

A book review by Aleister Crowley from the February 1918 edition of The International.

The History of the Belgian People. (The International Historical Society, 171 Madison Avenue, New York.)

In the last two volumes of this admirable historical study is covered the period from the unification of the low countries under Burgundy to modern times. It seems possible that the rule of Burgundy might have afforded the political stability necessary to the country had it not been for the jealousies excited in the neighboring states.

In the fifteenth century, the principle of free cities had really become unworkable. It was necessary for any country which wished to resist the encroachments of less prosperous neighbors to equip itself with proper military defence. The low countries were the head and front of the economic movements of Europe, but the economic movement can never flourish unless there is a reasonable guarantee of peace. When, however, the power of Burgundy was broken at the death of Duke Charles the Rash, it was quite necessary to continue the main political effect of the Burgundian rule by a reliance upon Austria. Yet this dependence was itself unnatural. Under the immense spiritual force of the intellectual movement and the renaissance culminating in the reformation, such vital internal changes took place that nothing short of complete political unity and independence could really have satisfied the needs of the provinces. They, however, found themselves confronted by the relics of the old system of domination and passed into the possession of Spain. Here was a totally unnatural arrangement which was therefore bound to result immediately in every kind of unrest. The situation was rather as if a university were to pass under the arbitrary rule of a totally unenlightened foreigner. After a short

time, as might have been expected, the unrest became open revolt and the real struggle for independence began. Discontent and revolt developed into open revolution under William of Orange, and the unstable equilibrium continued until the collapse of the power of Napoleon. By this time Europe had reached the stage which made the political independence of a purely industrial state possible at least in theory. But until human nature becomes altogether different from what it always has been it will evidently be dangerous for small, rich states without natural frontiers of extraordinary strength. The low countries had in fact only retained any semblance of military independence owing to their power of flooding the country in case of invasion, which is, after all, a somewhat suicidal means of defence. It was, therefore, not to be expected that the new found independence of Belgium would last long in the event of economic distress elsewhere. It was impossible for Germany to feel herself at ease while hemmed in by such trivial obstacles as Denmark, Holland and Belgium. Her method was, however, peaceful penetration. In Holland and Denmark she had comparatively free hand, but in Belgium the French influence was bound to act as a powerful counterpoise. There was consequently a division in Belgium itself between those who favored a close alliance with France and those who preferred Germany. In view of the additional importance conferred upon Belgium by the reign of coal and iron, it is not surprising that Germany should make a point of striking at her who was once the weakest and most wealthy of her neighbors. It is important for the reader to gain the point of view so admirably brought out in these excellent volumes that the catastrophe which has overwhelmed Belgium in the last three years is the natural result of geographical and economical conditions. We may or may not attach blame to any given set of people for their action, but we shall go hopelessly wrong in political judgement if we ever lose sight of the fact that aggressions are as a rule

determined by the facts of nature, not merely by the ambitions of monarchs. — A. C.