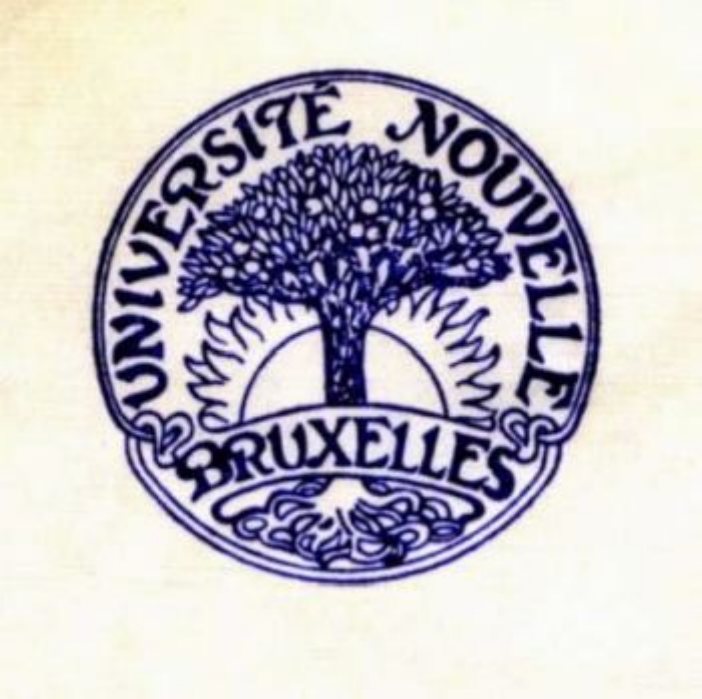
A space to maintain law education in Brussels: the New University



The German invasion in August 1914 was soon followed by the occupation of most of the country. The context of war and occupation was an obstacle to the resumption of classes: many of the professors and students had either fled or joined the military. . In Leuven, the sack of the city, the massacre and the fire of the university library represented major obstacles. In Liège, the ransacking of the university's premises prevented any resumption under "normal" conditions. These circumstances led the four universities of Belgium at the time, the State Universities of Liège and Ghent and the Free Universities of Brussels and Leuven, to close their doors. At the Free University of Brussels, the start of the new academic year, scheduled for October 14, 1914, never came. On October 3, 1914, the board of the university took the decision not to organize

the resumption of classes. Courses were suspended for an indefinite period.

A small institution remained in Brussels, called the New University. This institution, which was the result of a dissidence within the Free University of Brussels in 1894, twenty years earlier, offered doctorates in several disciplines, including law. Built on socialist thought, it stood under the direction of lawyer Guillaume De Greef, one of the founding figures of Belgian sociology, who had abandoned his teaching position at the Free University of Brussels. The New University was located on rented premises on rue de la Concorde, a street perpendicular to Avenue Louise, not far from the Courthouse. Ever since its inception, it had been welcoming many foreign students, mainly from Bulgaria, Romania and Russia. Bulgarian students formed a clear majority, to the point that it was sometimes referred to as the “Bulgarian university”: of the 393 students enrolled in the academic year 1913-1914, no fewer than 328 hailed from Bulgaria. Since the New University was not entitled to issue legal diplomas — giving access to professions organized by law — the number of Belgian students was particularly low. The law school, whose dean Edmond Picard was a key figure in the Brussels judicial world, was therefore mainly comprised of foreign students. But war and occupation, accompanied by the closure of the country’s main universities, were disrupting the situation and making it more attractive.

The resumption of courses was announced as early as September. General secretary of the university Joseph Octors called the professors to arms. Students were registering, but the professors — some of them at least — were not present. Some were not in Belgium, and would not return. Some were expected to return, such as Henri La Fontaine, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize just a few months earlier, in December 1913. But some were in Brussels, and were slow to resume their classes, such as Bön, Sasserath, or Des Cressonnières. The resumption of education in the context of war and occupation was not obvious to everyone. Joseph Octors wrote to Simon Sasserath. Doubtful, Sasserath replied the following: “I confess that I consider the resumption of classes, which can only be partial, a rather pointless attempt.” Des Cressonnières gave a similar answer, musing: “If the university really finds it appropriate to resume classes, I am willing to resume mine (…)”. In his correspondence, the secretary of the University echoes the Committee’s decision: “Despite the circumstances, we felt that there was no reason not to resume the work of the faculties this year.” He communicated the enrollment numbers at the end of

October: “about forty students are ready to take the courses.” Another justification is also relayed: the resumption of courses is necessary to allow Bulgarian students to remain in Belgium. They were only allowed not to return to Bulgaria if they were enrolled in university. The main objective was to “enable foreign students to complete their education”.

But what about the Belgian students? How could the resumption of courses be justified when so many students had been called up for military service and the universities had suspended their courses? The central committee of the New University was convinced of the legitimacy of its mission. In October 1915, what was needed was a continuation of the classes “in order to prevent young men and women from remaining idle.” The university notes that the courses of the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Faculty of Economic and Financial Sciences and the Faculty of Law had been conducted regularly and attended by a large number of Belgian and foreign students. This discourse was accompanied by an element of caution, a much-needed precaution: students would not be allowed to undergo legal examinations. To the students who enrolled, as to the teachers, the message was conveyed clearly: “to us, this is about allowing these students to devote themselves to intellectual pursuits with no other reward that the preservation of the fruit of their higher education.”

The “recruitment pool” of the New University obviously expanded. The share of foreign students decreased, that of Brussels students increased. They came not only from Brussels, but from more distant areas as well. With the closure of the universities of Leuven, Liège and Ghent, the prospect of scholarly activity offered by the New University, even if it did not result in a diploma, attracted those who had not been called up for military service as well as the younger students, who had finalized their secondary education during the years of the war. It was a matter of ensuring intellectual activity for “young men and women”, while preventing too loud an advertisement, a sort of “propaganda” that could be misinterpreted. It was a matter of offering a form of “intellectual service” in a quiet, decent way. The university, through the press, appealed to Belgian students, those who attended the courses the previous year in the institution or elsewhere, in a state university, or in one of the free universities of the country, as well as all students who had recently graduated from high school. Could more be done? At the beginning of July 1916, the secretary of the New University announced his wish to send a letter to the prefects, to the directors of middle and high schools, to the

student circles, whether in Brussels, Liège, Ghent or Leuven. He also intended to address a letter to the aldermen of public education in the city and communes of Greater Brussels. Rector De Greef intervened. To him, it was necessary to avoid “too direct a propaganda that could be misinterpreted.” A memorandum was finally sent to the prefects of the high schools of Brussels, Ixelles, and Saint-Gilles, but also at the Leuven high school, as well as “education classes” for girls and other private institutions.

Although classes resumed, for better or for worse, with some hesitation from part of the faculty, the war and the German occupation imposed a series of constraints on the organization of teaching. Henri La Fontaine, whose absence was deeply felt, did not return and would not return before the end of the war. He had left Belgium for the United States. As for those who were still on Belgian territory, in occupied Belgium, travel had become more difficult, especially for those coming from afar who had to cross areas under reinforced control, “staging areas”. This was the case for Van Bladel, who was asked to resume his course on maritime law in October 1914. Professor Pirard, who taught the course on criminal law, also declined in January 1916. He had to commute from Verviers. It is “not possible (…) to make the journey from Verviers in these difficult times”. The consumption of coal and electricity also represented material constraints. At the beginning of October 1917, Octors wondered whether it would be possible to guarantee the continuation of the teachings. The resumption of courses came, but autumn did too: “unfortunately I think that classes will have to be interrupted, given the difficulty that the university is encountering in obtaining coal”. Until the year 1916-1917, classes could still be given in the evening. But this too changed at the beginning of 1917: “The prohibition to consume more than 20 kwh of electricity will also prevent any evening work”. Some, like Edmond Picard, resisted restrictions, in their own way, with small means. The president of the cassation bar, who went by “Admiral”, used a loaned portable lamp to light up his class. War also disrupted the operation of the library. Some books, loaned to students, could not return to the shelves. Sometimes because the student who had borrowed the missing book was in the military, sometimes because he had left Belgium and returned in haste to his country of origin. The financial difficulties associated with the war eventually led to the closure of the library. Its closure was scheduled for the end of July 1915: “until further notice, only essential work will continue”.

During this time of deprivation, however, the New University took the initiative of offering meals to its foreign students who were left without resources. Starting in the first days of the war, at the beginning of August 1914, a “Student Refectory” was opened. Meals were distributed in the morning and evening. They fed 70 to 75 students per day. These students in need were mainly those Bulgarian students who formed the largest number of students at the New University on the eve of the war. The university also provided them with “cleaning facilities”. This initiative ended a year later, in August 1915. Bulgaria was about to join the war. It joined the Triple Alliance along with Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey a few weeks later, in October 1915. Bulgarian students were called up for military service. A total of 94 were enrolled at the university during the academic year of 1914. Only 13 of them were enrolled at the beginning of the 1915 school year.

The number of Belgian students, on the other hand, has increased significantly, to reach 62. It peaked at 139 students in 1916. Of the 58 students enrolled in law school that year, 32 were Belgian, 16 Russian, 8 Bulgarian, one Turkish, and one Italian. If the increase in the number of Belgian students was significant, what of the professors? Did they need time to reflect, to accept, to digest the situation? Perhaps it was also the continuation of war and occupation, which affected the entire country. Some faculty members eventually retired, not because of the physical barriers they might have encountered, but because of their disagreement over the continuation of the classes. This was the case for Des Cressonnières, who eventually took a clearer position. He wrote to the rector in July 1916. The meeting of the university committee had just taken place, a few days earlier. The majority of its members had voted for the continuation of the classes for the year 1916-1917. Des Cressonnières — who was one of the founders of the university — did not intend to agree with the majority opinion and resigned. He was not alone in this. This was also the case of Max Hallet, also alderman of finance for the city of Brussels, who resigned from the university’s board of directors, “in complete disagreement with [his] colleagues about the reopening of the classes next October”. Sasserath seems more uncertain. He had been giving lectures the entire time. He completed his course in 1914-1915, at any rate. He gave only some classes the following year. But in February 1917, he wrote to the secretary of the university to express his reluctance, claiming not to be “an enthusiastic supporter of the continuation of the classes,”though he”did not want to be uncompromising.” His decision to continue his teachings depended on the students’ attendance. He considered the course as given if there were not enough: “in my first class, I had four students. In the second, I

only had three. Today there was only one.” He concluded that “next year, we will see if there are a number of young people who are interested enough in donations and wills for me to give a full course again.” Did he eventually take a stronger position? In August 1918, on the eve of the resumption of classes, he wrote: “As you know, I am opposed to the resumption of classes as long as the war will last.” He answered to the secretary of the university that he would refrain from giving class. His answer no longer seemed to depend on the number of students who followed him. Some of his positions regard the organization of examinations, which were still organized for foreign students. Henri Frick refused, after tolerating it for those who, at the beginning of the war, had completed their education and had only one trial left. He refused an examination to a Russian student who had enrolled in university after the war began: “if they are students who enrolled during the war with the aim of graduating, I oppose it on the grounds of personal feelings.”

The academic year began again in August 1918, on the eve of the armistice. The New University opened its communication to other towns around and outside of Brussels. A memorandum was sent to the aldermen of the public education of the communes of Brussels, Ixelles, Saint-Gilles, Schaerbeek, Laeken, Molenbeek, Saint-Josse, Forest, Uccle, Anderlecht and Vilvoorde. But now the first weeks of classes were being disrupted by the Armistice. Classes were suspended in November 1918. They resumed a week later, only for a few weeks. Pourparlers began between the central committee of the New University and the board of directors of the Free University of Brussels. The prospect of reconciliation had already been advanced before the conflict, as early as 1908. The New University’s pecuniary difficulties seemed insurmountable. Bulgarian students, who made up the largest share of students enrolled before the war, were not to return. Bulgaria was one of the defeated countries. There was no way to obtain a student visa. The Central Committee of the New University met for the first time since the Armistice on December 28, 1918. It would also be the last time. The Committee decided on the dissolution of the New University. Only an Institute of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences would remain, which was housed within the Free University of Brussels. The philosophical dispute between the two institutions, which led to the split of 1894 twenty-five years earlier, had seemingly disappeared.

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