preparations for the eventual day of action :

"Plus que jamais le mot d'ordre est Révolution d'abord. Votre objectif doit être . : formation, organisation, conquête" <sup>24</sup>.

Such revolutionary phraseology as well as the predictable violent attacks on the selfish bourgeoisie, the Jews and "le clergé politicien" reflected the new-found radicalism of Rex. But the speech also contained more long-standing Rexist ideas such as the primordial importance of the family and, taken in its entirety, Matthys' speech seems to have been an attempt to fuse both the traditional and the novel elements in Rexist thought. Moreover, this

same balance was also evident in the important section of his speech which he devoted to the future political structure of Belgium. Degrelle had long been keen to emphasise the close historical links between francophone Belgium and Germany but in this speech Matthys went much further than ever before in presenting the Walloons as a Germanic people. Adopting the racial theories advanced by various German academics and popularised by innumerable Nazi publications, the *Chef de Rex a.i.* declared that by blood, history and *moeurs*, Wallonia did indeed belong to "l'espace germanique". But he was careful to stress that the Germanic character of the Walloons in no way prejudiced the Belgian state. On the contrary, it demonstrated the indissoluble racial bond which united the Walloons and the similarly Germanic Flemish nation. Thus, Matthys declared, Rex remained more than ever an advocate of Belgian unity :

"Nous sommes fermement attaché à ce minimum qu'est l'unité étatique des deux communautés qui forment la Belgique d'aujourd'hui. Ces provinces sont unies par une communauté de destin, indiscutable et séculaire. . . Notre fidélité jalouse à notre propre Patrie est la garantie la plus certaine de la fidélité que nous saurons témoigner au monde germanique" <sup>25</sup>.

Matthys' skilful use of Nazi ideas to rebuff those who sought a dismemberment of Belgium into two distinct ethnic communities meant that his acceptance of the Germanic character of the Walloons amounted to little more than new wine in old bottles. While demonstrating the willingness of Rex to adopt the rhetoric and symbols of the Nazi world, he had avoided making any real change in Rexist policies and, as Reeder succinctly observed, Matthys' comments signified "allerdings noch keine Abkehr von dem Gedanken des belgischen Einheitsstaates" <sup>26</sup>. Streel too was anxious that the correct message should be drawn from Matthys' speech. Though no enthusiast for the pseudo-scientific jargon of Nazi propaganda, Streel chose to support Matthys'

declarations as no more than a token concession which would help ensure the continuation of a united Belgium <sup>27</sup>.

Despite the absence of Degrelle, the rally in Brussels undoubtedly had a beneficial impact on Rexist morale. It was attended by a number of foreign delegations as well as by representatives of the numerous communal authorities under Rexist control and, if nothing else, it proved to a hostile population and a sceptical German audience that Rex was still a substantial political force in Occupied Belgium. Its impact was, however, to be only very transitory. Already before the rally took place, two new crises had arisen which in the subsequent weeks would absorb the attention of the Rexist leaders. Moreover, both of these issues - the introduction of labour conscription for young Belgian men and an unprecedented wave of attacks on the supporters of Rex - once again demonstrated that the cautious position articulated by Matthys in his speech was no longer viable. The only real choice was between neutrality or total collaboration.

On 6 October, the *Militärverwaltung* suddenly announced legislation making it obligatory for all young Belgian men within a certain age range to accomplish a period of labour service in the German Reich. During the previous months, other more limited forms of labour conscription had been announced but the introduction of such sweeping measures came as an unwelcome shock to the Belgian population. It inevitably recalled memories of the mass deportations organised by the German authorities during the first Occupation of 1914-1918 and the immediate popular response was one of anger and despair <sup>28</sup>.

For once, the Rexist leaders seem to have shared in the mood of their compatriots. They had received little advance warning of the decrees and were quick to realise that such arbitrary measures would destroy whatever slender hope had remained of winning popular support for their cause <sup>29</sup>. In public, Le

*Pays Réel* refrained from making any comment but, behind the scenes, Matthys and Streel did what they could to convince the German authorities to rescind their proposals. The newly-created *Conseil Politique* was hastily convened and its members unanimously supported alternative measures presented to the *Militärverwaltung* by Hendrickx, the pro-New Order director of the *Office National du Travail*, for the mobilisation of the labour force within Belgium itself <sup>30</sup>. These efforts were, however, entirely in vain. The German administrators in Brussels were well aware that such deportations would have a catastrophic impact on popular morale but they were powerless to prevent the introduction of this legislation which had been approved by Hitler as part of a general strategy for mobilising the labour force of Occupied Europe to assist the German war effort <sup>31</sup>.

Thus, after a series of fruitless negotiations, the Rexists were forced to abandon all hope of reversing or modifying the German proposals. *Le Pays Réel* continued, however, to treat the matter very cautiously and, in private, some consideration seems to have been given to the possibility of abandoning the entire policy of collaboration <sup>32</sup>. Such a drastic change of direction would have been very difficult to implement and, at the very least, would have required the approval of Degrelle who remained in the distant Caucasus region of Central Asia. Thus, despite Matthys' protestations to the contrary, it seems unlikely that the Rexist leaders in fact considered this option very seriously. Yet, if they were not to withdraw from collaboration, the only alternative was to support the labour conscription legislation and it was this option which they eventually chose. In a strongly worded circular distributed to the *cercles* on 21 October, the Rexist leaders swallowed their misgivings declaring that "en Nationaux-Socialistes, nous collaborons à fond pour la réussite de cette ordonnance" <sup>33</sup>. A few weeks later this attitude was

made public. Writing in *Le Pays Réel*, Victor Meulenyzer explained that, though Rex did not watch with "gaieté de coeur" the deportation of Belgian workers to Germany and would have preferred them to have remained within the country, labour conscription was essential in order to ensure the victory of the German - and European - cause <sup>34</sup>.

Nor was this support purely symbolic. In its circular of 21 October, the Rexist *Etat-Major* ordered its supporters to collect information on "tous les éléments associaux, trafiquants, 'swings' et fils de famille, sans occupation régulière" who would benefit from a period of labour in Germany <sup>35</sup>. These lists were clearly intended for the German authorities and in practice the definition of antisocial elements was extended to include all those believed to be opposed to Rex. Moreover, though the Rexistists claimed that the denunciation of such "social parasites" was the most effective means of protecting the honest members of the working class from deportation, their real motive was more self-interested. As some Rexist officials frankly admitted, they hoped that as recompense for helping the German authorities their own supporters would be exempted from the labour conscription measures <sup>36</sup>. A number of militants - including the provincial leaders of the *Formations de Combat* - refused to participate in this work but other Rexistists did do so and within a few months a number of such lists had been forwarded to the German authorities. In Brussels, members of Rex were even reported to have visited small businesses to assess whether they should be closed down and their owners deported to work in Germany <sup>37</sup>.

This zeal soon brought its intended reward. From the outset, the *Militärverwaltung* had agreed that prominent Rexistists would not be deported and, after further negotiations, the Rexist *Etat-Major* was able to announce in March 1943 that the German authorities had accepted that all militants who submitted



justified requests would not be subject to the labour conscription legislation. Close relations were established between the Rexist *cercles* and the German *Werbestellen* and, in practice, few if any Rexist were obliged to join their compatriots in the factories of the Reich <sup>38</sup>.

The mass deportation of Belgian men to Germany was a major turning-point in the history of the Occupation. More than any other single factor, it served as the catalyst which mobilised popular hatred against the Occupying forces and their Belgian allies. The remorseless decline in living standards, the activities of the Nazi police and the endless constraints imposed on daily life by German decrees and regulations had all played their part in alienating the Belgian people from the Occupying forces but it was the labour conscription legislation which for the first time brought the mass of ordinary citizens into direct conflict with the German authorities. Conditions in the German factories were frequently harsh and, rather than report for this unpleasant and ill-paid work, thousands of young men chose to go into hiding. Thrust into a dangerous clandestine existence, these *réfractaires* provided a steady stream of volunteers for the burgeoning Resistance organisations <sup>39</sup>.

For their part, the Rexist had once again chosen, after momentary hesitation, to support the German authorities against their own compatriots. Ultimately unwilling or unable to countenance abandoning collaboration, they had been obliged to support a policy which was directly harmful to their fellow citizens and could only prejudice the Rexist cause. Moreover, by choosing to assist the German authorities in return for effective exemption from the labour conscription measures, the Rexist leaders had reinforced their status as a separate caste who seemed willing to put their interests and those of the Occupying power above those of their country <sup>40</sup>.

This same willingness of the Rexist leadership to support the German authorities against their own compatriots was also evident in their response to the marked escalation which occurred in Resistance attacks on Rexist militants. Exact statistics of Resistance activities are impossible to establish but all extant documents demonstrate a clear increase in the intensity of such attacks during the last months of 1942 <sup>41</sup>. Assaults on Flemish Nationalists and other collaborators were also stepped up at this time but it was the Rexistists who were the favourite target of the Resistance. For example, of 19 New Order figures murdered between August and November 1942, 12 were members of Rexist organisations <sup>42</sup>. No supporter of Rex was too lowly to be immune from such attacks, but it was the murders of a number of prominent local leaders which had the greatest impact. On 11 November, Charles Hénault, a medical doctor and the long-time *chef de cercle* of Verviers, was shot dead by the *Partisans Armés* while a few days later on the 19th the *bourgmestre* of Grand Charleroi and former parliamentary deputy, Prosper Teughels, was killed outside his home <sup>43</sup>. Finally, on 16 December, the abbé Kaumont of Lasnes-Chapelle St. Lambert, one of the most prominent of Rexist priests and a confidant of some of the leaders of the movement, fell victim to the Resistance assassins <sup>44</sup>.

The deaths of these influential figures had a marked effect on Rexist morale. According to Albert Constant, many Rexistists were "affolés" by this wave of attacks and it became commonplace for militants to take elaborate precautions regarding their personal security <sup>45</sup>. Some became reluctant to accept public offices and in Liège, as we have seen, the newly appointed *bourgmestre* and some of his colleagues resigned from their posts, the *bourgmestre* rather unheroically seeking sanctuary in a sanatorium <sup>46</sup>. In order to prevent what they feared might become a wave of resignations, Matthys and Streel sent a letter to all Rexist office-holders on 27 November. Remarkably,

this circular admitted that, if the dangers proved too great, it might prove necessary to withdraw all Rexists from positions in public administration. But Matthys and Streel insisted that the time had not come for such a drastic move and the letter merely concluded with a call for Rexist office-holders to remain steadfast in the face of the attacks <sup>47</sup>.

Yet, if they were to remain at their posts, how could these Rexists be best protected against the Resistance? Early in 1942, Streel and Matthys had visited Schuind, the *secrétaire-général* of the Ministry of Justice to ask that greater efforts be made to discover the perpetrators of political murders. Yet, though Schuind apparently reassured them that he regarded those responsible for such attacks as criminals and that every effort would be made to apprehend them, this interview proved to have few practical results <sup>48</sup>. No arrests were made and, as the circular issued by Matthys and Streel in November admitted, the Belgian police and judiciary lacked both the means and the will to solve such cases <sup>49</sup>. Streel, however, was reluctant to abandon all hope of finding a purely Belgian solution to the problem and in November he proposed that special units composed of New Order sympathisers be established within the *polices communales* to specialise in the investigation of these murders <sup>50</sup>. But such measures were unlikely to bring substantial results and, in reality, the only option open to the Rexists was to seek refuge under the protective umbrella of the German forces. Indeed, Matthys had already decided to seek such assistance. In two virtually hysterical letters to the German authorities, he called for stern reprisals to be taken against the civilian population. Substantial fines, he insisted, should be imposed on the localities where such attacks took place, all former Belgian army officers and prisoners of war must be arrested and ten known Communists should be executed in reprisal for every murder of a New Order militant <sup>51</sup>.

Even by Rexist standards, these demands manifested a violent spirit rarely evident before and, coupled with the participation of Rex in the enforcement of the labour conscription measures, they clearly marked a further stage in the radicalisation of the movement. Moreover, Matthys continued to press for the implementation of these Draconian measures in his subsequent discussions with German officials <sup>52</sup>. For some months previously, the German authorities had been imposing fines on communes where Resistance violence took place and, in response to pressure from Matthys, a special fund was established into which these fines were paid and from which all New Order activists could claim in proportion to the loss or injury which they had suffered <sup>53</sup>. In addition, the Germans accepted that the system of arms permits should be extended so that all those Rexist appointed to public offices would be allowed to carry weapons <sup>54</sup>.

These limited measures did not, however, satisfy the *Chef de Rex a.i.* and, according to Reeder, Matthys also demanded unsuccessfully that the Rexist be allowed to respond in kind to the Resistance attacks <sup>55</sup>. Whether this was anything more than a repetition of the vague threats of revenge already issued would seem unlikely and there is no evidence of any plans within Rex at this time for a campaign of counter-terrorism. Matthys did, however, undoubtedly use these meetings with German officials to repeat his demands for the exemplary execution of Belgian hostages. Reeder and Von Falkenhausen had long resisted calls both from their superiors in Berlin and from New Order figures in Belgium for such executions but in November they finally decided that eight hostages would be executed at Charleroi on 27 November <sup>56</sup>. These executions were publicly stated to be in retaliation for the murders of Teughels and of other collaborationists and in his periodic report to his superiors Reeder admitted that they had been carried out principally in order to pacify the leaders of the

New Order movements <sup>57</sup>. How influential Matthys was in convincing the *Militärverwaltung* to take this decision is, however, unclear. After the war, Reeder tried to place all responsibility for these killings on Degrelle and the Rexists but in reality the demands from Rex formed only one element in a complex matrix of pressures which caused the German administrators in Brussels to take this decisive step <sup>58</sup>.

The manner in which Rex had responded to the imposition of labour conscription and the upsurge in Resistance terrorism inevitably exacerbated the differences within the movement. Matthys had formerly seemed willing to support Streel's political initiatives yet, on both of these issues, the *Chef de Rex a.i.* had adopted an extremist pro-German stance which was directly in conflict with the policies of the *Chef du Service Politique*. Moreover, Matthys' apparent change of heart reflected a more general radicalisation amongst the members of the *Etat-Major*. Despite continuing financial difficulties, sufficient funds had been found to recruit a number of additional staff during the autumn of 1942. These men came to the Rexist headquarters from the local *cercles* and the *Légion* and, in general, they allied themselves with those in the Rexist leadership who were anxious to kick over the traces of Streelian moderation <sup>59</sup>.

Typical of such radicals was Charles Lambinon, whose nominal attachment to Streel's *Service Politique* disguised a position of considerable autonomy <sup>60</sup>. He had a taste for police work and during 1942 established a *Bureau d'information, de renseignements et de documentation* (BIRD) which collected information on known adversaries of Rex as well as on members of the movement about whom there was some suspicion. Lambinon was an unscrupulous ambitious figure who soon established close links with various German police agencies. In late-1942, he participated enthusiastically in the enforcement of the labour conscription legislation collecting information from the *cercles* on

Communist party members and career soldiers of the former Belgian army which he probably passed on to his German patrons <sup>61</sup>. Streel disapproved of these activities and rejected Lambinon's proposal that BIRD should become a police force devoted to the investigation of attacks on members of Rex <sup>62</sup>. Nevertheless, Lambinon's agents did carry out surveillance of prominent patriots suspected of involvement in the campaign of terrorism <sup>63</sup> and his activities clearly indicated the extent to which, even within the *Etat-Major*, Streel's policies were being undermined by radicals untroubled by the patriotic scruples of their superiors.

Such extremism was the fruit not only of enthusiasm but also of despair. Neither the exhortations of Matthys and Streel nor the executions at Charleroi did much to restore Rexist morale which by late-1942 seemed to have reached its nadir. Resistance terrorism, the absence of any significant political breakthrough and the unfavourable evolution of the war all contributed to this mood of despondency. As 1942 drew to a close, the Rexist groups looked back on a year which seemed to have brought the movement no nearer to the achievement of its long-term goals <sup>64</sup> and for many it seemed that the only hope lay in the eventual return of the *Légion*. As one Rexist wrote desperately to his *légionnaire* brother in late-November :

"A quand le retour de nos chers légionnaires ? Il s'avère de plus en plus nécessaire ; tu auras appris. . . l'assassinat de Teughels. C'est épouvantable et si cela continue nous serons bientôt réduits à une poignée. Vite vos mitrailleuses pour faire de la bonne besogne !" <sup>65</sup>.

Thus, it was with euphoria that the Rexist learnt at the end of November that Degrelle was at last to return to Belgium on leave accompanied by approximately 160 *légionnaires* <sup>66</sup>. Matthys and Streel hastened to Germany to meet the returning heroes who were spending one week at the training camp of

the *Légion* at Meseritz. They found Degrelle remarkably unchanged by the long months at the front line. He had learnt not a word of German and, far from having adopted the discipline of a soldier, he had retained his impulsive, ebullient and somewhat anarchic character. He privately reassured the Rexist leaders that his experiences in the German armies had in no way changed his political attitudes and, in an emotional speech delivered at Meseritz, he proclaimed once again that the *légionnaires* were Belgian patriots fighting for the salvation of their country <sup>67</sup>.

Streel was much comforted by these first meetings with Degrelle. After the reverses of the previous months, it seemed that, he would at last be able to ensure the ascendancy of his moderate views <sup>68</sup>. Streel's optimism was, however, to be short-lived. A few days later, Degrelle and the Rexist leaders travelled to Berlin where they met Léon Van Huffel, the local correspondent of *Le Pays Réel* and one of the most enthusiastic exponents of radical Germanic ideas. Degrelle hardly knew Van Huffel and was initially unimpressed by the journalist's long monologues on the Germanic origins of the Walloons. Released from the privations of the front, he was more anxious to enjoy the social pleasures of the German capital and, to the despair of Van Huffel, he refused to attend a meeting with SS officials in favour of paying a visit to the wife of a German general <sup>69</sup>. Nevertheless, Van Huffel persisted and the next day Degrelle did agree to visit the offices of the SS where for the first time he met leading members of Himmler's entourage including apparently Gottlob Berger, the head of the *SS-Hauptamt* <sup>70</sup>.

This meeting proved to be a revelation for Degrelle. The wide-ranging discussions concerned both the future of Belgium in a German-dominated Europe as well as that of the *Légion Wallonie* and the Rexist movement <sup>71</sup> and, as Streel subsequently recalled, their effect was immediate and profound :

"Degrelle en revint littéralement transformé. C'est comme si un monde nouveau venait de se révéler à lui. On avait réussi à le persuader que l'avenir était à la SS et que seuls ceux qui auraient son appui pourraient jouer un rôle" <sup>72</sup>.

This was not, however, entirely a new departure for Degrelle. As a consummate political tactician, the *Chef de Rex* could not have been unaware of the increasing power of the SS and, through a study of his correspondence and activities, Albert De Jonghe has been able to demonstrate Degrelle's growing interest in the SS during 1942 <sup>73</sup>. Already in September 1941, he made a first effort to contact the SS and, though he does not appear to have met any SS representatives during his brief visit to Berlin in June 1942, it seems likely that he did encounter Van Huffel <sup>74</sup>. In addition, after Degrelle's return to the front line, the *Légion Wallonie* was placed for a number of weeks under the command of Steiner, the head of the SS Viking Division. Degrelle was by all accounts greatly impressed by the superior spirit and material conditions of these *Waffen-SS* troops and, at the instigation of the *Chef de Rex*, Steiner wrote to the SS headquarters to propose unsuccessfully the transfer of the *Légion Wallonie* to the *Waffen-SS* <sup>75</sup>.

But, despite these speculative initiatives, his closest contacts were still with non-SS figures such as the diplomat Abetz, to whom he had addressed a long missive in September <sup>76</sup>. Moreover, though he was undoubtedly aware of the importance which groups such as the SS attached to racial theories, Degrelle remained a defender of the united Belgian state. In his dealings with German officials he was keen to stress the nationalist purpose of the *Légion* declaring in an interview with the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* :

"Ce n'est pas comme Wallons que nous sommes partis au Front de l'est, mais la Légion "Wallonie" est la légion des volontaires belges d'expression française. Pour nous, nous sommes des nationalistes qui combattent pour une Belgique nouvelle dans une Europe renouvelée" <sup>77</sup>.



Statements such as these indicate that Degrelle was still searching for the most advantageous policy to adopt and, as he himself admits, it was only in Berlin in December that he decided to seek a *rapprochement* with the SS empire. Berger, he recalls, seemed to him to be a man of elephantine stupidity wedded to an absurd racial vision of world history but it was obvious that he and his SS colleagues were the coming men of the Third Reich. The generals, diplomats and politicians of the *ancien régime* were doomed to disappear and, if he was to play any role in the New Europe, it was clear he must win the support of Himmler and his assistants <sup>78</sup>.

In his many post-war justifications of his activities, the *Chef de Rex* has often dwelt on the patriotic motive behind his new policy. Listening to Berger, he claims that he became aware of the threat of racial dismemberment which hung over Belgium and he decided to avert this danger by winning the SS over to his nationalist opinions <sup>79</sup>. But, in reality, Degrelle's change of direction owed less to any vision of the national interest than to his concern for his own future. During his meetings in Berlin, the SS officials had dwelt on the failings of the VNV which, attached to a narrow, provincial outlook and dependent on the support of its *Wehrmacht* patrons in the *Militärverwaltung*, would have no place in an SS-designed New Europe <sup>80</sup>. The comparison with Rex must have been more than evident to Degrelle, especially as the SS was already providing financial assistance to extremist Walloon groups and had begun to recruit for the *Waffen-SS* in the region <sup>81</sup>. Thus, as he remarked to Romsée, he intended to swim with the tide of Nazi opinion :

"La politique de l'Anschluss se fera dans notre pays avec ou contre moi ; je préfère qu'elle se fasse avec moi" <sup>82</sup>.

Having made up his mind, the *Chef de Rex* was unshakeable in his new resolve. In his discussions in Berlin, he had smelt the seductive whiff of power

believing, largely mistakenly, that Himmler's *adjoints* were willing to offer him a position of substantial authority in an SS-dominated Europe. Thus, when Degrelle returned to Belgium in mid-December, he was determined to exploit to the full the new possibilities open to him. For the first time since August 1940, he was confident that he would soon be able to seize power and he threw himself into political intrigue with a renewed enthusiasm which directly contradicted his assurances to Reeder that he intended only to rest during his stay in the country <sup>83</sup>.

Streel was understandably appalled by Degrelle's abrupt change of direction. An alliance with the SS was the antithesis of everything for which he had striven and would inevitably lead to the virtual abandonment of Rex's commitment to a unified Belgian state in favour of some looser confederation of Flanders and Wallonia within a community of Germanic nations. Both in Berlin and after their return to Brussels, Streel made strenuous efforts to make Degrelle change his mind warning the *Chef de Rex* in personal meetings as well as in the columns of *Le Pays Réel* of the dangers he foresaw in an alliance with the SS <sup>84</sup>. These efforts were, however, to no avail. Never one to listen to the rational arguments of others, Degrelle was intoxicated by the prospect of power and refused to heed either the warnings of Streel or those of Elias, the head of the VNV, whom Streel had arranged for Degrelle to meet in the vain hope that his experience of the ways of the SS might make the *Chef de Rex* reconsider his new policy <sup>85</sup>. But Degrelle dismissively described the Flemish Nationalist movement as "foutu" and he instead concentrated his attention on winning the support of Jef Van de Wiele, the malleable head of the pro-SS Flemish group *DeVlag*, and of *SS-Brigadeführer* Richard Jungclaus who since April 1942 had been Himmler's representative in Belgium <sup>86</sup>.

At public events, Degrelle made no secret of his determination to "marcher à fond". Addressing Belgian volunteers in the German transport corps, he praised the comradeship of Germanic peoples within the NSKK while at a reception given in his honour by the New Order *Association des Journalistes Belges*, he spoke grandiloquently of the glorious future which awaited Brussels as one of the major cities of the German Empire <sup>27</sup>. But, with his characteristic taste for the dramatic gesture, Degrelle chose to make his first full declaration of his "neue Marschrichtung" <sup>28</sup> at a rally organised by Rex in the Palais des Sports in Brussels on 17 January 1943. The style of this meeting was a careful imitation of Nazi party rallies and, in front of the assembled Rexist militants as well as numerous German and foreign dignitaries, Degrelle delivered a powerful oration which impressed even a sceptical observer such as Reeder <sup>29</sup>. Commencing with an account of his experiences on the Eastern Front, the climax of his speech was a vivid portrayal of the Germanic heritage of Wallonia. Charlemagne, the bishops of Liège and the Burgundian monarchs were all used by the Rexist leader to buttress his singular interpretation of history in which he presented the Walloons as a Germanic frontier people struggling against the influences of French culture. The war, he continued, had provided Wallonia with the opportunity to return to these Germanic roots :

"Il faut qu'on sache que, fils de la race germanique, . . . nous avons repris conscience de notre qualité de Germains, que dans la communauté germanique nous nous sentons chez nous" <sup>30</sup>.

Mathys had, of course, already made similar remarks in his October speech but on this occasion Degrelle made no attempt to use the Germanic origins of the Walloons as a means of defending the independence of Belgium. Instead, Degrelle fully accepted that the future of the francophone Belgians lay *within* an expanded German Reich. The political significance of these remarks was clear.

The idea of an empire encompassing all of the various German racial groups of Europe was one advocated by the SS and the entire speech was clearly intended by Degrelle to demonstrate his support for the aims and ambitions of Himmler and his associates.

In other respects, however, Degrelle's speech was much more evasive. He provided no details of the form which the new relationship between Wallonia and Germany should take, merely declaring that :

"Notre petite Patrie, c'est l'Occident ; mais notre grande Patrie c'est la Communauté Germanique au sein de laquelle nos camarades sont morts" <sup>91</sup>.

Moreover, though he dismissed the Belgian state created in 1830 as a deformation of history, Degrelle was careful not to reject all idea of a Walloon-Flemish partnership praising the distant Burgundian era as one of harmony and joint endeavour between the two peoples <sup>92</sup>. This evasive phraseology served a deliberate purpose. Though anxious to convince the SS of his willingness to form part of their Germanic Empire, Degrelle's political ambitions remained much wider than the narrow frontiers of Wallonia. Thus, he did not wish to be seen as an advocate of the simple annexation of Wallonia by Germany and throughout the remaining years of the war he would be careful to leave open the possibility of some form of unified Belgian entity within the Reich <sup>93</sup>.

These subtleties were, however, much less important than the way in which Degrelle's speech fundamentally altered the terms upon which collaboration was based. Until January 1943, it had been presented by the Rexists as a *contract* between two distinct communitites. The justifications of that contract were several: the German military victory in Western Europe, the need for a political revolution within Belgium and, from June 1941, the crusade against the Bolshevik peril. All of these contractual justifications defined collaboration in

restrictive, exclusive terms. However close the relationship might be, it remained a contract between two separate entities whose distinctiveness was not prejudiced by their mutual endeavours to achieve certain goals. But on 17 January, Degrelle abandoned this contractual vision of collaboration and instead presented Wallonia and Germany as a single entity. The consequence of this *fusion* of the interests of Germany and Wallonia was to destroy all notion of a limit to collaboration. Walloon co-operation with the Reich ceased to be motivated by self-interest but became self-fulfilment, the expression of Wallonia's racial and historic character. German policies were, by definition, also those of Wallonia and the Walloon people owed an unconditional loyalty to the leaders of the Third Reich <sup>94</sup>.

Thus, Degrelle's speech on January 17 marked what might be termed the highest stage of collaboration. What had begun two years previously as a part-opportunistic, part-principled policy of co-operation with the Occupying forces had become an open-ended commitment to support the Nazi regime in every way. Not content only to identify with the German cause, Degrelle advocated even the physical absorption of the Belgian lands into a Germanic empire.

Above all, the speech confirmed Degrelle's transformation into a power-seeker on the stage of the German Reich. Ideological scruples were forgotten in what had become an unconditional pursuit of the Nazi patronage which he now believed was the only way that he could hope to acquire power. Thus, as Degrelle has freely admitted, the ideological content of his speech was much less important than its political significance. He attached no great importance to the alleged Germanic character of the Walloons and claims that he would have happily declared that they were Hindu in origin if it would have appeased the Nazi leaders :

" . . . Moi cette germanité des Wallons ne m'impressionait pas outre mesure, mais les Allemands étaient baba devant cette découverte" <sup>95</sup>.

Thus, in his post-war accounts of his actions, he has presented the speech as an instance of Degrellian sleight of hand outwitting the ponderous Germans. By convincing the Nazi leaders that he was a convert to their pseudo-scientific racial doctrines, Degrelle argues, he intended to ensure the survival of some form of Belgian state within the Nazi empire <sup>96</sup>.

This may indeed have remained his final goal but, in reality, such patriotic justifications had long since become no more than a convenient rationale for his own pursuit of power. Drawn like a moth towards the fading lights of Berlin, Degrelle was from January 1943 of peripheral importance in his native land. He had become an essentially German figure, of significance only in the internecine conflicts which would dominate the last years of Hitler's regime. The corollary of this process was a weakening of the bonds between Degrelle and Rex. Though he would remain the undisputed leader of the movement, Degrelle no longer took much interest in developments within Belgium and observed with only a distracted eye the fortunes of his political movement. Thus, the speech which superficially marked Degrelle's return amongst his followers, in fact signalled the point of separation between Rex and its leader. In the final years of the war, Degrelle and Rex were increasingly to operate in different political arenas and, instead of the leader of a Belgian political movement, Degrelle became a solitary adventurer seeking crumbs of prestige and power amidst the ruins of the besieged Reich.

### Footnotes : Chapter 5

- (1) e.g. J-P Brunet *Jacques Doriot*, pp. 399-403.
- (2) Untitled note [19 Sept. 1942] and VM to Daye 23 Sept. 1942, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye ; Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 38, C2GM ; *Journal des Tribunaux* 23 Jan. 1949, pp. 53-57, 'Cour Militaire'. It was occasionally referred to as the *Bureau Politique* of Rex.
- (3) JS Pro Just., 24 May 1945 and 'Note écrite...' 27 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (4) Première séance du nouveau Bureau Politique 25 Sept. 1942, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye. Degrelle's long-standing lawyer Georges Dubois, a former head of Rex in Brussels Louis Vanderveken, a large-scale economic collaborator René Petit as well as a representative of the CCW were also said to have been members of the *Conseil* ; Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 38, C2GM ; *Le Soir* 1 Dec. 1946 and 12 Jan. 1947, p. 4, 'Les Conseils de Guerre' and 4 June 1947, p. 5, 'Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles'.
- (5) P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, p. 106. See also ; R. De Becker Conférence rédactionnelle au *Soir* 3 Sept. 1943, C2GM, PL 1.
- (6) R. Poulet Prison Diary 11 July 1946 (Private Collection) ; *Le P.R.* 6 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Des propositions constructives'.
- (7) *Le Nouveau Journal* 19 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'Le point essentiel' and 24-25 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'Aspiration à la discipline'.
- (8) *Le Soir* 27 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'En marche vers l'unité'.
- (9) Documentation Jans 320 ; W. Meyers 'Les collaborateurs flamands de France et leurs contacts avec les milieux flamingants belges', *Revue du Nord* LX (1978), 337-346.
- (10) *Ibid.* The post-war trials of suspected collaborators revealed only a few isolated cases of francophone Belgians who had joined Flemish pro-German groups : *Vers l'Avenir* 26 Mar. and 24 May 1946, p. 2, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur'.
- (11) *Le P.R.* 10 Aug. 1941, p. 4, 'A propos de "Wallonie"' ; Simar to Chefs de Groupes 7 Sept. 1942, C2GM, C 11/321.8.
- (12) *Le P.R.* 4 Jan. 1942, p. 1, 'Les grandes heures de Rex en '41'.
- (13) *Le P.R.* 28 July 1942, pp. 1 and 4, 'Le problème de Bruxelles', 5 Aug. 1942, p. 1, 'Manifestations reconfortantes' and 27 Oct. 1942, p. 2, 'Une grande manifestation...'
- (14) J. Willequet *La Belgique sous la botte*, pp. 159-162 ; A. De Jonghe 'H. J. Elias als leider van het Vlaams Nationaal Verbond', *Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine* VI (1975), 197-238 and VII (1976), 329-423.
- (15) A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers* IV 52-82 and 121-134 and V 82-94.
- (16) R. De Becker 'La collaboration...', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* No. 497-498 (1970), 20.
- (17) JS 'Note écrite...' 27 May 1945 and Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Procès-Verbal de l'audience publique 6 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. and Jugement et Appel.
- (18) *Le P.R.* 14 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'La mise au point de la stratégie révolutionnaire', 21 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'Perspectives du parti unique', 7 Nov. 1942, p. 1, 'Jacques Doriot...' and 29 Nov. 1942, pp. 1 and 6, 'On ne fait pas la révolution sans révolutionnaires'.
- (19) *Le P.R.* 30 Sept. 1942, p. 1, 'Besoin de grandeur' and 28 Nov. 1942, p. 1, 'Une belle déclaration'.
- (20) VM to Chef de Cercle de Virton 29 Aug. 1942 and Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 14 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 11/148 and 217.
- (21) *Ibid.* ; *Le P.R.* 27 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'Une grande manifestation de force et de foi'.
- (22) *Ibid.* ; P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, pp. 105-106.
- (23) *Le P.R.* 25 July 1942, pp. 1-2, 'Reprenant son commandement au Front de l'Est...' and 27 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'Une grande manifestation...' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis* II, 468-469.
- (24) *Le P.R.* 27 Oct. 1942, pp. 1-2, 'Une grande manifestation...'
- (25) *Ibid.*
- (26) TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, p. 2743.

- (27) *Le P.R.* 6 Dec. 1942, p. 1, 'Facteurs de mort et de vie'. Streeel subsequently had some difficulty in explaining away this tactical concession ; J. Streeel 'Analyse de l'acte d'accusation : première suite' pp. 13-15, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel.
- (28) TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, pp. 2712-2713 ; P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, p. 109.
- (29) Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 69, C2GM.
- (30) *Ibid* ; Journal de V. Matthys p. 10, C2GM ; Première séance du nouveau Bureau Politique 25 Sept. 1942 and JS to Daye 3 Oct. 1942, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye.
- (31) *Ibid* ; A. Milward *The New Order and the French Economy* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 113-114.
- (32) *Le P.R.* 16 Oct. 1942, p. 2, 'Les "fils à papa" cherchent à échapper...' ; Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 70-71, C2GM.
- (33) Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 21 Oct. 1942, C2GM, C 11/219.
- (34) *Le P.R.* 8 Nov. 1942, p. 1, 'Ouste ! Au travail !' and 21 Feb. 1943, p. 1, 'Notre jeunesse a aussi des devoirs...'
- (35) See note 33 ; Documentation Jans 53 ; Journal de V. Matthys pp. 10-11, C2GM.
- (36) Feyaerts to IV Bannière of FC 26 Dec. 1942, C2GM, C 11/278.
- (37) Franz Van Moer Pro Just., 19 July 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 292 ; Simar to Chefs de Groupes 26 Dec. 1942, C2GM, C 11/321.8 ; *La Meuse* 8 Aug. 1945, p. 1, 'Antoine Dupont...' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis II*, 467.
- (38) TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, p. 2731 ; Dupont and Brunet to Chefs de Cercles 3 Mar. 1943 and Letter of Chef des Cadres Politiques Cercle d'Ath, C2GM, C 11/232 and 321.7.
- (39) J. Culot 'L'exploitation de la main d'oeuvre belge et le problème des réfractaires', *Cahiers I*, 33-66 ; F. Selleslagh 'L'emploi' in *1940-1945 La vie quotidienne en Belgique* (Brussels, 1984), pp. 155-167.
- (40) Extraits du Bulletin d'information confidentiel du Ministère de l'Intérieur [1943], C2GM, Fonds INBEL/966.
- (41) Von Craushaar to OFKs and FKs 28 Apr. 1943, GRMA T 501 97 473-481 ; A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers V*, 7-18. Streeel stated that 140 attacks had been made on Rexists by the end of 1942 ; JS 'Note écrite...' 27 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (42) TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, p. 2769.
- (43) *Ibid* ; *Le P.R.* 13 Nov. 1942, p. 1, 'Notre camarade Ch. Hénault...' and 20 Nov. 1942, p. 1, 'Notre camarade Jean Teughels...' ; J. Wynants *Verviers libéré* (Verviers, 1984), p. 193.
- (44) *Le P.R.* 19 Dec. 1942, p. 1, 'C'était un saint père...' and 22 Dec. 1942, p. 1, 'Le suprême adieu...' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis II*, 539-540.
- (45) Albert Constant Pro Just., 12 Feb. 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 283-284 ; TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, p. 2743 ; Informations reçues de Belgique 9 Dec. 1942, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/964.
- (46) TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, p. 2755 ; *La Meuse* 25 Jan. 1946, p. 2, 'Gérard Willems...'.
- (47) JS and VM to Cadres Politiques 27 Nov. 1942, C2GM, C 11/230 ; JS Pro Just., 4 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Cour Militaire.
- (48) Plaidoyer prononcé par Victor Matthys devant le Conseil de Guerre de Charleroi pp. 3-4, C2GM, JP 258 ; JS Pro Just., 4 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Cour Militaire ; Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 108, C2GM.
- (49) See note 47.
- (50) JS to Grauls 19 Nov. 1942 and JS Pro Just., 5 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Cour Militaire.
- (51) VM to Dr. Callies 14 Nov. 1942, Papiers Grauls, C2GM, PG 5/245 ; VM to Reeder [undated] copy in Simar to Chefs de Groupes 21 Nov. 1942, C2GM, C 11/321.8.
- (52) These discussions are referred to in several documents ; JS and VM to Cadres Politiques 27 Nov. 1942, C2GM, C 11/230 ; JS Pro Just., 4 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Cour Militaire.
- (53) TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, p. 2779 ; Dupont to Chefs de Cercles 22 Nov. 1942, C2GM, C 11/289.
- (54) JS to Cadre Politique 4 Dec. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS [Supplementary File 7, Doct. 11.
- (55) The phrase used by Reeder was "Selbsthilfe". A. De Jonghe interpretes this to suggest that Matthys proposed the creation of a Rexist self-defence corps but there is no evidence to support his theory : 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers VIII*, 84.



- (56) *Ibid*, *Cahiers V*, 8. More hostages were executed on 12 December and at regular intervals thereafter for the remainder of the Occupation.
- (57) TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, p. 2743.
- (58) E. Reeder Pro Just., 27 Dec. 1949, Procès Von Falkenhausen, Doct. 1749 ; A. De Jonghe *Op. cit.*, *Cahiers V*, 12 and VIII, 54-60.
- (59) JS 'Note écrite...' 27 May 1945 and Michel Saussez Curriculum Vitae, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info. and Doss. Michel Saussez, Inst., Doct. 15 ; Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, pp. 55 and 64, C2GM, JB 13.
- (60) J. Streeel 'Observations sur l'acte d'accusation' pp. 7-8, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel.
- (61) Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, p. 4, C2GM, JB 13 ; Henry Marcovitz Pro Just., 4 Nov. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 152-153 ; Ordres de l'Etat-Major des FC 12 Dec. 1942 cited in Documentation Jans 53 ; JS to Chefs de Cercles 20 Nov. 1942, C2GM, C 11/229.
- (62) See note 60.
- (63) Jean Fontaine Pro Just., 13 Dec. 1946 and Albert Constant Pro Just., 27 Dec. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 274-276 and 280-281. When Streeel learnt of this surveillance he ordered that it should cease.
- (64) e.g. Constant to FC 2 Jan. 1943, C2GM, C 11/267.
- (65) Michel Saussez to Edouard Saussez 23 Nov. 1942, Aud. Gén., Doss. Michel Saussez, Pièces à Conviction, Doct. 29.
- (66) J. Streeel Mémoire : à partir de ma rupture avec Rex, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel ; [Baumann] to Meyer 22 Jan. 1943, GRMA T 501 175 83 ; *Le P.R.* 20 Dec. 1942, p. 1, 'Après une campagne de quinze mois'.
- (67) J. Streeel Mémoire : quelques précisions sur la volte-face de Degrelle, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel ; Légion Belge "Wallonie" Historique, p. 31, C2GM, W 4 ; *Le P.R.* 19 Dec. 1942, p. 1, 'Une émouvante exhortation...'
- (68) J. Streeel Mémoire : quelques précisions sur la volte-face de Degrelle, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel. See also *Le P.R.* 24 Dec. 1942, p. 1, 'La Légion nous indique les solutions...'
- (69) *Ibid*.
- (70) Himmler referred only to the *Chef de Rex* meeting his "Mitarbeitern" but Degrelle insists he met Berger ; Himmler to Lammers 25 Mar. 1943, C2GM, C 11/124bis, Doct. 7 ; *L'Eventail* 6 June 1980, p. 9, 'Léon Degrelle'.
- (71) Reeder to OKH 26 Jan. 1943, C2GM, Procès von Falkenhausen, Doct. 117.
- (72) J. Streeel Mémoire : à partir de ma rupture avec Rex, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel.
- (73) A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder', *Cahiers V*, 51-60.
- (74) *Ibid* ; *Le Soir* 16 June 1946, p. 2, 'Les Conseils de Guerre'.
- (75) A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder', *Cahiers V*, 57 ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, pp. 281-282.
- (76) A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder', *Cahiers V*, 59.
- (77) LD to Dr. Bähr 11 May 1942, GRMA T 175 131 2651929 ; *Le P.R.* 28 Nov. 1942, p. 1, 'Une belle déclaration'.
- (78) Interview with Léon Degrelle 14 July 1988.
- (79) e.g. J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, pp. 302-303.
- (80) TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, pp. 2721-2722.
- (81) P. Dastier 'Degrelle parle', *Dossier du mois* No. 6/7, p. 12.
- (82) Cited in Comte Capelle *Au Service du Roi II*, 131.
- (83) Reeder to OKH 26 Jan. 1943, C2GM, Procès von Falkenhausen, Doct. 117 ; Niederschrift über die Besprechung des SS-Ausschusses der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für den germanischen Raum 12 Jan. 1943, Institut für Zeitgeschichte München, Doct. PS 705, p. 4. I am grateful to A. De Jonghe for supplying me with a copy of this document.
- (84) J. Streeel Mémoire : quelques précisions sur la volte-face de Degrelle and à partir de ma rupture avec Rex, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel ; R. Poulet Prison Diary 11 July 1946 (Private Collection).

- (85) J. Streeel Mémoire : quelques précisions sur la volte-face de Degrelle, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel ; JS 'Note écrite...' 27 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info.
- (86) See note 82 ; J. Streeel Mémoire : à partir de ma rupture avec Rex, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel ; Berger to Himmler 5 Jan. 1943, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Doct. NS 19/1541, I am grateful to A. De Jonghe for making a copy of this document available to me.
- (87) *Le P.R.* 10 Jan. 1943, p. 1, 'Le Chef de Rex passe en revue...' ; R. De Becker 'La collaboration...', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* No. 497/498 (1970), 50.
- (88) The phrase was Reeder's ; TB 23, 15 Apr. 1943, p. 2940.
- (89) Reeder to OKH 26 Jan. 1943, C2GM, Procès von Falkenhausen, Doct. 117 ; *Le P.R.* 18 Jan. 1943, p. 1, 'La cérémonie' ; TB 23, 15 Apr. 1943, p. 2940.
- (90) *Le P.R.* 18 Jan. 1943, pp. 1-3, 'Le discours du Chef de Rex'.
- (91) *Ibid.*
- (92) *Ibid.*
- (93) e.g. J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, pp. 303-306.
- (94) See J. Streeel Mémoire : à partir de ma rupture avec Rex, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel.
- (95) J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, p. 305 ; L. Narvaez *Degrelle m'a dit* (Brussels, 1977), p. 306.
- (96) *L'Eventail* 6 June 1980, p. 9, 'Léon Degrelle'.

## CHAPTER SIX : JANUARY 1943 - SEPTEMBER 1944

Degrelle's speech in the Palais des Sports had the effect of throwing Rex into an abyss from which it would make vain efforts to escape during the subsequent eighteen months. All hope of limiting the policy of collaboration to certain goals or even of reversing it evaporated and the history of Rex during 1943 and 1944 is a dismal story of an ever closer and less scrupulous association with the German authorities which inevitably resulted in the Rexistes becoming hated foreigners within their own land.

Not all members of Rex were, however, willing to follow their leader in his new stance. As Rexist reports admitted, a considerable number of militants left the movement in the weeks following Degrelle's speech. Many of these were experienced veterans who had been in Rex since 1936, including Albert Constant, the *Chef de l'Etat-Major des Formations de Combat* and Paul Lisein, the *Chef des Cadres Politiques*<sup>1</sup>. But indisputably the most important withdrawal from Rex at this time was that of José Streel. The *Chef du Service Politique* and former architect of the policy of moderation pursued by Rex until December 1942 left the movement to which he had dedicated his entire adult life declaring his disgust at "les enthousiasmes chimériques, les ambitions maladroites et les erreurs politiques" of the *Chef de Rex*<sup>2</sup>.

Degrelle himself did not seem overly concerned by the departures of men like Streel whom he described as a "petit pion de province, dont les scrupules l'empêcheront d'aller loin"<sup>3</sup>. For, even if towards certain other militants he adopted a more conciliatory tone hinting that his latest declarations were no more than another instance of Degrellian sleight of hand intended to bamboozle the Nazis<sup>4</sup>, it was clear that the *Chef de Rex* no longer retained much interest in the fate of his political movement. The principal

purpose of the speech had been to open the way to a *personal* alliance between himself and the German leadership and during the spring of 1943 he energetically pursued this goal during his visits to the Third Reich. Indeed, his speech had already brought him one substantial benefit in the form of an instruction from Hitler to his subordinates which stated that :

"wir mit allen Mitteln Degrelle unterstützen müssten, da er für uns der einzig wirklich brauchbare Belgier sei" <sup>5</sup>.

Thus, Degrelle sought to build on the favourable impression created by his speech in order to build a broad coalition of support amongst the Reich leaders. He was therefore far from a simple pawn of the SS. Degrelle never believed in putting all his eggs in the one basket and instead continued to seek support elsewhere in the institutional jungle of the Third Reich, notably in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the *Wehrmacht* and the Reich Chancellery.

During these negotiations in Germany, Degrelle put forward a series of proposals intended to reinforce his personal power. These included fanciful suggestions such as the creation of a second *Légion* to fight in North Africa <sup>6</sup> as well as more practical ideas such as the creation of a new single youth movement in Belgium, the *Jeunesse Légionnaire* directed by a group of former *légionnaires* <sup>7</sup>. Most of the more realistic suggestions were adopted by the German authorities but there remained clear limits to the amount of support they were willing to accord the Walloon leader. Thus, when for example Degrelle together with his new-found ally Paul Colin of *Le Nouveau Journal* and *Cassandre* proposed that they be allowed to seize control of the highly influential *Le Soir*, this proposal was rejected on the grounds that it would concentrate too much power in the hands of Degrelle and his allies <sup>8</sup>.

The most important feature of these negotiations was the way in which Degrelle presented himself as a *cavalier seul* and did not seek to advance

the interests of Rex along with those of himself. Rex featured rarely in his discussions except when he dismissively commented to his German interlocutors that "seine Partei aufgelöst bzw. in einen grösseren Verband überführt werden müsse" <sup>9</sup>. It was the *Légion* which had become the principal focus of his ambitions and when Degrelle returned to Belgium in March he paid little attention to Rexist affairs boasting only with a little exaggeration that he never set foot in the Rexist headquarters in the Avenue du Midi after August 1941 <sup>10</sup>.

In general, Degrelle was content to allow the trusted and unthreatening Matthys to direct the Rexist movement and it was under his direction that a further major reorganisation of the *Etat-Major* was carried out in the spring of 1943. The principal result of these changes was to create a more formal and hierarchical structure based on a series of departments. Thus, the *Service Politique* was replaced by a *Département Politique* nominally headed by a pre-war Rexist senator and *premier échevin* of Grand Bruxelles Léon Brunet but in which the real power was exercised by the *Chef-adjoint*, Louis Collard, a young bureaucrat who after being active in Rex in the heady days of 1936 had only rejoined the *Etat-Major* in September 1942 <sup>11</sup>. The second major change introduced by Matthys was to establish Charles Lambinon's BIRD as a separate department, the *Département de Sécurité et d'Information* (DSI). Granting Lambinon wide powers to establish the new department as he saw fit, Matthys ensured that Lambinon and his sinister group of assistants would play an increasingly prominent role in Rex during the last years of the Occupation <sup>12</sup>. The other changes accomplished at this time were of less significance but they included the creation of several other departments - such as the *Département de Discipline Intérieure* - which confirmed the evolution of Rex towards a more military and distinctly less political form of organisation <sup>13</sup>.

The principal challenge facing the Rexist leaders was the recrudescence in Resistance attacks on their supporters. These were becoming both more audacious and less discriminating and amongst those to be killed at this time were female militants and for the first time a figure of national importance Paul Colin, who was assassinated in April 1943 <sup>14</sup>. The impact of these killings on Rexist morale was substantial. Many observers agreed that the atmosphere of fear they generated was making it increasingly difficult to find militants willing to adopt positions of public responsibility and that a gradual paralysis of local Rexist activities was becoming evident <sup>15</sup>. In response, the Rexist continued to look to the *Militärverwaltung* for effective action. The leadership remained convinced that the German authorities retained the potential to restore public order but that for political reasons they were holding back from taking decisive measures. Thus, the Rexist leaders continued to press Reeder and his colleagues to abandon all restraint and they energetically supported those steps - such as the execution of hostages - which the *Militärverwaltung* did decide to take <sup>16</sup>.

On the other hand, the Rexist did not consider seriously taking action of their own against the shadowy killers of the Resistance. Though they remained convinced that these men were being directed by leading figures in the Belgian *ancien régime* elite, the Rexist leaders preached self-restraint to their followers promising only that at a vague date in the future all Rexist losses would be avenged. As Ruelle, the new *Chef des Formations de Combat*, declared over the coffin of one of the Rexist martyrs in April :

"Tu sais que seule la discipline qui nous est imposée nous interdit de venger ton sang dans le sang. Mais un jour viendra qui tout paiera" <sup>17</sup>.

The attacks of the Resistance did, however, have the effect of hastening the transformation of Rex into a quasi-military organisation. This

theme of internal transformation was repeated ceaselessly by the propagandists of the movement. A highly stylised ritual was devised for use at meetings and all Rexistists were exhorted to dedicate themselves totally to the movement <sup>18</sup>. Shirkers were denounced as "rexistes d'opérette" while those who dared to withdraw from Rex were threatened with violence administered by the "dur et pur" of the movement <sup>19</sup>. Germanic phraseology such as "Sieg Heil" was increasingly prominent at Rexist meetings and in the oaths whereby militants swore blind loyalty to the *Chef*, the movement and the Walloon race <sup>20</sup>.

Degrelle, meanwhile, remained absorbed by his own quite separate concerns. Foremost amongst these in the spring of 1943 were the somewhat complicated circumstances of his private life. During his absence at the front, his wife had formed a relationship with an Austrian *Luftwaffe* officer called Pessl and when, on his return from the East, she told Degrelle of this affair he immediately began to plot some form of redress. The German authorities, however, prevented a duel or any other such direct confrontation with the Austrian and Degrelle was forced to make appeals even to his allies in the SS to get some form of disciplinary action taken against Pessl. In the event, however, such measures were rapidly overtaken by events. Pessl behaved throughout rather in the manner of a figure from a romantic operetta and late on the evening of 12 April his body was discovered lying close to the Degrelle family home. There was no doubt that both Pessl and Degrelle's wife had seriously contemplated committing suicide but various circumstances regarding Pessl's death suggested that he had in fact been killed. The German police referred a report of the case to SS headquarters with the conclusion that Pessl had probably been killed by one of Degrelle's guards but for political reasons it was decided to take no further action <sup>21</sup>.

This rather tragicomic episode was, however, soon overshadowed by a decisive meeting between Degrelle and the head of the SS aboard Himmler's private train during the night of 23-24 May. It was the first time that the *Chef de Rex* had been able to meet the man who was rapidly becoming Hitler's deputy and during this meeting he made a series of further important concessions which completed the ideological and political realignment he had commenced in December 1942. Himmler agreed that the *Légion Wallonie* be integrated into the *Waffen-SS* but, apart from some minor concessions over the autonomy which this unit would enjoy, the head of the SS made no important proposals to Degrelle. Instead, it was the ideas of Degrelle which dominated the meeting. In a document he presented to Himmler, the putative leader of the Walloons promised that the sole aim of his political activity would be the return of this lost Germanic race to the Reich. Though temporary concessions would be necessary in order to placate the Belgian sensibilities of the francophone population, he assured Himmler that within one or two generations the Walloon people would accept full integration into the Reich <sup>22</sup>.

This meeting formed the basis of Degrelle's subsequent political career and - although they had not been party to the meeting - it also had a considerable impact on the Rexists. Encouraged by extravagant accounts of this meeting provided by Degrelle, they rejoiced at his apparent success in winning the confidence of the SS leadership and for the first time since early 1941 the Rexist leadership began to plan seriously for a future seizure of power. Rumours of a Rexist *coup d'état* to be carried out in conjunction with the forces of *DeVlag* once again began to circulate <sup>23</sup> but in fact the Rexists were thinking of a more gradual and disciplined progression to power. Their strategy contained three elements: total collaboration with the German authorities, the elimination of all potential rivals to Rex within the New Order community and



the continued infiltration of their supporters into all positions of responsibility within the Belgian governmental structures.

It was the last two of these which were to absorb much of the energies of the Rexist leaders during the remainder of 1943. All plans nourished by Streeel for an entente between Rex and its more moderate critics were abandoned and instead the Rexistists did all they could to muzzle or intimidate those New Order journalists such as Poulet and De Becker who criticised the new radicalism of Degrelle <sup>24</sup>. In addition, Rex worked hard to reduce the influence of those radical collaborationist groups which had emerged during 1941 and 1942. Two of these, AGRA and the *Cercle Wallon*, had become of some importance. AGRA was the first to feel the full weight of Rexist hostility. After the transfer of the *Légion* into the *Waffen-SS*, those volunteers recruited by AGRA for the *Waffen-SS* were forcibly enrolled into the *Légion* and in July Rex forced AGRA to accept the fusion of the forces recruited by the two groups for the German transport corps (the NSKK) into a new single unit under the *de facto* control of Degrelle and Rex <sup>25</sup>. Together with divisions within AGRA itself and the demoralisation caused within this movement by the evolution of the war, these measures ensured that AGRA virtually disappeared as an independent grouping during the last year of the Occupation.

The case of the *Cercle Wallon* was somewhat different. This small group of intellectuals had emerged first in Germany and then in Belgium during 1942 and enjoyed the patronage of various extremist groups within the SS who remained opposed to what they regarded as the clerical and Belgicist convictions of Degrelle. The members of the *Cercle* enjoyed no popular support but they did succeed in building up a network of cultural and social organisations such as the *Maisons Wallonnes* which were established in a number of Walloon towns during 1943. The head of the *Cercle* was Fernand-Marie Collard

who had made the Berlin-based newspaper *L'Effort Wallon* a voice for his radical Germanic ideology <sup>26</sup>. At first Rex was unsuccessful in their attempts to oust Collard from *L'Effort Wallon* or to marginalise the activities of his supporters in Belgium but in May 1943 Collard suddenly decided to enrol in the SS officer training school at Bad Tölz (possibly with a view to furthering his long-term political ambitions) and in his absence the Rexists were successful in splitting his organisation and bringing much of the *Cercle* - at least within Belgium - under the control of pro-Rexist elements <sup>27</sup>. Most importantly, the Rexists managed to undermine SS support for the *Cercle Wallon*. During 1943 Matthys and Louis Collard of the *Département Politique* gradually convinced Jungclaus and his deputy for Walloon affairs Moskopff that they should give their exclusive support to Rex and without this German patronage the *Cercle* dwindled into an organisation of minimal importance <sup>28</sup>.

The second facet of Rexist strategy during 1943 also owed much to Louis Collard and his *Département Politique*. This was the steady infiltration of Rexists into the governmental apparatus of Belgium. Already significant under Streel, this policy continued to grow in importance after his departure. Its aim did, however, change in character. While Streel had stressed that the Rexists nominated by the Germans to public posts were accomplishing a patriotic duty, Louis Collard and his assistants saw in Rexist infiltration only a preparation for an eventual seizure of power. The structures of infiltration did, however, remain very much the same. Once again it was the relationship between the Rexist leaders and the New Order staff of Romsée's Ministry of the Interior which remained the means by which Rexists were selected for appointment to public office. With the deterioration in German military fortunes it was only convinced Rexists who were now willing to accept nomination to such offices and so the difficulties of the early war years when the Ministry of the Interior

had often preferred to choose non-Rexists for sensitive posts had largely disappeared. Thus, by the summer of 1944, according to Matthys, 85% of the population of francophone Belgium - including all of the *grandes agglomérations* of Wallonia - were living in communes directed by Rexist *bourgmestres* and *échevins* <sup>29</sup>.

The only major obstacle to Rexist influence in public administration remained the opposition of the *Militärverwaltung* to the nomination of Rexist to positions of importance in the central governmental apparatus. The big prizes continued to elude them and were instead granted by Reeder to the more reliable and often technically more proficient members of the VNV. Only one Rexist *secrétaire-général* was appointed and he occupied only the relatively unimportant Ministry of Public Works. Thus, there was a continued imbalance between francophone and Flemish New Order influence in the Brussels ministries, a fact that the Rexist never failed to bring attention to the German authorities both in Belgium and Berlin <sup>30</sup>. Yet, despite their rising position in the Nazi firmament this was a problem which the Rexist never succeeded in overcoming. Even in the summer of 1944 they were to remain outsiders marginalised from positions of power in Brussels.

In addition to this infiltration of established governmental bodies, the Rexist were also anxious to take control of new parastatal bodies created during the Occupation. Foremost amongst these was the *Service des Volontaires du Travail pour la Wallonie* (SVTW), a body which had been created by a group of authoritarian royalists in 1940 anxious to bring about the regeneration of their country through the virtues of physical labour. It had had some initial success but its momentum soon began to be lost and in 1943 the Rexist exerted much energy on intrigues intended to bring it under their control. The reason for this lay principally in their belief that the SVTW was destined to play a key

role in the compulsory labour service which the Rexists believed the Germans were planning to introduce in Belgium. The only effect of Rexist efforts to infiltrate their supporters into the SVTW was, however, to destroy the *Service* as a viable organisation. Though by 1944 they had eventually gained control of it, it was by then an institution of entirely marginal importance which merely bore witness to the impotence which so frequently characterised the efforts of the Rexists to grasp control of the levers of Belgian public life <sup>31</sup>.

The history of their attempts to take control of the *Volontaires* well demonstrated the almost manic energy which the Rexists expended on the infiltration of public bodies. This was certainly an important task and moreover was one of the few readily available to the Rexists while they awaited their eventual seizure of power but one also senses in this activity an emotional motive which went deeper than rational analysis. Self-importance and *arrivisme* were important motives in collaboration in Belgium as elsewhere in Occupied Europe and the arrogant, pompous behaviour of many Rexists appointed to public office demonstrated the importance which such public symbols of power clearly possessed for them. For many, it also served as proof of their personal idealism. Appointment to public office was, after all, an increasingly dangerous action and for many Rexists it gratified their deep - if profoundly misguided - sense of civic responsibility. In the Monsieur Homais world of many modest Rexists their acquisition of a position of local authority served above all to prove to an uncomprehending majority that they were indeed idealists willing to accomplish the most onerous duties in order to serve the common good.

The history of Rex during 1943 was also marked by a transfer of power to a new generation of leaders. Though Matthys remained the head of the movement, underneath him there was a considerable change in personnel. Many of the old veterans had now gone to the Eastern Front, retired or withdrawn from

Rex and they were replaced by a new generation of leaders very different from the political veterans of 1936. Important among these was, of course, Charles Lambinon. His DSI expanded steadily during 1943 and, though he was far from successful in winning the confidence of the German police, he did gather together a group of unscrupulous opportunists who shared their leader's interest in violent actions and material rewards <sup>32</sup>. But the most important of the new leaders of Rex in 1943 was Louis Collard of the *Département Politique* of Rex. Within a few months of his appointment in January 1943, he had asserted his ascendancy over all his potential rivals within the *Département Politique* and had also emerged as the most influential advisor of Matthys. He dominated relations between Rex and the German authorities, made his *Département Politique* the central body of the *Etat-Major* and became in effect alongside Degrelle and Matthys the third man of Rex <sup>33</sup>.

The reasons for Collard's meteoric rise to power were several. He was a consummate intriguer who well knew how to exploit the hot-house atmosphere of the Rexist headquarters to his own ends but the principal reason for his success lay in his personal competence as an administrator. In the world of collaboration, Collard was rare in being a true specialist. Most supporters of the German cause turned their hands indifferently to political, military, journalistic and bureaucratic tasks but Collard was a bureaucrat who never made a public speech, published no journalism and dressed always in a civilian suit. On the other hand, he was a highly skilled administrator who devoted himself entirely to his work and had no real private life outside of the Rexist offices in the Avenue du Midi <sup>34</sup>. He was moreover perfectly suited to the needs of a movement which had in effect parted company with its political past and needed administrators such as Collard who could forge an authoritarian structure for Rex. Thus, alongside Collard, there were in the *Etat-Major* a number of lesser

figures very similar to him. They all shared with their leader the same devotion to bureaucratic matters and the same lack of interest in the broader political life of Belgium and their ascendancy well demonstrated how Rex had become a closed community separate from the majority of Belgians <sup>35</sup>.

The problems faced by Rex in late-1943 clearly indicated the need for a new generation of effective leaders. The retreat of German forces in the east coupled with the sudden collapse of Mussolini's Italy had a major impact on Rexist morale. The leaders of the movement remained relatively sanguine and in the summer they hoped that the tentative peace-feelers between Germany and the Soviet Union might lead to a reversal of alliances with the two revolutionary states joining together to destroy the Anglo-Americans <sup>36</sup>. But the majority of ordinary members of Rex saw no such reason for optimism. As far as they were concerned the evolution of events merely demonstrated that they had backed the wrong side and, although no exact statistics are possible, it is clear that there was a further substantial withdrawal of militants from Rex during the summer and autumn of 1943 <sup>37</sup>. A number of rural *cercles* were closed or fused with larger ones and even in Brussels the three existing *cercles* were reduced to a single *Région de Bruxelles* <sup>38</sup>. Thus, during the year the number of Rexist *cercles* fell from 23 to 17 and according to Reeder the movement only had 8,000 members by 1943 <sup>39</sup>. This figure must be treated with some caution. It does not seem to have been more than an educated guess by a well-informed observer and only took into account the members of the *cercles* of Rex. As such, it omits a large number of Rexistes who were serving in German military and para-military organisations as well as that considerable penumbra of sympathisers who did not form part of the structure of the movement. Nevertheless, despite such caveats, it is clear that Rex had declined to an organisation of marginal numerical importance. Even if one makes the most generous allowance for those

who surrounded Rex while not forming part of it, the number of Rexist sympathisers cannot have exceeded 1 or 1.5% of the population of francophone Belgium <sup>40</sup>.

Moreover, the morale of those who remained was low. The attacks of the Resistance continued to grow in frequency and audacity. By November, Reeder reported that more than sixty Rexistists had been murdered so far in 1943 and already in September Matthys had remarked with some justification on the "atmosphère de guerre civile larvée" which now existed in Belgium. All attempts by the Belgian and German authorities to reverse this upsurge in violence had been unsuccessful and the Rexistists had in effect become fugitives outside the protection of the law <sup>41</sup>. The majority of the population sympathised with the attacks and participated enthusiastically in the isolation and intimidation of the Rexist minority. Their possessions were frequently attacked and in the Borinage members of Rex received rope-nooses through the post. Elsewhere, the cows of a militant were daubed with swastikas while in Charleroi Rexistists were mugged in the streets and stripped of their clothes <sup>42</sup>. Such events happened elsewhere in Europe but - as Reeder observed - the depth of bitterness existing within francophone Belgium between the collaborationist minority and the patriotic majority appears to have been exceptional <sup>43</sup>.

In this atmosphere, many Rexistists came to have a paranoid fear of everybody with whom they came into contact, often penning urgent letters to the German authorities denouncing the murderous conspiracies of their neighbours <sup>44</sup>. In addition, they began to resort to individual reprisals against those who they held responsible for the Resistance attacks. Matthys and his advisors remained convinced that such Rexist "counter-terror" actions would achieve nothing and advised their supporters to place their faith in the ability of the German police to apprehend the culprits <sup>45</sup>. But, as Matthys himself

subsequently admitted, a desire for immediate and direct reprisals had become by 1943 "le courant général" within Rex <sup>46</sup> and throughout the country various Rexist groups began to resort to chaotic and indiscriminate acts of violence.

The most important instance of such direct actions occurred at Liège. In the summer of 1943, a group of Rexist radicals came together led by a former *légionnaire* Jean Pirmolin who boasted of the atrocities which he had committed on the Eastern Front. Closely associated with Lambinon's DSI, Pirmolin's band was responsible for the murders in the summer of 1943 of two leading figures in the Liberal Party in Liège as well as of a policeman against whom Pirmolin held a purely personal grudge. Soon afterwards, the same men carried out a number of armed robberies - including one of a casino - sharing the booty between themselves and the Rexist movement <sup>47</sup>. It is clear that the actions of Pirmolin and his colleagues met with the approval of a number of important figures within the Rexist *cercle* of Liège but that they did not act with the knowledge of Matthys or of the *Etat-Major* of Rex <sup>48</sup>.

Nevertheless, despite the arrest of Pirmolin and his accomplices by the Belgian police, the events at Liège well demonstrated the impotence of the Rexist leaders in preventing their supporters from taking matters into their own hands. In an article in *Le Pays Réel* denying responsibility for the murders, Matthys raised the possibility of similar actions by other Rexist hotheads commenting :

"Il ne faudrait pas compter sur nous pour désavouer ces garçons. Ils agiraient à l'encontre des instructions et des ordres qu'ils ont reçus, mais pas plus que le Mouvement lui-même, ils ne porteraient la responsabilité réelle des actes meurtriers qu'éventuellement, et à notre plus vif regret d'ailleurs, ils commettraient" <sup>49</sup>.

The real responsibility, Matthys insisted, would lie with those members of the established elite of Belgium who encouraged and protected the Resistance killers



and, if they did not abandon such support, further murderous acts by exasperated Rexistists were inevitable <sup>50</sup>. Thus, principled opposition to violence had in effect been abandoned by the Rexist leaders and the way was henceforth open for the bloody events of 1944.

By the autumn of 1943, the Rexistists had become a beleaguered grouping of social outcasts rejected by their compatriots, subject to the ever more frequent attacks of the Resistance and committed irredeemably to a military cause which was staggering towards defeat. Yet, while elsewhere in Europe many collaborationist groups abandoned all political activity and prepared as best they could for defeat, the Rexistists showed few signs of despair. During much of 1943, as we have seen, despite Degrelle's achievements, many supporters of Rex had been demoralised. But from the autumn onwards there was a considerable upsurge in their morale. The new leaders who had come to the fore confronted the problems facing the movement with determination, all Rexistists drew comfort from the unprecedented successes of Degrelle in his dealings with the German leadership and, despite all of the evidence to the contrary, many Rexistists still believed that the German armies possessed the capacity to defeat their enemies. Thus, throughout this last year of the Occupation, the Rexistists operated in a kind of "looking-glass world" in which black had become white and white had become black. Evident realities were inverted or denied and, deprived of any contact with the majority of the population, the Rexistists became "une confrérie initiatique" which existed, in Matthys' words, "en dehors de la vie réelle" <sup>51</sup>.

During this period, the contacts of Degrelle with his movement became increasingly tenuous. He only infrequently addressed Rexist audiences, met their leaders rarely and devoted himself instead to the *Légion* and the pursuit of his personal ambitions. Thus, in his absence, Matthys, Louis Collard and their

colleagues devised their own strategies for the movement of which they had become the effective guardians. The first priority was to improve morale and in the autumn an energetic internal propaganda campaign was launched intended to restore faith in the Rexist cause. Under the direction of Julien Carlier, its themes were aggressive, millenarian and utterly devoid of any subtlety. Committed to an inherently bankrupt cause, the Rexist propagandists could only resort to vacuous appeals to blind loyalty :

"Que les cowards s'en aillent. Nous ne sommes pas de ces rats qui fuient le navire quand il menace de sombrer"  
"Pas de flottement dans nos rangs ? Personne ne bouge ? En avant donc. Serrons les dents. La route est belle" <sup>52</sup>.

Such exhortations were, however, unlikely to have any effect unless they were accompanied by effective action to counter the Resistance attacks. All hope of the Germans defeating the Resistance had by now disappeared and instead the Rexist leadership devoted itself to devising better means of protecting their supporters. After prolonged discussions with Jungclaus, who as the representative of the SS in Belgium played an important role in police matters, the Rexist leaders were able to announce in November 1943 the creation of their own corps of armed bodyguards, entitled the *Formations B*, who as a uniformed paramilitary grouping were intended to protect all Rexist militants considered to be in danger <sup>53</sup>. Recruitment for this unit started immediately and the initial target of 300 volunteers was soon reached. Training took place at Namur and by the spring of 1944 these men were in place throughout Belgium affording much needed protection for Rexist *bourgmestres*, *chefs de cercles* and other vulnerable militants <sup>54</sup>.

The creation of the *Formations B* consolidated the close relationship between the Rexist leaders and Jungclaus' office. This *rapprochement* clearly owed much to Degrelle's success in winning the support of the German SS

leadership but it was essentially the work of Matthys and Louis Collard who gradually detached Junglaus and his staff from the pro-Flemish and anti-Rexist prejudices still prevalent in SS circles. The benefits for Rex of this alliance were manifold. In addition to substantial financial assistance, the Rexistists possessed for the first time an influential ally among the manifold agencies of the Third Reich. On several occasions in 1944, Junglaus or his deputy Moskopff travelled to Berlin to plead the Rexist cause and within Belgium they offered them what one observer described as their "appui total et inconditionnel" <sup>55</sup>.

Thus, it was in an increasingly optimistic mood that in January 1944 Matthys carried out a further reorganisation of the *Etat-Major* of Rex. The system of departments established in the spring of 1943 had proved too unwieldy and the principal purpose of these further changes was to create a more centralised structure which could meet the needs of a hierarchical and militarised movement. The most important innovation was the creation of a *Secrétariat de l'Etat-Major* headed by Louis Collard which enabled this ambitious figure to exert much more direct control over those areas of the Rexist empire which had hitherto evaded his grasp. All matters of personnel, of contact with the German authorities and, increasingly, of policy were centralised in this office which became the powerhouse of Rex during the last months of the Occupation <sup>56</sup>. The other important change introduced in January 1944 was the creation of an *Inspectorat de la Milice* headed by Joseph Pévenasse. The purpose of this new office was to provide a central command structure for the various Rexist military and paramilitary units. The remaining *Formations de Combat*, the *Formations B*, the *Gardes Wallonnes* and the Walloon units of the NSKK transport corps were all at least partly responsible to this office <sup>57</sup>.

Encouraged by these various initiatives, the Rexist press adopted a bullish, optimistic tone during the first months of 1944. In private, the Rexist

leaders warned their supporters that an Allied invasion on the coast of northern Europe was likely during the coming year <sup>58</sup> but in the press their propagandists welcomed this prospect which, they declared, would mark the final decisive encounter between the forces of reaction and those of the National Socialist revolution. Even the possibility of short-term defeat held no fear for these unconditional allies of Nazi Germany :

"Même si quelques-uns d'entre nous doivent se balancer aux réverbères du boulevard Anspach, les Rexistes ne manquent pas d'enfants qui pourront reprendre leur combat dans cinq, dix ou vingt ans et assurer le triomphe de leur cause" <sup>59</sup>.

The ideology espoused by the movement had by 1944 become little more than a banal repetition of slogans borrowed from the standard repertoire of the German propaganda apparatus. The last vestiges of Rexist distinctiveness as a movement with its own intellectual heritage had all but disappeared. Instead, National Socialism, the SS and a crude elitism had become the alpha and omega of the Rexist creed. The values they worshipped were the nihilistic ones of struggle and destruction and, instead of describing the post-revolutionary society which they were seeking to create, Rexist propagandists merely resorted to panegyrics of the dour, statist institutions of the Third Reich <sup>60</sup>.

The ideological poverty of the movement was, however, of little concern to its supporters. The time had long since passed when the choice of collaboration was determined by intellectual commitment and by 1944 other issues had a much greater claim on the attentions of Rexist militants. Foremost amongst these remained the challenge posed to their security by the Resistance. The deployment of the *Formations B* had done much to prevent assassinations of prominent Rexist officials but many lesser members of the movement remained painfully exposed <sup>61</sup>. In these circumstances, the security precautions they adopted became increasingly elaborate. Some used false names for their gas and

electricity bills, publications such as *Le Pays Réel* were delivered by private couriers and militants were issued with cards specifying that in the event of them being attacked they were to be hospitalised in the German-protected Hôpital Brugmann in Brussels <sup>62</sup>.

The issue of security also absorbed the attention of the Rexist leaders. More arms were distributed to militants and they made fruitless visits to the Belgian Ministry of Justice and to the *Militärverwaltung* to demand more effective police action <sup>63</sup>. But there was little that these authorities could do and, as Matthys recalled after the war, the situation of the Rexistists had become that of a primitive community :

"Nous nous sommes considérés comme une communauté d'hommes sur qui pesait une menace perpétuelle mais qui ne jouissait plus de la protection des organes sociaux habituels. Réduits à un état primitif de légitime défense, cette communauté devait trouver en elle-même sa protection et défendre le droit de ses membres à la vie" <sup>64</sup>.

Thus, the Rexist leadership accepted for the first time the need to respond in kind to the Resistance attacks. On 30 January, the *chef de cercle* of Namur, Gignot, and his wife were murdered in their home by a Resistance unit and in response Charles Lambinon together with three *légionnaires* murdered François Bovesse, a leading Liberal politician and former Governor of the province of Namur <sup>65</sup>. It appears that Lambinon acted without first seeking the approval of Matthys <sup>66</sup> but when informed of the reprisal murder the *Chef de Rex a.i.* had no hesitation in accepting responsibility for it. Thus, at the funeral of Gignot he praised those who had enacted such "prompte et bonne justice" after the murder of the *chef de cercle* <sup>67</sup>.

This first instance of what became a "scientific" counter-terror aimed at those who in Rexist eyes were the patrons of the Resistance terrorists marked a turning-point in the history of the movement. Though the murder of

Bovesse would remain for a number of months an isolated incident, a decisive step had been taken by the Rexist leaders and when in the summer numerous groups of local militants resorted to similar methods they were only adopting a tactic already espoused publicly by their leaders <sup>69</sup>.

A further manifestation of the increasing radicalism of the leadership was the tacit approval which they gave to the activities of Charles Lambinon's DSI. Lambinon always remained a law unto himself shunning his fellow Rexist leaders and preferring to work with the German police and with the group of amateur policemen and freelance killers who he had brought together under his command. In addition to the *Brigade Z* which he directed in Brussels, Lambinon exerted more or less direct control over a number of provincial police brigades - notably at Charleroi, La Louvière and Liège - which had been established by the Rexist *cercles* <sup>69</sup>. The principal obstacle to the further development of the DSI remained the continued opposition of a number of German police agencies - notably the *Sipo-SD* in Brussels - to its activities. In their opinion, the ineffectual and frequently violent actions of the DSI only hampered their own work and it was only after Matthys and Collard had met with the heads of the German police on a number of occasions that in May 1944 Lambinon and his colleagues were eventually granted the right to carry out their own arrests <sup>70</sup>. This expansion in the responsibilities of the DSI was seized upon enthusiastically by Lambinon who already saw himself as the future Himmler of a New Order Belgian state and during the summer the units of the DSI numbering some fifty men were responsible for a considerable number of police operations. Their methods were ineffectual and rudimentary and they frequently used violence to extract confessions from their victims. Thus, though the DSI never became a major element of the German police apparatus within Belgium, its

activities were far from insignificant and the total number of those arrested by its brigades was in the region of 1,500 <sup>71</sup>.

Though they gave their approval to Lambinon's operations, the Rexist leaders always looked on them as largely irrelevant to the broader life of the movement. Contacts between the men of the DSI and the Rexist officials were infrequent and the DSI essentially existed in its own rather murky world. Of much more direct concern to the Rexist leaders were, however, the activities of Joseph Pévenasse's *Inspectorat de la Milice*. Pévenasse threw himself energetically into his new responsibilities and during the first months of 1944 had some success in restoring a semblance of order to the *Gardes Wallonnes* and the NSKK, both of which had become somewhat dissolute and chaotic organisations <sup>72</sup>. However, when Pévenasse turned his attention to the Rexist movement as a whole the difference of outlook which divided him from the other Rexist leaders soon became evident. Since his departure to the Eastern Front in 1942, Pévenasse had become the voice of those radical Rexistists who deplored the hesitations of men like Matthys and demanded total identification with the Nazi cause. Thus, in 1944 he advocated the effective dissolution of Rex and its replacement by a new military-style organisation modelled on the example of the SS <sup>73</sup>. This idea did, however, meet with firm opposition from Matthys and Collard who, while accepting the need to adapt the Rexist movement to the new realities, refused to countenance the integration of all Rexist forces into a militia where effective command would undoubtedly be exercised by Pévenasse and his allies. Instead, they preferred to contemplate the creation of an organisation similar to the Darnand's *Milice* in France which, while providing the necessary military basis for the New Order, operated under the direction of the political leadership <sup>74</sup>.

The tensions between these different visions of the future of Rex were at first prevented from coming to the fore by other matters. Thus, in the early months of 1944, the Rexist leaders were distracted by their concern over the fate of the *légionnaires*. Soon after its return to the front-line in November 1943, the *Légion* became embroiled - largely, it seems, at Degrelle's instigation - in a counter-attack against the Red Army which led to its encirclement. For a number of weeks, it seemed that the *légionnaires* were doomed to annihilation but suddenly in February, news reached Brussels that they had managed to extricate themselves and rejoin the German lines. The cost had, however, been enormous. Of the almost 2,000 men in the *Légion*, 1,100 had died on the field of battle, including its commander, Lucien Lippert <sup>75</sup>.

Amongst the fortunate survivors was Léon Degrelle and he was immediately fêted by a German propaganda machine hungry for war heroes. On 20 February, the *Chef de Rex* was received by Hitler who presented him with the *Ritterkreuz* and he returned in triumph to Brussels in the style of a conquering hero <sup>76</sup>. This spring of 1944 was the finest hour of the Rexist. Despite all of the omens of impending doom, Degrelle had emerged as one of the undisputed heroes of Nazi Europe. On 27 February he addressed a mass rally at the Palais des Sports in Brussels and a few days later travelled to Paris where he addressed an audience at the Palais de Chajlot which included De Brinon, Doriot, Déat and Darnand <sup>77</sup>. Intoxicated by these triumphs, Degrelle and his followers were convinced that they were destined to play a major role in the New European Order which would follow a German victory. The *Chef de Rex* boasted to all he met of how he would soon be the leader of Belgium or even of a Burgundian state which would also include large areas of the Low Countries and of Northern France <sup>78</sup>. This was no more than another of the *Chef de Rex's* many fantasies but in that strange last spring of the Occupation everything



seemed possible and a mood of euphoria overwhelmed all but the most disabused of Rexist. One event above all others symbolised the mood of the moment. This was the march by the surviving troops of the *Légion Wallonie* in full battle order through the streets of the Belgian capital on 1 April. The troops were motorised for the occasion with borrowed armoured material and Degrelle, smiling broadly, rode triumphantly on a tank accompanied by his young children. On the steps of the Bourse, the parade was greeted by the Rexist leadership, together with representatives of the German forces and of French and Flemish collaborationist groups. As one Rexist was reported to have remarked "Cela nous venge de bien de choses". After all of the disappointments of the previous years, it seemed that they could at last enjoy the fruits of success <sup>79</sup>.

During the subsequent months, Degrelle devoted himself to intrigues intended to reinforce his political position within the Nazi world. The *Chef de Rex's* activities at this time were a remarkable combination of extravagant fantasies and hard-headed realism. Into the former category came his attempts to build a basis of support for his ideas in Flanders and France. In both cases, he met with failure : blocked in Flanders by a *Militärverwaltung* which remained immune to his charms and in France by the hostility of the Parisian collaborationist community which, even if certain of its propagandists hailed Degrelle as the man on horseback sent to rescue France in its hour of need, was on the whole unwilling to surrender power to the young Belgian war hero <sup>80</sup>.

But it was the *Légion* which always remained the principal focus of Degrelle's concern. He was convinced that only the military feats of the *Légion* would enable him to win the respect of the German leaders and, at the same time, he recognised that the *Légion* would be essential if he was to hope to seize and hold power in Belgium <sup>81</sup>. Thus, in the spring and summer of 1944, Degrelle devoted much of his energies to the further expansion of the *Légion*. He

toured Germany seeking recruits amongst the many thousands of young Belgian men conscripted for labour in German factories <sup>e2</sup> and, in order to ensure that the German authorities allowed these men to leave the factories for the front-line, he conceived the plan of using the Rexists to draw up lists of men within Belgium who could replace them in the factories of the Reich. This idea was ill-conceived and impractical but it did for once lead Degrelle to intervene in Rexist matters. Matthys who, hitherto, had always been willing to enact all of the orders of his superior on this occasion refused to do so perhaps because he disapproved of the idea of drawing up lists of innocent Belgian men for deportation to Germany or perhaps simply because he recognised that the project was unrealistic <sup>e3</sup>. Whatever the case, Degrelle summoned Collard to his villa outside Brussels and issued strict orders that the names of 10,000 men be collected as rapidly as possible. A number of *cercles* duly set about this work and in May a central *fichier* was established of names which eventually included details of 6,000 to 7,000 individuals <sup>e4</sup>. Because of the Allied advance, these names were never transmitted to the German authorities but the incident nevertheless demonstrated clearly that by 1944 there no longer really existed any limit to the collaboration which the Rexists were willing to countenance.

The last months of the Occupation after the Allied landings in Normandy on 6 June were dominated by an increasingly hysterical and millenarian atmosphere within the Rexist movement. Apparently unable to grasp the reality of what was taking place, the Rexists amazed German observers by welcoming the invasion and by dismissing the reverses suffered by the German forces as no more than a ruse intended to lure more of the Allied armies onto the continent <sup>e5</sup>. As Matthys observed at his trial, this confidence could only appear in retrospect to have been based on blind stupidity <sup>e6</sup> but it was no

more than the logical conclusion of the process of self-deception which had been developing over a number of years. Despite everything, membership of Rex appears to have remained static <sup>e7</sup> and there were no major defections similar to those which had occurred in 1943. The time for rats to leave a sinking ship had long since passed and most Rexists saw no alternative other than to draw still closer to the German authorities.

By the summer of 1944, Rex was becoming a German rather than a Belgian organisation. The *Formations B* and the DSI were little more than offshoots of the German forces and in daily life the Rexists mimicked the habits and customs of the Occupier. They wore his uniforms, accepted his money, and employed both his titles and his language. In private as in public, they sought the company of Germans and even married German women <sup>e8</sup>.

This was the final and most extreme stage of collaboration and the natural corollary of the exclusion of the Rexists from the world of their compatriots. The principal symbol of that exclusion, the armed assaults of the Resistance, continued to escalate during the last months of the Occupation. In June there were 151 attacks on New Order individuals which resulted in 110 deaths and in July there were 286 attacks which resulted in 217 deaths <sup>e9</sup>. These were national figures which included members of all collaborationist groups but Rexists formed a large proportion of the total as they remained the preferred target of many of the patriotic groups. A civil war in effect existed between the Rexists and their opponents and many observers feared that Belgium was about to collapse into a primitive anarchy <sup>e0</sup>. Attacks by the Resistance occurred at all times of the day and night and involved all categories of Rexists including adolescents, women, young children and the parents of *légionnaires*. Engaged in a crude war against a powerful adversary, the

Resistance struck where it could, rarely pausing to establish the individual guilt of the victim <sup>91</sup>.

For the Rexist leaders, all other objectives faded into insignificance as they attempted to find some means of responding to this Resistance onslaught. The *Formations B* were further expanded and hostage lists were compiled of dignitaries who were to be arrested in the event of Resistance attacks. But none of these measures had much impact and the Rexist returned once again to the tactic of "counter-terrorism". On 8 July, Léon Degrelle's brother, a pharmacist, was killed in his home town of Bouillon and in reprisal Matthys sent three Rexist to the town to kill several notables. Fortunately, most of the intended victims had already gone into hiding but they did kill one man before fleeing the town pursued by a German police patrol. When arrested, the Rexist eagerly admitted that they had been sent by Matthys and they were subsequently released <sup>92</sup>.

"Official" instances of Rexist terrorism such as this formed only the tip of the iceberg of Rexist violence during the summer of 1944. In Namur, Charleroi, Mons, the Brabant Wallon and many other localities, groups of militants came together to form their own terrorist groups which owed nothing to central planning. It was in Charleroi that this violence took its most extreme form. Attacks by the Resistance were particularly intense here and in response the Rexist launched almost daily attacks on those whom they regarded as the patrons and accomplices of the Resistance. These murders were frequently the work of violent figures who had joined Rex during the war and had given parts of the movement the character of "un gang américain" <sup>93</sup>. But they were joined by men who had been active in Rex since 1936 and whose mature years and position in society would not lead one to expect that they would become involved in terrorist acts <sup>94</sup>. The Allied advance, the "psychose de terreur"

fostered by the Resistance attacks and the millenarian rhetoric of the Rexist leaders, all came together to create a hysterical atmosphere in which the Rexist struck out blindly at all those unfortunate enough to come within their reach.

This blood lust did not only infect the Rexist *cercles*. The attitude of many in the *Etat-Major* also evolved rapidly towards support for indiscriminate reprisals during the summer of 1944. In particular, Pévenasse as the unofficial leader of a loose coalition of radicals, persistently advocated an end to all restraint. Relations between him and Matthys and Collard had continued to deteriorate during 1944 and at some point in the summer he initiated secret negotiations with Jungclaus with the intention of transforming the *Formations B* into an *Allgemeine SS* which would have been the nucleus of the single SS militia he had long advocated. Unfortunately for him, Matthys learnt of these discussions and he seized the opportunity to dismiss Pévenasse from the *Etat-Major* handing over control of the militias to Collard <sup>95</sup>.

Pévenasse's abrupt departure from the Rexist headquarters left Matthys and Collard in effective control and it was Collard who totally dominated the *Etat-Major* during these months. With the help of an artificial stimulant, he devoted himself entirely to his work cajoling and threatening his subordinates into ever greater efforts as the Allied armies advanced through France. No matter was too trivial to escape his attention and apart from occasional visits to Germany he was rarely absent from the *Etat-Major* <sup>96</sup>.

That the Rexist movement continued to operate right up until the moment of the Liberation clearly owed much to Collard's efforts but it was also the product of the fantasy world which the Rexist leaders had come to inhabit. They existed in effect in a moral and spiritual vacuum where they could pursue their political goals with a single-mindedness which took no account of the

broader realities of their situation. As Matthys recalled after the war, their actions at this time were dominated by :

"l'extraordinaire existence en vase clos que nous avons menée, de cet isolement spirituel. . dans lequel nous avons été confinés. Pendant ces années, je n'ai connu, et je n'ai vu que des hommes qui pensaient, qui jugeaient et qui sentaient comme moi" <sup>97</sup>.

It was also this profound isolation which lay at the root of the bloody violence which would mark these last days of Rexist activity in Belgium. By August, even the Rexistists were becoming aware that an eventual German retreat from Belgium was increasingly probable <sup>98</sup> and it was possible that at that moment they might have chosen to abandon their fruitless struggle. But instead Matthys rallied his troops for one last effort. Addressing a rally on 13 August - only three weeks before the Liberation - the *Chef de Rex a.i.* announced that "nous sommes arrivés à l'heure de l'action révolutionnaire". For too long, the Rexistists had accepted impassively the assaults made upon them but now it was time for a mobilisation of all Rexistists to take the necessary action <sup>99</sup>.

The Belgian population did not have to wait long to discover the consequences of this rhetoric. On 17 August, the Rexist *bourgmestre* of Grand Charleroi, Oswald Englebin was killed, together with his wife and son, in an attack on his heavily protected car at Courcelles on the outskirts of Charleroi <sup>100</sup>. The assassination of such an influential figure so soon after Matthys' speech could not but lead with grim inevitability to bloody Rexist reprisals. But what was to distinguish the subsequent events from other such actions was the direct participation of almost the entire Rexist leadership. As soon as he was informed of the murders, Matthys decided that the Brussels *Etat-Major* would itself - in conjunction with Charleroi militants - take the necessary action <sup>101</sup>. Thus, after a day of frantic activity, a convoy set out from Brussels on the evening of 17 August for Charleroi where the approximately

25 Brussels Rexist - including Matthys, Collard and Lambinon - met with about 100 local militants. During the night, they scoured the town seeking out bourgeois dignitaries who were then taken to the headquarters of the *Formations B* in Charleroi before being transferred to Courcelles where the house nearest to the scene of Englebin's murder had been requisitioned as a temporary prison. There in the early hours of the morning under the personal supervision of Matthys and Collard the 19 victims were shot in cold blood <sup>102</sup>.

Together with those murdered in Rexist actions elsewhere in Charleroi during the same day, the total number of those killed in reprisal for the death of Englebin and his family was 27 making this by far the most horrific of Rexist atrocities <sup>103</sup>. But it was the central role played by the Rexist leaders which made the events at Courcelles so significant. The local Rexist were all too capable of carrying out their own reprisals but, seized by a "folie sanguinaire" <sup>104</sup>, Matthys and his colleagues chose to direct and glory in a terrorist act which was without precedent in the history of modern Belgium. Thus, in many respects, these murders demonstrated the final bankruptcy of the Rexist cause. They had descended from a fringe political organisation to the level of criminal outlaws who could excel only in the black arts of terrorism.

The last days of the Occupation were overshadowed by the events at Courcelles. Despite the Allied advance, Matthys went on holiday to a Rexist hotel at Dinant and it was Collard who supervised Rexist activities at this time, notably the participation of an amalgam of Rexist civilian and military forces in a German-directed anti-Resistance operation at Ciney in rural southern Belgium <sup>105</sup>. The wave of killings continued up until the final moment. When Georges Dubois, a pro-Rexist lawyer, was the victim of an attempted assassination, Collard ordered Lambinon's DSI to arrest a number of leading legal figures. Once again, most of the intended victims were able to flee in

time but one - the *bâtonnier* Braffort - was arrested and murdered in a wood outside Brussels on 22 August 106.

Abruptly at the end of August, the German armies began to withdraw from Belgium accompanied by their local administrative staff. The suddenness of the withdrawal took the Rexists largely by surprise. They had expected the Germans to make a stand in Belgium and, thus, they were suddenly confronted with a stark choice between accompanying the retreating troops or remaining behind to face the revenge which the Resistance and the government in London had long promised. Not surprisingly, most chose the course of least resistance and fled east. The evacuation was appropriately chaotic and undignified. The leaders of the movement were generally able to hitch a lift from the German forces or possessed fuel to use their own cars ; but the majority of Rexists had no such means at their disposal and had to find trains, lorries or even horses with which to make good their escape 107. Not all were so lucky. Some were overtaken by the speed of the Allied advance or were taken prisoner by the Resistance. A few chose to make a last stand firing wildly at the British troops while others took to the hills or tried to lose themselves in the patriotic demonstrations. Most, however, were eventually rounded up and interned. Some were roughly treated but in general the Liberation was more orderly than in much of Europe and the few instances of popular justice were largely the product of spontaneous mob action 108.

Most of the leaders of the movement did, however, escape and, like the remnants of any defeated army, they pillaged as they went. On the eve of their departure, the DSI (operating probably on the orders of Matthys or Collard) robbed a number of jewellers in Brussels and there were many instances of Rexists arriving in their temporary German haven laden down with the profits of similar activities 109. Thus, the manner of their departure symbolised



perfectly the position which the Rexists had acquired within Belgium : they left not as the exponents of a defeated political cause but as the humiliated, detested servants of a departing conqueror.

Footnotes : Chapter Six

- (1) *Informations administratives et politiques* Dec. 1943, pp. 40-44, 'Bilan de fin de l'année' ; *National Socialisme* 15 Apr. 1943, p. 12, 'Ordres et Communiqués' ; EMF of FC Ordres hebdomadaires No. 56-57, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Documentation Générale, Farde A, Doct. 10.
- (2) JS to La Presse de Rex 1 Feb. 1943, JS to Meulenijzer 25 Feb. 1943 and JS to abbé Lannoy 31 Mar. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS [Supplementary File 7, Docts. 11-14 and 7-8] and Info.
- (3) *La Meuse* 7 Aug. 1945, p. 1, 'La détention perpétuelle à José Streel'.
- (4) LC Pro Just., 27 Nov. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 154-155 ; J. Streel Mémoire : à partir de ma rupture avec Rex, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (5) A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers V*, 68-70.
- (6) OKW WFSt, Qu (Verw.) 13 Feb. 1943, C2GM, C 11/124bis, Doct. 3.
- (7) TB 23, 15 Apr. 1943, p. 2945.
- (8) Reeder to OKH 26 Jan. 1943, C2GM, Procès von Falkenhausen, Doct. 117 ; TB 23, 15 Apr. 1943, pp. 2932 and 2942.
- (9) Himmler to Lammers 25 Mar. 1943, C2GM, C 11/124bis, Doct. 7.
- (10) J. De Launay *Histoires secrètes de la Belgique*, p. 234.
- (11) *National Socialisme* 15 Apr. 1943, p. 12, 'Ordres et Communiqués' ; LC Pro Just., 27 Nov. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 154-155.
- (12) *National Socialisme* 15 Apr. 1943, p. 12, 'Ordres et Communiqués' ; VM testimony in Documentation Jans 266 ; Louis Shaw Pro Just., 4 Sept. 1946 in Documentation Jans 377.
- (13) *National Socialisme* 15 Apr. 1943, p. 12, 'Ordres et Communiqués'.
- (14) *Le P.R.* 24 Jan. 1943, p. 6, 'La Camarade Villers lâchement assassinée', 16 Apr. 1943, p. 1, 'Paul Colin est mort' and 21 Apr. 1943, p. 1, 'Le camarade Kempeneers...' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis III*, 117-119.
- (15) Sipo-SD 'Meldungen...' 3/43 15 Feb. 1943, p. 41 and 7/43 15 Apr. 1943, p. 38 ; TB 23 15 Apr. 1943, pp. 2914-2919 ; TB 24, 1 Aug. 1943, p. 3147.
- (16) TB 23, 15 Apr. 1943, p. 2911 ; Von Craushaar to OFKs and FKs 28 Apr. 1943, GRMA T 501 97 473-483.
- (17) *Le P.R.* 1 May 1943, p. 1, 'Suprême hommage à un héros'.
- (18) *Le P.R.* 25 Sept. 1943, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement' ; Chef des CT to militants de base 30 Oct. 1943, C2GM, C 11/221.
- (19) Chef de Groupe 10, Région de Bruxelles to members, C2GM, C 11/323.18 ; IIIe Bannière des FC 'Aux FC défaillants ou portant atteinte à l'honneur de la milice', INBEL No. 0587, 22 Mar. 1943, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/965.
- (20) Circular of Département Politique 30 Mar. 1943, C2GM, Papiers Pierre Daye ; *Le P.R.* 25 May 1943, pp. 1 and 4, 'Commémoration de nos héros'.
- (21) Report of Baumann 6 Apr. 1943, Jungclaus to Berger 12 Apr. 1943, Berger to Himmler 15 and 18 Apr. 1943 and Kaltenbrunner to Berger 23 Apr. 1943, GRMA T 175 131 2650990-2650997.
- (22) A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers V*, 94-98 ; Übersetzung der Aufzeichnung von Herrn Degrelle 24 May 1943, C2GM, BDC III, Doct. 18.
- (23) TB 24, 1 Aug. 1943, pp. 3117-3118 ; Sipo-SD 'Meldungen...' 11/43, 15 June 1943, p. 19.
- (24) Re. *Le Soir*, see note 8. After the death of Colin in April 1943, a supporter of Rex, Paul Herten, became editor of *Le Nouveau Journal*. Other more moderate journalists opposed this appointment and encouraged the efforts of Poulet to return to the newspaper from which he had resigned in January 1943 when his article critical of Degrelle's new views had been rejected by the German censor. After lengthy negotiations, Herten was, however, able to assert his control and his opponents resigned from the newspaper ; P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis III*, 187-189 ; *Journal des Tribunaux* 23 Jan. 1949, pp. 53-57, 'Cour Militaire' ; Sipo-SD 'Meldungen...' 11/43, 15 June 1943, p. 41 ; R. Poulet *Histoire du Nouveau Journal* pp. 51-53 (Private Collection).
- (25) *Le P.R.* 6 June 1943, p. 1, 'Le Chef de Rex a.i. souligne...' ; TB 24, 1 Aug. 1943, p. 3148-3150 ; TB 25, 15 Nov. 1943, pp. 3417-3418 and 3452 ; TB 26, 1 Mar. 1944, pp. 3665-3666 ;

Sipo-SD 'Meldungen...' 11/43, 15 June 1943, p. 31 and 17/43, 15 Sept. 1943, p. 28 ; *National Socialisme* 15 July 1943, p. 12, 'Unification wallonne au sein du NSKK'.

(26) TB 22, 31 Dec. 1942, pp. 2743-2744 ; *Le Soir* 2 July 1942, 'Un cercle wallon à Berlin', cited in C2GM, C 13/13.4 ; *L'Effort Wallon* 28 June 1942, p. 1, 'Nous ne sommes pas des convertis...', 25 Oct. 1942, p. 1, 'Politique en vase clos...' and 6 Dec. 1942, p. 7, 'Le Cercle Wallon au Pays' ; Westbank to F-M Collard 5 Dec. 1942, C2GM, C 13/19.1 ; *La Gazette de Charleroi* 2 Feb. 1943, 'Les buts et l'activité des Cercles Wallons en Belgique', cited in C2GM, C 13/14.3.

(27) *Notre Combat* 30 May 1943, p. 2, 'F-M Collard rejoint la Waffen SS' ; Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 52-53, C2GM ; TB 26, 1 Mar. 1944, p. 3666 ; *Le P.R.*, 4 Mar. 1944, p. 2, 'La Maison Wallonne de Liège'. A Rexist was appointed administrator of the *Maisons Wallonnes* ; Maisons Wallonnes to Westbank 24 Jan. 1944, C2GM, C 13/19.5.

(28) Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 54, C2GM.

(29) LC to Auditeur Militaire Général 30 Apr. 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Enquête Complémentaire, Farde C, Doct. 18 ; *Le Soir* 28 May 1947, p. 5, 'Les Conseils de Guerre de Bruxelles' ; Mémoire aux autorités allemandes p. 54, C2GM, C 11/324 ; Journal de V. Matthys p. 8, C2GM.

(30) Mémoire aux autorités allemandes pp. 16-20, C2GM, C 11/324 ; TB 25, 15 Nov. 1943, p. 3395 ; A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers V*, 161-167.

(31) J. Gérard-Libois and J. Gotovitch *L'an 40*, pp. 468-473 ; 'Historique du Service des Volontaires de Travail pour la Wallonie', C2GM, W 3/50 ; Documentation Jans 24.

(32) Louis Shaw Pro Just., 4 Sept. 1946, Documentation Jans 377. See for example the *curricula vitae* of Salamanis, Delcourt, Shaw, Nolloment and Dubois in Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, C2GM, JB 13.

(33) Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, p. 55, C2GM, JB 13.

(34) VM Pro Just., 29 Nov. 1946, LD to VM 13 Aug. 1944 and Rapport d'expertise médicomentale 27 May 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Docts. 160-161 and 200-204 and Doss. LC, Enquête Complémentaire, Farde H, Doct. 7.

(35) See the cases of Jean Colman, Albert Regnard, Michel Saussez and Carlos Jacques in Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947 and Cour Militaire Pro Justicia 13 Mar. 1947, C2GM, JB 13 and JB 12.

(36) V. Mastny *Russia's Road to Cold War* (New York, 1979), pp. 73-84 ; R. De Becker 'La collaboration...', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* No. 497-498 (1970), 52 ; *Le P.R.*, 1 May 1943, p. 1, 'Premier mai...', 15 May 1943, p. 1, 'Les ailes marchantes de la révolution' and 13 Sept. 1943, p. 1, 'Le Chef de Rex exhorte ses militants'.

(37) TB 25, 15 Nov. 1943, p. 3415 ; Constant to [Pévenasse] 13 Jan. 1944, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Inst., Doct. 31 ; *L'Avenir du Luxembourg* 11 May 1946, p. 1, 'Rexiste notoire'.

(38) *National Socialisme* 15 Apr. 1943, p. 12, 15 Nov. 1943, p. 11 and 15 Dec. 1943, p. 10, 'Ordres et Communiqués' ; Renauld to Chef des Cadres Territoriaux 8 Oct. 1943 and Service administratif et financier des Cercles to Renauld 29 Nov. 1943, C2GM, C 11/321.13 and 221 ; *Le P.R.*, 23 Sept. 1943, p. 3, 'Chronique du Mouvement'.

(39) TB 24, 1 Aug. 1943, p. 3147. The *Sipo-SD* made the same estimate : 'Meldungen...' 8/43 1 May 1943, p. 36.

(40) These figures are based on the population census carried out in 1947. At that time the total population of those areas (Wallonia and Grand Bruxelles) where Rex operated was 3,896,014 ; *Recensement général de la population de l'industrie et du commerce au 31 décembre 1947* (Brussels, 1949) I, 172 and 199.

(41) CH MV 926/43 g. pol. 10 Sept. 1943, C2GM, Procès von Falkenhausen, Doct. 1751 ; TB 25, 15 Nov. 1943, pp. 3384 and 3443. Reeder stated that 51 Rexist militants had been assassinated as well as 29 Flemish and Walloon members of German military units. As it can safely be assumed that some of the latter category were Rexist serving in the German units, the total figure must have been at least 60. See also *Le P.R.*, 5 Sept. 1943, p. 1, 'Deux balles dans la nuque' ; Radiodiffusion Nationale Belge 9 Aug. 1943, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/512.

- (42) P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, pp. 133-134 ; INBEL 1 May 1943 No. 3, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/1087 ; *Vers l'Avenir* 7 Feb. 1947, p. 4, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis III*, 339.
- (43) TB 23, 15 Apr. 1943, pp. 2910-2911.
- (44) Jean Colman to [GFP] 13 Dec. 1942 and Commissaire de Forest Pro Just., 6 Nov. 1944, Aud. Gén., Doss. Jean Colman, Inst., Docts. 56 and 3.
- (45) VM testimony in Documentation Jans 266 ; *Le P.R.* 19 Sept. 1943, p. 6, 'Les funérailles du bourgmestre Paquot'.
- (46) Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 94, C2GM.
- (47) Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 25 Aug. 1945 and undated, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Docts. 64-70 and 71-73 ; *La Meuse* 13 Nov. 1945, pp. 1 and 4, 'La Gestapo de Rex' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis III*, 283 ; SS und Polizeigericht X, Aussenstelle Brüssel to SS Richter 7 Apr. 1944, GRMA T 175 131 2657863-2657865 and 2657868.
- (48) For details of local Rexist involvement, see for example : *La Meuse* 19 Apr. 1945, p. 2, 'Conseil de Guerre' and 25 May 1945, p. 2, 'Le Grand-Liège...' ; *Gazette de Liège* 27-28 May 1945, p. 1, 'Le procès du Grand Liège'. Pirmolin claimed unsuccessfully that he had acted with the authority of the Rexist leadership ; SS und Polizeigericht X, Aussenstelle Brüssel to SS Richter 7 Apr. 1944, GRMA T 175 131 2657864.
- (49) *Le P.R.* 5 Sept. 1943, p. 1, 'Deux balles dans la nuque'.
- (50) *Ibid.*
- (51) VM to Auditeur Militaire Sasserath 18 Feb. 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 285-287.
- (52) *Le P.R.* 5 Nov. 1943, p. 1, 'Cent pour cent ou f...ez le camp' and 9 Nov. 1943, p. 1, 'A prendre ou à laisser'.
- (53) LC to militants 20 Nov. 1943, C2GM, JB 20 ; Pévenasse and Keutgen to FC and Chefs de Cercles 9 Feb. 1944, Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse, Doct. 1003.
- (54) Pierre Pauly Pro Just., 27 June 1945 and Pévenasse to Chefs de Cercles and FC 14 Jan. 1944, Aud. Gén., Doss. Pierre Pauly, Info., Doct. 18 and Doss. LC, Enquête Complémentaire, Farde E, Doct. 42 ; TB 26, 1 Mar. 1944, p. 3664.
- (55) Marcovitz Report No. 3, 11 Feb. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 168-173 ; Rücksprache mit SS-Hauptsturmführer Moskopf 11 May 1944, GRMA T 175 131 2657825 ; Journal de V. Matthys p. 16, C2GM ; A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers VIII*, 123-125.
- (56) LC to Chefs de Cercles 19 Jan. 1944, C2GM, C 11/103 ; LC Ordres d'exécution 10 Feb. 1944, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Pièces à Conviction, Doct. 42.
- (57) LC to Chefs de Cercles 19 Jan. 1944, C2GM, C 11/103 ; Protocole de la réunion du 6 Jan. 1944, Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse, Inst., Doct. 919 II.
- (58) Undated Speech, Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse, Doct. 925.
- (59) *Le P.R.* 29 Feb. 1944, p. 1, 'Nous aurons la victoire...'
- (60) *Le P.R.* 6 Apr. 1944, p. 2, 'Former des cadres...' and 2 May 1944, pp. 1 and 4, 'Les principes socialistes du Mouvement' ; *Informations administratives et politiques* Apr. 1944, pp. 38-42, 'La réunion d'avril 1944' and May 1944, p. 1, 'Rex=Ordre=Socialisme'.
- (61) e.g. *Vers l'Avenir* 18 Nov. 1946, p. 2, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur'.
- (62) Keutgen to Chefs de Cercles 13 Jan. 1944, Région de Bruxelles Ordre du Jour mensuel Mar. 1944 and Form, C2GM, C 11/221, 323, 12 and 289 ; Gérard Delhalle Pro Just., 3 Aug. 1946 and LC Pro Just., 9 Sept. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Docts. 194-198 and 201-202.
- (63) LC to Chef de Cercle of Liège 28 Jan. 1944, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 128 ; TB 26, 1 Mar. 1944, p. 3662 ; Mémoire aux autorités allemandes pp. 80-86, C2GM, C 11/324 ; Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 109-110, C2GM ; *Le Soir* 28 May 1946, p. 3, 'Conseil de Guerre de Charleroi' ; A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers VIII*, 91-92.
- (64) Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 119, C2GM.
- (65) *Le P.R.* 1 Feb. 1944, p. 1, 'Edgard Gignot' ; Jugement Conseil de Guerre de Namur 24 Oct. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Charles Lambinon, Inst., Doct. 150-151 ; *La Meuse* 24 Oct. 1945, p. 1, 'Deux des assassins...' and 25 Oct. 1945, p. 1, 'La mort pour les meurtriers de François Bovesse' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Ooms *La Belgique sous les Nazis IV*, 29-31.

- (66) VM Pro Just., 20 and 21 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Docts. 61-62 and 81 ; *La Meuse* 25 Oct. 1945, p. 1, 'La mort pour les meurtriers de François Bovesse'.
- (67) *Le P.R.* 4 Feb. 1944, p. 1, 'Les funérailles de nos camarades Edgard et Flora Gignot'.
- (68) VM Pro Just., 17 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 52 ; *Le Journal de Charleroi* 29 May 1946, p. 3, 'Le procès des tueurs du 18 août'. See also p. 314.
- (69) Louis Shaw Pro Just., 4 Sept. 1946, Documentation Jans 377.
- (70) *Ibid* ; Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, p. 6, C2GM, JB 13 ; Untitled report of Gieselmann 13 May 1944 and Rücksprache mit SS-Hauptsturmführer Moskopf 11 May 1944, GRMA T 175 131 2657598 and 2657823-2657824 ; Henry Marcovitz Report No. 6 11 Mar. 1946 and Pro Just., 4 Nov. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Docts. 119-121 and 152-153 ; A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers VIII*, 105-106.
- (71) Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, pp. 7-53, C2GM, JB 13 ; Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 25 Aug. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 64-70 ; Bericht über die augenblickliche Lage der DSI 11 Apr. 1944 and Sicherheits und Informations Department 6 May 1944, GRMA T 175 131 2657518 and 2657517.
- (72) Protocoles des réunions du 6 Jan. et 27 Mar. 1944, Wallonische Verbindungsführung beim Stab der NSKK-Gruppe LW to Pévenasse 29 Feb. 1944 and Pévenasse to Kommando Abteilung Z 15 Mar. 1944, Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse, Docts. 919 II and 928 I, II and III.
- (73) Undated speech and Pierre Pauly Pro Just., 29 June 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Joseph Pévenasse, Doct. 925 and Doss. Pierre Pauly, Info., Doct. 18.
- (74) Milice Française, Chef du Département S.I. to Chef du Département Politique 22 Jan. 1944 and VM to Darnand 19 Feb. 1944 cited in Siméon Pro Just., 15 Dec. 1946, C2GM, C 11/293 and JB 20.
- (75) Légion Belge "Wallonie" Historique pp. 39-68, C2GM, W 4 ; J. Erickson *The Road to Berlin*, pp. 176-179 ; *Le P.R.* 15 Feb. 1944, p. 1, 'Après de durs combats'.
- (76) *Le P.R.* 22 Feb. 1944, p. 1, 'Le Chef reçoit des mains du Fuehrer...' and 23 Feb. 1944, p. 1, 'Le Chef est parmi nous' ; Radio Bruxelles 22 Feb. 1944, C2GM, Fonds INBEL/980 ; A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers VII*, 156-157.
- (77) *Le P.R.* 28 Feb. 1944, p. 1, 'Le Chef a rendu hommage...', and pp. 1 and 2, 'Le discours du Chef', 7 Mar. 1944, p. 1, 'Devant plusieurs milliers de Français...' and 'Le discours du Chef' and p. 4, 'Le Chef est l'hôte...' ; TB 26, 1 Mar. 1944, pp. 3628 and 3670 ; TB 27, 10 Apr. 1944, p. 3850.
- (78) P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis IV*, 83-84 ; *Front* Apr. 1944, 'Visages de la guerre' ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*, pp. 320-321.
- (79) *Le P.R.* 2 Apr. 1944, p. 1, 'Bruxelles' and 5 Apr. 1944, p. 2, 'Inoubliable' ; P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *Op. cit.* IV, 72 and 75-78 ; TB 27, 10 Apr. 1944, p. 3854.
- (80) A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers VII*, 163 ; Le Gorlais to Constant 23 Mar. 1944, Aud. Gén., Doss. Albert Constant, Farde A, Doct. 23 ; *Le P.R.* 8 Feb. 1944, p. 1, 'Jean Hérold-Paquis...', 21 Apr. 1944, p. 4, 'Engagements à bureau ouvert ?', 25 Apr. 1944, p. 1, 'Jean Azéma et Jean Hérold-Paquis', 27 Apr. 1944, p. 2, 'Réveil de Bourgogne' and 2 May 1944, p. 3, 'Fêtes rexistes du Travail' ; TB 26, 1 Mar. 1944, p. 3665 ; TB 28, 10 May 1944, p. 3923 ; *La Gazette de Charleroi* 13 Mar. 1944, p. 1, 'Jean Azéma et Jean Hérold-Paquis' ; *L'Assaut* 18 June 1944, p. 3, 'Jean Azéma...'.
- (81) e.g. *L'Effort Wallon* 2 July 1944, p. 2, 'Un autographe de Léon Degrelle' and p. 4, 'Le Commandeur de la SS-Division "Wallonie" parle'.
- (82) TB 28, 10 May 1944, p. 3924 ; TB 29, 10 June 1944, p. 4002 ; TB 30, 10 July 1944, p. 4102 ; *Le P.R.* 27 June 1944, p. 1, 'Le Chef exhalte notre révolution', 30 June 1944, p. 1, 'Le Chef Léon Degrelle...' and 7 July 1944, p. 1, 'De nombreux ouvriers wallons...'.
- (83) Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 76-77, C2GM.
- (84) Secrétaire de l'EM du Chef Ordre d'exécution 13 May 1944, C2GM, C 11/159 ; Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, p. 56, C2GM, JB 13 ; LC Pro Just., 3 Jan. 1947 and Edouard Josselies Pro Just., 4 Feb. 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 234 and Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 261-262 ; P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis IV*, 143-144.

- (85) TB 29, 10 June 1944, p. 3996 ; TB 30, 10 July 1944, pp. 4085-4086 ; Sipo-SD 'Meldungen...' 12/44, 15 June 1944, p. 4 and 13/44, 1 July 1944, pp. 1-3.
- (86) *Le Soir* 5 Mar. 1947, p. 5, 'Le procès des tueurs de Rex'.
- (87) TB 28, 10 May 1944, p. 3924 ; TB 29, 10 June 1944, pp. 3994 and 4002 ; P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, p. 183.
- (88) *Vers l'Avenir* 8 June 1946, p. 2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre de Namur' ; *L'Avenir du Luxembourg* 10 Jan. 1946, p. 1, 'Au Conseil de Guerre' ; *La Meuse* 19 Sept. 1946, p. 2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre'.
- (89) Sipo-SD 'Meldungen...' 14/44, 15 July 1944, p. 5 and 16/44, 15 Aug. 1944, p. 7.
- (90) e.g. P. Struye *L'évolution du sentiment public*, pp. 178-179 and 189.
- (91) *Front* 5 July 1944, 'Pas de pitié pour les traitres' ; *L'Assaut* 14 May 1944, p. 3, 'Du sang...' and 18 June 1944, p. 3, 'Encore du sang' ; *Le P.R.* 14 Mar. 1944, p. 3, 'De lâches assassins...' ; 14 Apr. 1944, p. 3, 'La femme d'un légionnaire...' ; 14 May 1944, p. 1, 'Un légionnaire, sa femme et sa mère...' and 2 June 1944, p. 2, 'Trois habitants de Wasmes...' ; A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers VIII*, 43 and 120-121.
- (92) *Ibid*, 140-141 ; *Le P.R.* 12 July 1944, p. 1, 'Edouard Degrelle...' ; Conseil de Guerre de Namur Exposé des Faits and Pro Justicia 20 July 1948, C2GM, JB 26 ; Heinz Böttcher Pro Just., 11 Apr. 1949, C2GM, Procès von Falkenhausen, Doct. 2256.
- (93) *Le Journal de Charleroi* 7 Feb. 1946, p. 2, 'Les assassins d'Ham sur Heure' ; *Le Soir* 11 Nov. 1947, p. 1, 'Vingt-sept tueurs rexistes...' ; Cour Militaire Pro Justicia 13 Mar. 1947, p. 87, C2GM, JB 12 ; R. De Becker 'La collaboration...', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* No. 497-498 (1970), 39-42.
- (94) *Le Journal de Charleroi* 12 Oct. 1945, p. 1, 'Du bétail pour l'abattoir...' and 1 Feb. 1946, p. 3, 'Le chef tueur sous les verrous' ; Cour Militaire Pro Justicia 13 Mar. 1947, pp. 84 and 87-88, C2GM, JB 12.
- (95) Ordres d'EM 4 Aug. 1944 and LC Pro Just., 18 July 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Enquête Complémentaire, Farde D, Doct. 32 and Farde G ; Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 51-52, C2GM ; Interview with Madame R. Meunier 8 Feb. 1988.
- (96) Fragebogen für Anträge auf Ausstellung eines Sichtwermerkes and Rapport d'expertise médico-mentale 27 May 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 55-64 and Enquête Complémentaire, Farde H, Doct. 7 ; *Le Soir* 8 July 1947, p. 4, 'Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles'.
- (97) Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 83, C2GM.
- (98) e.g. *Le P.R.* 16 Aug. 1944, 'Le discours du Chef a.i.'.
- (99) *Le P.R.* 16 Aug. 1944, pp. 1, 3 and 4, 'Dans le domaine du terrorisme comme dans celui de la politique...' ; Sipo-SD 'Meldungen...' 16/44, 15 Aug. 1944, pp. 31-33.
- (100) *Le P.R.* 18 Aug. 1944, p. 1, 'Un crime qui crie vengeance...'.
- (101) Cour Militaire Pro Justicia 13 Mar. 1947, pp. 84 and 105-106, C2GM, JB 12.
- (102) A. Lemaire *Le crime du 18 août* ; P. Delandsheere and A. Doms *La Belgique sous les Nazis* IV, 237 ; Declaration by Camille Felu, copy dated 14 Mar. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 174-175.
- (103) *Ibid*.
- (104) 'Les mémoires de Pierre Daye', *Dossier du mois* No. 12, p. 35.
- (105) Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, pp. 49-51, C2GM, JB 13 ; Guy Nollomont Pro Just., 6 Jan. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. Charles Lambinon, Inst., Doct. 21-22. See also C2GM, JB 20.
- (106) Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, pp. 13-15, C2GM, JB 13 ; *Journal des Tribunaux* 22 June 1947, pp. 374-376, 'Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles' ; Jean Colman Pro Just., 10 May 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Jean Colman, Inst., Doct. 49 ; *Le Soir* 5 June 1947, p. 5, 'Les Conseils de Guerre'.
- (107) Marcel Simon Pro Just., 3 Jan. 1946 and Charles Nisolle Pro Just., 18-25 June 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 146-147 and Doss. Charles Lambinon, Inst., Doct. 47-56 ; *La Meuse* 30 Oct. 1946, p. 2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre'.
- (108) e.g. *Le Courrier de l'Escaut* 7 Sept. 1944, p. 2, 'Un collaborateur pendu...'.

(109) Conseil de Guerre de Bruxelles Exposé des Faits 3 Mar. 1947, pp. 16-17, C2GM, JB 13 ;  
Sylvain Jadoul Pro Just., 21 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 64-70 ; J. Wynants  
*Verviers libéré*, p. 9.

## CONCLUSION

The thefts and violence of September 1944 provided a suitable conclusion to the history of a movement which had sacrificed its credibility, men and moral scruples to the cause of collaboration with a self-serving and oppressive conqueror. The Belgian people emerged from the four dark years of the Occupation exhausted but, despite the differences which would emerge during the subsequent years, they possessed a reinforced sense of common purpose. It was this fundamental change in the political climate of Belgium which, above all, consigned the Rexists to oblivion. In the uncertain and demoralised atmosphere of the 1930s, Rex had been one of many groups to advocate some form of authoritarianism. But the experiences of the Occupation had destroyed this political fashion replacing it instead with a new consensus based on the values of political liberty, social justice and economic reform. The Rexists, condemned to a sterile exile in the ruins of Germany, were physically and spiritually excluded from this new world and, when many of them did eventually return to Belgium, it was only to face trial, long periods of detention and, in some cases, execution. The Rexist cause itself was dead beyond all hope of resuscitation.

Thus, the history of Rex during the more than four years of German Occupation was that of a categorical failure. This went much deeper than the mere fact of the German defeat. Long before the final surrender, collaboration had been revealed as a bankrupt tactic which the Rexists sustained only by their obstinate blindness to evident realities and the absence of any alternative course. This failure had several facets. It consisted, first of all, of their inability to convince more than a small minority of the population of the legitimacy of their actions. Though there was widespread popular support in 1940 for some form of accommodation with Germany, Degrelle and the Rexists



never succeeded in establishing themselves as the authentic representatives of this opinion. Instead, discredited by their pre-war activities and by the indecent haste with which they sought to capitalise upon the defeat, they were regarded from the outset as unscrupulous opportunists who had betrayed their country for base motives. Unlike the cases of the Flemish Nationalists or of certain pro-German groups elsewhere in Europe, no sense of the possible legitimacy of their stance clouded popular judgements of the Rexists. Thus, they were doomed to remain a small isolated group who, as the confusion of 1940 gave way to the suffering and oppression of the latter war years, were excluded almost totally from the lives of their compatriots.

Only in one perverse respect could Rex be said to have succeeded. This was in its dealings with the German authorities. Shunned in 1940 by the Nazi leaders and the German administrators in Belgium as irrelevant, the Rexists had managed by 1944 to win the confidence of both Himmler and Hitler. At no stage in their bid for European determination did the Nazis develop a coherent master-plan for a German-dominated Europe and, as many disillusioned collaborationists subsequently reflected, the pursuit of short-term expediency took the place of any serious attempt to develop a partnership with the pro-German minorities in Occupied countries<sup>1</sup>. Yet, thanks mainly to the feats of the *Légion Wallonie* and the skilful manoeuvring of Degrelle, Rex was one of the very few pro-German groups in Europe to succeed, against all the odds, in penetrating the jungle of the Third Reich. Thus, though the wild rumours that Degrelle had been designated as the ruler of a Burgundian empire or even as Hitler's heir apparent were entirely without foundation<sup>2</sup>, there can be little doubt that, had Germany managed to snatch an implausible victory from the jaws of defeat in 1944 or 1945, Rex and its young leader would have been granted substantial power in Wallonia, or even within Belgium as a whole.

But this was, of course, an entirely Pyrrhic victory, achieved only at the cost of wilfully disregarding the interests of their compatriots. Indeed, it was in a very real sense a success attained *outside* Belgium on the battlefields of Russia and in the offices of Berlin. On the other hand, the legacy bequeathed by the Rexists within Belgium was one of total failure. This has perhaps been most clearly evident in post-war attitudes towards the movement. Elsewhere in Europe, the passage of time has led to a certain softening in attitudes towards former collaborationists. The initial anger of the post-war years has given way to a grudging acceptance that, however harmful their activities were, some at least were sincere figures who believed in the cause which they espoused. But, although attitudes towards those Flemish Nationalists who supported the Nazis have shown signs of moving in this direction, no such trend has been evident in the case of the Rexists. Popular fascination with Degrelle and his followers continues undiminished but - as with the British obsession with those Cambridge-educated spies who served the Soviet cause - this has not been accompanied by a willingness to accept the legitimacy of their actions. The general consensus remains that they were evil men whose behaviour is to be explained more by their psychological make-up than by their political views.

This irredeemably negative attitude is mirrored in the absence of any recognisable heirs to the Rexist cause. The political history of post-war Belgium has not lacked exponents of anti-democratic ideas. The prolonged controversy provoked by the actions of Léopold III which dominated Belgian political life in the 1940s and early-1950s and the sudden loss of the Congo in 1960 both gave rise to groups opposed to the weakness and mediocrity of the democratic order. But these movements were composed for the most part of former members of right-wing Resistance groups such as the *Armée Secrète* and the *Mouvement National Royaliste* who were strongly critical of Degrelle and the

Rexist for having sabotaged the authoritarian cause through their treasonable wartime actions <sup>3</sup>.

Moreover, the Catholic revolt against liberal democracy which had provided so much of the initial social and intellectual basis of Rexism evaporated after the war. The new generations of Catholic students and intellectuals, influenced by the Resistance and by the horrors committed by the Nazis, embraced the secular and democratic world seeking, through ideologies such as Christian Democracy, to spiritualize it from within rather than to overthrow it from outside <sup>4</sup>. Thus, only the persistence of a certain lower middle class culture in francophone Belgium still provides a distant echo of the spirit and ideas of Rex. Through their hostility to the economic and social trends of the modern era, these small businessmen and professionals have on occasions given their support to movements whose calls for a purification of the political life of Belgium recall the slogans of the Rexist. In the 1950s, the newspaper *Rivarol*, with its attacks on the successor of the pre-war Catholic party, the *Parti Social Chrétien*, and, in more recent times, the *Union Démocratique pour le Respect du Travail* led by Hendrick have both given voice to this political tradition <sup>5</sup>. But, even here, the link with Rex is only very tenuous and the tiny Rexist party led in the 1970s by Debbaudt, a former member of the *Légion Wallonie*, met with no success <sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the affinity between such groups and the pre-war Rexist movement has diminished in recent years. The vogue for neo-liberal ideas and the emergence of anti-immigrant sentiment have in the 1980s created a new political culture on the extreme-right of Belgian politics. Thus, small groups such as *Forces Nouvelles* and figures such as Roger Nols, the demagogic *bourgmestre* of the Brussels suburb of Schaerbeek who at times has seemed keen to assume the mantle of the Belgian Le Pen, both employ a rhetoric which has little in common with the Rexist <sup>7</sup>.

The post-war fate of their cause would not have surprised the Rexists. They were all too aware of its categorical failure and, already during the winter of 1944-1945 in Germany, many had accepted the futility of continuing with their political activities. The *Etat-Major* was re-established under the direction of Collard and Colman and a network of local Rexist groups exerted somewhat dictatorial control over the Walloon exiles <sup>9</sup>. But morale amongst the Rexist community was always low. Their material conditions were far from comfortable and few were inclined to believe German assurances that the Nazi cause would eventually prove victorious. Only in December 1944 was there a brief moment of renewed optimism when the German armies launched their counter-offensive in the Ardennes. Degrelle - accompanied by a small group of *légionnaires* - hastened to join the advancing German forces, declaring that he wanted to be the first to enter "liberated" Brussels <sup>9</sup>. But, although the *Chef de Rex* spent Christmas in a requisitioned chateau in the Belgian Ardennes and was joined soon after by Matthys and Collard at the head of a self-styled *Comité de Libération Wallon*, the German offensive rapidly came to a halt and all hope of a triumphant return to anything more than a small enclave of Belgian territory disappeared <sup>10</sup>. Soon afterwards, the Rexists returned to the Reich where, as demoralised spectators, they observed the final German collapse. Although the *Légion* continued to participate in the last ditch battles against the Russian armies advancing on Berlin, political activity seemed pointless and at a meeting of Degrelle, Matthys and Collard at Beckerode on 30 March, the Rexist movement was officially dissolved <sup>11</sup>.

All thoughts had now turned to escape and, as the American armies advanced through western Germany in the spring of 1945, a number of leading Rexists including Joseph Pévenasse and Charles Lambinon disappeared without trace <sup>12</sup>. Others, such as José Streel who had only very reluctantly joined the

exodus in September 1944, returned clandestinely to Belgium where Streeel was arrested soon afterwards <sup>13</sup>. For their part, Victor Matthys and Louis Collard fled south hoping to enter Switzerland but they were refused entry and travelled instead into the Tyrolean Alps. Matthys was arrested on 31 July when he was discovered living in an Alpine cottage while Collard was taken prisoner in February 1946 in Innsbruck <sup>14</sup>.

As for Degrelle, he left the remaining *légionnaires* at the end of April and fled north through Denmark and Norway - both of which remained under German control - to Oslo where he found a light aeroplane which he used to make good his escape. With five colleagues, he flew over much of liberated Europe before crash-landing on a beach at San Sebastian in Spain <sup>15</sup>. The *Chef de Rex* was at first anything but a welcome guest. Already embarrassed by the presence of Pierre Laval, the Francoist regime was anxious to expel Degrelle but both the British and the Americans refused to accept responsibility for him and all efforts to bring the fugitive to justice soon became bogged down in bilateral negotiations between the Spanish and Belgian governments. In return for handing over Degrelle, the Spanish authorities wished to receive some form of diplomatic recognition from the Belgian government but the Belgian Foreign Minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, refused to allow the fate of Degrelle to become the subject of any "marchandage diplomatique". In August 1946, Degrelle suddenly disappeared from the hospital where he was convalescing from injuries suffered during the crash-landing and, from then on, the Spanish government denied any knowledge of his whereabouts. In fact, the Rexist leader was being protected by influential Spanish friends and he remained in hiding for about ten years before gradually reappearing in public in the later-1950s. The Belgian government still hoped to obtain his extradition but, once he had managed to obtain Spanish nationality, such hopes became unrealistic and in 1983 they

finally announced that, if the *Chef de Rex* ever returned to Belgium, he would simply be expelled at the frontier as an "étranger indésirable" <sup>16</sup>.

Thus, apparently untroubled by the transition to a democratic regime, Degrelle, as the only surviving collaborationist leader, continues to live in some style in southern Spain. He tells somewhat embroidered tales of his adventures and boasts of his intimacy with the Nazi leaders asserting, in the manner of Edith Piaf, that he regrets nothing <sup>17</sup>. The attitude of those Rexists who stood trial in Belgium during the 1940s was, however, very different. Thousands of such trials took place <sup>18</sup> and the mood of the defendants was on the whole sombre. A few did appear in court dressed proudly in their Rexist uniforms while others claimed lunacy or committed suicide but most preferred to present themselves as honest but misguided idealists <sup>19</sup>. Expressions of regret were frequent and, even if many were made in the hope of obtaining a reduced sentence, others do seem to have been sincere <sup>20</sup>. Though they protested at the injustices of the *épuration* which had led to the execution of a number of minor figures while more important collaborators - especially those accused of economic crimes - had not been prosecuted <sup>21</sup>, many Rexists admitted that they had made errors of judgement. For example, Oscar Cus, the one-time *chef de cercle* of La Louvière, declared :

"J'ai servi une cause que je croyais juste. Maintenant, je comprends que le national-socialisme a commis des horreurs et que Rex a failli à sa tâche" <sup>22</sup>.

Many appeared at a loss to explain how they had come to be involved in collaboration. "J'étais intoxiqué" was a phrase frequently used by those who sought to blame their behaviour on the seductive rhetoric of Degrelle and few seemed anxious to attempt any justification of their actions. While not feeling any enthusiasm for the restored democratic political system, they recognised that their own cause was beyond redemption and, according to José Streel, most

collaborationists wished only to recover their place in society and forget the past <sup>23</sup>.

One of those who shared this attitude was Victor Matthys. He accepted full responsibility for the crimes committed in his name and regretted bitterly that the horror of Courcelles enabled the Rexists to be presented as bloodthirsty criminals. Addressing the court in Charleroi which tried him and many other Rexist leaders for their part in the murders at Courcelles, Matthys attempted - not without some dignity - to explain the events which had led to his incarceration. Predictably, he made much of the sincerity of the Rexists. As a movement of idealists, he argued, they had neglected their responsibilities to their fellow citizens, mistakenly believing that only they could save Belgium. Thus, as the war had continued, they had been drawn into their own isolated world and had been unable to recognise the absurdity of their actions. Far from being evil men, the Rexists, he insisted, were for the most part honest Belgians who had fallen victim to "la folle sincérité de nos illusions" <sup>24</sup>.

The military courts established to try those accused of collaboration were unmoved by such arguments. "La trahison n'est pas un idéal" remarked one lawyer <sup>25</sup> and few Rexists were able to convince the courts of their good faith. The justice dispensed during the *épuration* was firm but orderly. There was little of the chaos evident elsewhere in liberated Europe and the *Auditorats Militaires* which prepared the prosecutions of those accused of collaboration did so in a serious, efficient manner. Matters were, of course, much easier than in France where supporters of the Vichy regime could claim with some justification that it had been the legal government. In the case of Belgium, the existence - however fortuitous - of the government-in-exile in London prevented such problems and only those who claimed that they had been acting with the secret approval of the King created difficulties for the courts <sup>26</sup>. Miscarriages of

justice were rare and related more to the harshness of certain sentences than to the establishment of guilt or innocence. Some categories of defendants such as those young men who had fought in Russia tended to be particularly harshly treated, as were those journalists who had espoused the Nazi cause. Their crime was regarded as having been especially heinous and a number of Rexist writers - including Victor Meulenysen and José Streeel - were amongst those executed after the war <sup>27</sup>. But, in the case of the principal Rexist leaders, there could be little doubt as to the appropriate sentence. Matthys and Collard were sentenced to death and, together with 25 other Rexist, they were executed by firing-squad in the early morning of 10 November 1947 in Charleroi. All were shot in the back and their bodies buried in anonymous graves in the *cimetière communal* <sup>28</sup>.

But perhaps the strongest impression left by the post-war trials of collaborators was the insignificance of the phenomenon. As Matthys admitted, collaboration was far from being the central element of the German Occupation of Belgium <sup>29</sup>. Certainly, contrary to what some former collaborators and patriotic writers have asserted, it was not merely a mental aberration but a movement with real social origins. Psychological explanations of collaboration are, thus, insufficient in so far as they fail to take into account its social origins in the economic difficulties of the Belgian lower middle classes and the sense of alienation felt by many young Catholics during the inter-war years.

But it was, for all that, a fringe phenomenon. Extreme events have extreme consequences and the dramatic military events of the war certainly played a part in the emergence of collaboration. But throughout western Europe the period of the Second World War also witnessed a profound social and political revolution which has all too often been disguised by the superficial continuity of democratic structures. And, as at all times of rapid change, there



arose a number of radical fringe groups. The collaborators were, thus, essentially a product of a moment of social crisis. Like the Levellers of the English Revolution, or the extreme Jacobins in Revolutionary France, they were an unrepresentative, marginal group whose very existence nevertheless bears witness to the changes taking place in society.

The temptation for the historian must therefore be to belittle the significance of collaboration. The real social and political history of the war years, in Belgium as in many other areas of Europe, did not consist of the antics of small groups of collaborators or even the heroics of the Resistance. Both were marginal revolts by the powerless while the central institutions of Belgian society - notably, the established politicians, the Catholic Church and the industrial elite - joined neither camp, preferring to concentrate on the essential task of preserving their positions of authority. In 1940, their perception of the military situation caused them to incline towards collaboration while in the latter war years it led them to patronise the Resistance. Thus, just as in the First World War, the established elite had tolerated the presence of the German authorities while retaining contact with the King and the government on the other side of the front line, so from 1940 to 1944 the principal institutions of Belgian life avoided adopting partisan positions which might prejudice their survival. Power always prevailed over sentiment and in this way the events of the German Occupation served essentially as a moment of truth which briefly revealed the underlying sources of power - and impotence - in Belgian society <sup>30</sup>.

There is therefore an evident need for a new kind of history of the Second World War which releases it from the constricting framework of a primitive morality play, in which the glories of the Resistance are endlessly contrasted with the evil of the collaborators. The war was indeed a Manichean

struggle between good and evil but it was many other things as well. The military and diplomatic events of the war have been reconstructed by historians in some detail but the task which remains is to pass beyond narrative into the thematic and analytical studies which will convey the complex political and social character of those years.

But, at least for the foreseeable future, there seems every chance that the pleas of the historian for a more dispassionate, analytical history of the period will go unheeded. The events of the war remain the central historical reference point for much of the European population and no element of that memory is more potent than collaboration. In Belgium, the Rexists may indeed have been a marginal phenomenon, the popular fascination with whom distracts from more important aspects of the history of the war, but they have attained a centrality in the public memory which goes far beyond their slight historical significance. Collaboration - as the very persistence of the term demonstrates - has become in Belgium as elsewhere in Europe an integral element of the spirit of the age. If the mood of the 19th century was one of optimistic common endeavour, the events of the 20th century have revealed the divisions which prejudice the unity of every society. The sense of failed idealism and incipient decline which has hung over so much of the history of post-war Europe has transformed the image of the collaborator into an expression of this general mood of disillusionment. Thus, collaboration has gained a much wider significance which would seem to ensure that, though Rex itself is well and truly dead, the legacy of the movement will remain very much alive.

### Footnotes : Conclusion

- (1) R. De Becker 'La collaboration...', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* No. 497-498 (1970), 64-66 ; J. Streel Note politique sur la répression p. 8, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (2) e.g. A. De Jonghe 'La lutte Himmler-Reeder...', *Cahiers* VII, 170-171.
- (3) R. Van Doorslaer and E. Verhoeyen *L'assassinat de Julien Lahaut* (Antwerp, 1987) ; Anon. 'Nouvelles formes et tendances d'extrême droite en Belgique', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* Nos. 140-142 (1962) ; J. Gérard 'Pourquoi Rex n'a pas vaincu' and P.G. Teichmann 'Ce que je pense de Degrelle et du rexisme', *Dossier du mois* No. 6/7.
- (4) J.C. Willams 'L'Union Démocrate Belge', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* No. 743-744 (1976) ; J-C Ricquier 'Auguste De Schryver', *Revue Générale* June-July 1982, 26-28.
- (5) *Rivarol* 10 Oct. 1953, p. 1, 'A la porte les parlementaires' ; L. Rowies, J. Moden and J. Sloover 'L'UDRT-RAD', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* Nos. 924 and 940-942 (1981), *Rivarol* subsequently moved to Paris and has, of course, become one of the principal organs of French right-wing opinion.
- (6) E. Verhoeyen 'L'extrême droite en Belgique (I)', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* No. 642-643 (1974), 31-33.
- (7) M. Vandemeulebroucke 'Brussels by Nols ?', *La Revue Nouvelle* LXXIX Apr. 1984.
- (8) Untitled account by VM, Paul Garain Pro Just., 26 Apr. 1945 and Emile Delguste Pro Just., 2 June 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Docts. 180-185 and 15-17 and Doss. Jean Colman, Inst., Doct. 9 ; Henry Marcovitz Pro Just., 7 Mar. 1946, C2GM, PF 3 ; H. Philippet *Et mets ta robe de bal*, pp. 212-213.
- (9) Raymond Camby Pro Just., 17 July and 14 Nov. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Docts. 22-36 and 106-110 ; Documentation Jans 126.
- (10) Journal de V. Matthys pp. 18-19, C2GM ; VM Pro Just., 21 Dec. 1946 and LC Pro Just., 3 Jan. 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Doct. 179 and Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 233 ; P. Lévy *Les heures rouges des Ardennes* (Brussels, 1946), pp. 28-29, 46 and 52 ; L. Degrelle *La Campagne de Russie*, pp. 385-400.
- (11) Untitled account by VM, Raymond Camby Pro Just., 17 July 1945 and JS to abbé Lannoy 31 Mar. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Docts. 180-185 and 22-36 and Doss. JS, Info., Doct. 2.
- (12) Sûreté de l'Etat Pro Just., 7 Sept. 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 79 ; Letter of Mathieu 21 Feb. 1986, C2GM, JP 722.
- (13) Police Judiciaire Pro Just., 3 May 1945, Aud. Gén., Doss. JS, Info ; J. Streel Mémoire pour mon défenseur, suite et fin, C2GM, Fonds José Streel ; *Le Soir* 6 Mar. 1948, p. 4, 'Arrestation mouvementée...'
- (14) VM to wife, Note of arrest of VM 31 July 1945 and Sûreté de l'Etat Pro Just., 7 Sept. 1945 and 2 Feb. 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. VM, Info., Docts. 41 and 42 and Doss. LC, Inst., Docts. 79 and 163.
- (15) J. De Launay *Histoires secrètes de la Belgique*, pp. 183-184 ; L. Degrelle *La Campagne de Russie*, pp. 466-498.
- (16) J. De Thier 'Pourquoi l'Espagne de Franco n'a pas livré Degrelle', *Revue Générale* Apr. 1983, 3-26.
- (17) e.g. L. Degrelle *Hitler pour mille ans* ; J-M Charlier *Léon Degrelle*.
- (18) See J. Gilissen 'Etude statistique sur la répression de l'incivisme', *Revue de droit pénal et de criminologie* XXXI (1952), 513-628.
- (19) Police Judiciaire Pro Just., 11 Jan. 1947, Aud. Gén., Doss. LC, Inst., Doct. 252 ; *Vers l'Avenir* 5 Nov. 1946, p. 2, 'Conseil de Guerre de Namur' ; *La Meuse* 2 July and 25 Sept. 1946, p. 2, 'Au Conseil de Guerre'.
- (20) R. Poulet *Ce n'est pas une vie*, p. 172 ; *La Meuse* 10 Feb. 1945, p. 1, 'Audience mouvementée...' ; Jean Denis to Auditeur Militaire Charles 9 June 1946, Aud. Gén., Doss. Jean Denis, Info., Doct. 80.
- (21) R. Poulet *Op. cit.*, pp. 84-85 ; J. Streel Note politique sur la répression, C2GM, Fonds José Streel.
- (22) *Le Journal de Charleroi* 4 Mar. 1947, p. 4, 'Conseil de Guerre de Charleroi'.

- (23) *La Meuse* 21 Sept. 1945, p. 1, 'Conseil de Guerre' ; *L'Avenir du Luxembourg* 27 Feb. 1946, p. 1, 'L'épilogue...' ; R. De Becker 'La collaboration...', *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* No. 497-498 (1970), 45 ; J. Streeel Note politique sur la répression, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel.
- (24) Plaidoyer prononcé par Victor Matthys devant le Conseil de Guerre de Charleroi, C2GM, JP 258 ; Mémoire de V. Matthys pp. 120-125, C2GM.
- (25) *Le Soir* 10 May 1946, p. 2, 'Le Général Chardonne...'.  
 (26) *Le Soir* 25 May 1947, p. 5, 'Cour Militaire' ; R. Poulet Mémoire confidentiel à S.A.R. le Régent (Private Collection).
- (27) J. Streeel Note politique sur la répression, C2GM, Fonds José Streeel ; 'Entretiens avec un homme libre : Marcel Grégoire', *Revue Générale* Nov. 1985, 12-13 ; R. Poulet Prison Diary 8 and 11 Aug. 1946 (Private Collection).
- (28) *Le Soir* 11 Nov. 1947, pp. 1 and 4, 'Vingt-sept tueurs rexistes...'.  
 (29) Mémoire de V. Matthys p. 121, C2GM.
- (30) See R. Van Doorslaer 'Macht en onmacht in bezettingstijd, het geval België', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* CII (1988) No. 4, 610-617.

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