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### The Belgian Rexist Movement Before the Second World War: Success and Failure

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**The Belgian Rexist Movement before the Second World War:**

**Success and Failure**

Gabriella Newes  
Honors Thesis in History  
Prof. Neil  
April 25, 1987



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## INTRODUCTION

Belgium in the 1930s was no different from the rest of Europe. It was in a crisis -- financial, political, and, as it appeared to some, social. Unemployment reached a peak for the decade in 1934 (with 183,000<sup>1</sup> out of a population of about 8,092,000<sup>2</sup>). Yet in the first half of the 1930s, the government had no working policy for either inflation or unemployment.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the nature of Belgian politics at the time made Parliament ineffectual. Since the First World War, Belgium had been run by the Union Nationale, a coalition of the three strongest parties in the nation, the Catholics, the Socialists, and the Liberals (in the November, 1919 elections, the results in the Parliamentary House were 71 seats, 70 seats, and 34 seats, respectively).<sup>4</sup> Although such a union guaranteed that a plurality of Belgian opinion would be heard, and protected against any one party -- and ideology -- unfairly superseding others, it also made the process of change very slow. For instead of being able to work on proposals for policies, the party representatives spent most of their time concentrating on compromising with each other. Enacting new legislation was a trying process. As a result, it seemed to some Belgians that the government was not doing its job.

The younger generation of Belgians who had just reached the voting age of twenty-one were particularly aggravated by this stale and sluggish political system. Many of them wanted to have a voice in politics beyond their ballot, and were impatient

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Michel Etienne, Le Mouvement rexiste jusqu'en 1940 (Paris, Librairie Armand Colin, 1968), p. 58.

<sup>2</sup>Population figures only available for 1930. B.R. Mitchell, European Historical Statistics: 1750-1970 (New York, Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Inaction on the financial crisis ended in March, 1935, when economist and banker Paul Van Zeeland was appointed Prime Minister and given special powers to rectify the situation through a rigorous program of devaluation.

<sup>4</sup>Roger E. De Smet, René Evalenko, and William Fraeys, Collection de Science Politique: Atlas des Elections Belges 1919-1954 (Brux., Institut de Sociologie Solvay, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1958), p. 14.

to effect change within their country. Some sought out political youth groups, such as the Socialist youth, while others turned to more socially and religiously active groups, such as Catholic action. The Belgian Rexist movement emerged out of the latter.

The future Rexistists were a group of university and secondary school students who wanted to bring moral and religious reform to their nation. The proselytizing aspect of Catholic action appealed to them because it offered them the chance to actively bring reform to society around them, and to immediately measure their results. At the same time, they realized that only through politics, only through entering the political arena could they accomplish the societal reforms they wanted on a grand scale. The history of the Rexist movement is the history of its attempting to bring Catholic activism for moral and religious reform to Belgium through political channels. It is also the history of the Belgian form of fascism. For in the process of its political development, Rex would be swayed by an ideology which was growing fast in all of Europe, and which seemed to offer an answer for some of the other Europeans who were searching for a way to reform their society: fascism. Because of Belgium's historical and geographical situation, and because of the political tensions unfolding in Europe in the 1930s, the evolution of fascism in Rex would be important.

Belgium was a geographical and political crossing. Bordering on three of the most important European powers in the 1930s, it was the keystone of German, French, and English political relations. In the First World War, it was through Belgium that the Germans had entered France. In the eyes of the Belgians and, indeed, of most of the rest of Europe, if a second were to come, the aggressor would undoubtedly again attack through Belgium. If at that time Belgium were more fascist than democratic, if Degrelle had won a parliamentary majority and established a fascist regime in alliance with Hitlerian Germany, democratic France and England would be especially endangered. "Belgium is a frontier country in a double sense," wrote Harold Callender of The New York Times.

She is a bastion on the frontier of democracy and of Western civilization. Hence her part in the struggle between fascism and free government has, like her foreign policy, an importance far greater than her geographical area might suggest.<sup>5</sup>

The development of Rex into a political group would be watched not only from within the nation, but also from without.

Luckily, Belgium's pre-war fascism was only a flirtation, and quickly died out. The failure of Rex to stay alive on its own was due mostly to its own failure to be realistic. Caught in the glories of its first political successes in 1936, Rex never stopped to consider whether, once in politics, it might have to change its tactics. It refused to realize that to keep its supporters it would have to have some concrete results to show them. Having been thoroughly educated in the techniques of propaganda by Mgr. Picard, the leader of Belgian Catholic action, Rex did not see the need to go beyond it. This thesis will be an exploration of Rexist history with the intent to prove that it was Rex's inability to move beyond propaganda which caused its downfall before the war.

In explaining the evolution of the Rexist movement, I have divided its pre-war history into a pre-phase followed by four distinct phases. The pre-phase covers the period before Léon Degrelle, founder of the Rex movement, became head of the Catholic action publishing house, Les Éditions Rex. Once Degrelle became the publishing house editor, Rex entered its first phase. It remained in this phase, developing considerably as a movement to protect the Church, until it became too political for the Church, and was forced to break off its ties with Belgian Catholic action in January, 1934. In its second phase, Rex continued to politicize itself through its press, and still acted to protect the Church, though not through Catholic action, but by influencing the Catholic Party directly. Rex's third phase began decisively on November 2, 1935 with the coup de Courtrai, at which point Rex openly declared itself political for the first time: Rex would no longer try to bring reform to Belgian society by working through

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<sup>5</sup>The New York Times, Mar. 7, 1937, section VIII, p. 13.

the Catholic Party; instead, it would form its own party. Rex's purpose in its third and most important phase was no longer to protect the Church, but to protect Catholic morality in general, and to fight corruption in financial and government circles. In this third phase, Rex launched continual attacks on the three established parties (Catholics, Socialists, and Liberals), and supposedly engaged in traditional politics by becoming a political party represented in Parliament. The fourth and final pre-war phase of Rexist history began with Degrelle's total failure in the 1937 elections and lasted until the German invasion of Belgium on May 10, 1940. During this last phase, Rex would lose almost all of its support and would turn more and more towards Hitlerian and Mussolinian fascism as the only way to regain power -- or so it thought.

In order to preserve continuity, I have divided my chapters less along chronological guidelines than along guidelines of important issues. Chapter one narrates the chronology of the movement to the beginning of phase three. Chapter two discusses Rexist ideology, an understanding of which is necessary to be able to explore the third and fourth phases of the movement, described in the third chapter. Chapter four elaborates on Degrelle's biography, and on his role as a leader, orator, and writer. And chapter five discusses the Rexist press, the most important vehicle of Rexist propaganda and the very basis of Rexistism.

I must add a note on historiography before I begin with my narration. Few historians have written on Rex, and even fewer have done a careful analysis of the importance of Rex. Because Degrelle is still living today and is very willing to be interviewed, most modern works on Rex are long interviews written up in book form. These, however, are frequently inaccurate and disorganized. Although I have tried in this thesis to use a wide variety of sources, I have relied heavily on Jean-Michel Etienne's work, because his is the only comprehensive historical treatment of pre-war Rex which can be completely trusted.

**Chapter One**

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**Chronology: Rex before Parliament**



### L'Avant-Garde and the great Louvain farces

The origins (or pre-phase) of Rex can be traced back to the student newspaper at Louvain university, L'Avant-Garde, and to the group of writers that formed around its chief editor, Léon Degrelle. The student newspaper must have been just like any other newspaper, except that its journalists had a special affinity for joke-making and pranks. These were always rather harmless and the main intent of them was to have fun and to get attention. Indeed, Degrelle's groupies gained a considerable reputation for these farces, some of which are, even today, still remembered.

One graduate told me about how Degrelle and his friends once fooled the entire town of Louvain by dressing up as workmen and pretending to be doing road-work. They managed to set up a road block and to divert traffic away from the major street for an entire day, until they decided that the joke had lasted long enough and that it was time to leave.<sup>1</sup> A more famous prank is the "Procès Dumas."

For several week in 1927, L'Avant-Garde ran a serial entitled "La barbe ensanglantée" and signed "Alexandre Dumas, petit-fils."<sup>2</sup> Wanting to bring some fresh attention to the student newspaper, Degrelle and his friends decided to make use of the story's pseudonym. They fabricated a suit brought against them by the inheritors of Alexandre Dumas for defamation of the great novelist's name. To do this, they drew up a fake letter from the inheritors' lawyer, Henri Torrès -- who happened to be one of Paris' most reknown lawyers -- and printed it in the next issue of L'Avant-Garde. They then found a Belgian lawyer, a M. Cleymans, to represent M. Torrès in court in Louvain. (Cleymans was all too honored to be associated with the great Parisian lawyer's name to investigate the matter fully.) They even convinced a low-level court official (whose

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<sup>1</sup>As told to me by a student of Louvain university who graduated in the 1950s. He is proof that Degrelle stories have indeed gone down in university history.

<sup>2</sup>Jean Ladrière and Robert Pfeiffer, L'Aventure existe (Bruxelles, Pierre de Méyère, ed., 1966), p. 18. These authors date the event in 1932. This, however, is impossible, since Degrelle left L'Avant-Garde already in 1928. Jean-Michel Étienne (see note 3), a most reliable source, gives no date. My date is only a guess, therefore.

name they had literally picked out at random from the phone book!) to deliver a summons notice to the offices of the students paper. What with all the student press coverage and excellent preparation of the L'Avant-Gardists, the suit caused a great sensation. All of Louvain turned out for the trial and the judge deemed the case so important that he postponed judgment for eight days. The great prank had worked even better than expected. In fact, it was becoming a little too real to be safe. The students finally decided to put an end to it and the next issue of L'Avant-Garde revealed the joke. Surprisingly, perhaps, everybody took it in good humor -- even the great Torrès, who wrote a witty response to the paper.<sup>3</sup>

The experience at L'Avant-Garde taught the future Rexistes not only writing and journalistic skills, but also propaganda and attention-getting methods, as well as leadership techniques. The atmosphere must have been like that of a gang: participants in the journalism and in the pranks (which, as in the Dumas case, were often one and the same) were part of a tight group. And this group was lead by a strong leader. Indeed, L'Avant-Garde and its various extra-curricular activities offered Degrelle his first opportunity at real leadership. Within such a small and close-knit community, he was able to develop his rhetoric and tactics without feeling threatened by greater forces. It is nevertheless rather remarkable how much attention he was able to bring to himself and his student friends. L'Avant-Garde was also the fostering ground for Degrelle to gather his future Rexistes de la première heure, the disciples who would follow him and work with him to form the new Rex movement.

Yet while still at L'Avant-Garde, much had to be learned. Pranks and comical articles were not enough to keep a band of youths together for long. They needed direction, guidance. This, they received from the Association Catholique de la Jeunesse

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<sup>3</sup>Ladrière and Pfeiffer, p. 18-21; and Jean-Michel Étienne, Le Mouvement rexiste jusqu'en 1940 (Paris, Librairie Armand Colin, 1968), note 5, p. 11.

Belge and its leader, Monseigneur Picard. It is important, therefore, to take a brief look at this organization and at its philosophies.

### The ACJB and Mgr. Picard: building blocks of the Rexist movement

The actual, formal movement of Rex originated in the Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Belge (ACJB) and drew most of its ideas from what it had learned there. The ACJB was a Catholic action group; that is, it was a Catholic Church organization which existed to spread the word, so to speak. In a Catholic country like Belgium, there was little converting which needed to be done. The ACJB's task, therefore, was more to spread awareness of a Catholic ideology and to bring more people into its fold. It was also an institution for the young, a place where they could meet, discuss and work together for the Catholic cause. Mgr. Louis Picard, head of the ACJB as the Rex movement was forming, defined the institution as a link between ACJBists -- lay apostles of Christ living in the temporal world -- and Church leaders.<sup>4</sup> The ACJB, like other Catholic action groups, wanted a state based on Christian principles.

Elle [l'ACJB] entend exercer une influence sur toute la vie et sur toutes les institutions sociales, sur la famille, sur la profession, sur l'Etat lui-même....Car il y a une conception chrétienne de toutes choses, et de toute activité, et l'Action Catholique ou plus exactement l'Eglise par l'Action Catholique veut travailler de tout son pouvoir à l'application et à la réalisation de cette conception chrétienne.<sup>5</sup>

In his book, La doctrine Catholique de L'Etat, Picard describes in detail what a state governed by a Catholic party would be like. First of all, State and Church are distinctly separated. God created two societies, a temporal one in the State and a spiritual one in the Church, which must remain autonomous. Yet, autonomy does not cancel out collaboration. Indeed, each plays a crucial role in human society. While the State exercises economic and legal control over its citizens, the Church holds full power

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<sup>4</sup>Mgr. Louis Picard, La Doctrine catholique de l'Etat (Louvain, Editions Rex, 1934), p. 127-128.

<sup>5</sup>Picard, p.135

over religious and moral matters. Both must work together to form a political economy and, as they interact, both must respect each other's realm of authority. For a state economy following only economic laws is doomed to liberalism, and one subject only to moral laws is theocratic -- both enemies of a Catholic state. The Catholic State receives its power not from the people but from God himself. Rebellion against society's institutions and leaders, therefore, means rebellion against God. Such a state, then, is authoritarian and must guide and control its citizens, for the science of politics is too complicated for the individual to venture into alone: "La conception catholique de l'Etat implique donc l'autorité incontestable des pouvoirs publics.<sup>6</sup>... L'autorité forte remise en honneur par le fascisme et l'hitlérisme n'est pas en tant que telle opposée à la doctrine catholique."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, not only can the Christian idea of national life and political institutions be realized in democracy and parliamentarianism, but it survives even in authoritarian and dictatorial systems, for it will soften their sometimes harsh actions and deter dangers that they might bring to the nation's citizens. The role of the statesman, then, is to guide and protect the citizens. Guide them in acting for the common good -- and, thus, the supernatural good of the souls -- and protect them from particular individuals and groups (clans, classes, private societies) which might work against the common good. He must unify and stimulate their activities and those of their associations, and he must keep order and security. Above all, the statesman must be free from personal ambitions and interests within the society.

A Catholic state would be tolerant of all religions: "Les catholiques constitués en parti n'ont qu'une ambition: gouverner sagement le pays tout en assurant le respect et la liberté de la religion."<sup>8</sup> Picard's definition of tolerance, however, does not include propaganda. Non-Catholic believers, therefore, may live freely in a Catholic state, but only if they keep quiet about their faith (or non-faith) and don't take any open actions

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<sup>6</sup>Picard, p. 16

<sup>7</sup>Picard, p. 19

<sup>8</sup>Picard, p. 118

to enlarge their following. Such a narrow understanding of tolerance fits in perfectly with Picard's anti-liberal and authoritarian type of state.

In the social field, the Catholic State would enforce traditional types of laws: the religious marriage sacrament would become official; the sanctity of the family and other traditional Catholic mores would be implemented; birth control and divorce -- a sacriligious breaking of the marriage sacrament -- would be forbidden; financial support would be available for parents who wished to send their children to private (i.e. Catholic) schools and for the Catholic schools themselves; and the media would be censored against stepping out of the strictly-laid, Catholic moral grounds. In education, the State must fully collaborate with the Church, for it is the Church which ultimately controls a child's education (the parents are susceptible to Church laws) and a child must be educated in the Christian doctrine. Collaboration here consists of protecting both the family and the Church as they educate the child, as well as protecting the child from unfit parents.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in the realm of economics, besides Church-State collaboration to ensure good economic and moral policy-making, Picard prescribes a corporative State. Cross-class professional associations would act as intermediaries between people and State and ensure a close relationship between the two.<sup>10</sup> On an international scale, nations should work with each other economically -- this, as an expression of "la fraternité humaine que nous enseigne et nous inculque l'Évangilique."<sup>11</sup> Writing in the early '30s, Picard criticizes the present economic organization which, he says, makes work seem as if it is produced only for the producer and not for society as a whole.

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<sup>9</sup>Of course, Picard does not say what the state should do in the event of an unfit priest. Could such a creature even exist? One can assume that, if it did, the state would have to get rid of him also.

<sup>10</sup>Corporatism was not a new invention. It had been around in the dialogues of important religious leaders for several years. Picard notes that Pope Pius XI called corporatism an essential element of social organization "conforme à la nature des choses." Picard, p. 43

<sup>11</sup>Picard, p. 110

Corporatism would return the professional system to a healthy state, where work supported the common good.

This elaborate philosophy was actually not so innovative. Picard essentially outlined a traditional Catholic state which takes responsibility for all aspects of its citizens' lives by controlling both their public and private affairs. It is this type of society that the early Rexist first envisioned. It is out of such a background that they would develop their Rexist ideology.

But if the ACJB organization itself offered a base for the Rexist movement, its leader, Monseigneur Picard, also exercised a lot of influence. Mgr. Picard was residing at Louvain when Degrelle and his future Rexist compatriots were attending the university. The chaplain soon heard about Degrelle's exploits at the L'Avant-Garde student newspaper and engaged him to write for the ACJB's student journal, Cahiers de la Jeunesse Catholique, in 1927. Degrelle became a regular at the ACJB house and beginning in 1928, he and his colleagues of L'Avant-Garde consulted frequently with Mgr. Picard. Picard was a leader for them and someone with experience in leadership. He gave them direction, a cause to work for: the Catholic cause. He taught them publishing skills and modern techniques of propaganda and action; he showed them how crucial it was to win over the masses to one's side in any endeavor for societal change.<sup>12</sup> Finally, in 1928, he convinced them to leave L'Avant-Garde and devote themselves solely to Catholic action.

#### Christus-Rex: the coming together of pastime and ideal

ACJB action had always been based on the press, its own press, called Les Editions Rex because of a cult for the Christ-king which was becoming more and more

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<sup>12</sup>Jacques Saint-Germain, La Bataille de Rex (Paris, \_\_\_\_\_, 1937), p. 67

popular among student in the mid to late '20s.<sup>13</sup> By 1930, however, Mgr. Picard had grander visions for his movement and established a full-scale publishing house for the ACJB. The new institution was located in an ACJB building at 52 rue Vital-Decoster, Louvain, and used the insignia of Christus Rex: three large letters spelling out "Rex," interlaced and attached to a crown whose last point was a cross. (See plate 1) The new Les Éditions Rex was in charge of the propaganda wing of the ACJB and its aim was to:

...répandre dans le pays des publications de nature à faire rayonner le Christ dans les foyers. Le programme était vaste et comprenait non seulement la propagation de la littérature spécifiquement doctrinale, mais aussi de la littérature profane à caractère chrétien ou moralisateur. <sup>14</sup>

In October 1930, Degrelle was appointed its new director, and Rex entered what I have called its first phase.<sup>15</sup>

When he came, he brought with him his tight group of faithful disciples from L'Avant-Garde. To them, working at Les Éditions Rex was a new chance to coordinate hobby -- so to speak -- and ideal. All of them had a passion for imaginative and provocative writing. (The French writer, Saint-Germain, described them as "...la jeune équipe, dont chaque membre cachait au plus profond de lui-même un écrivain ingénieux ou un poète sensible...")<sup>16</sup> They had been able to turn this passion into substance at L'Avant-Garde, yet one can imagine that the atmosphere at the ACJB was

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<sup>13</sup>The celebration of Christ-king was initiated by Pope Pius XI in his "Quas Primas" encyclical of 1925. The last Sunday of October was devoted to all sorts of festivities in the name of the Christ-king. [Usnard Legros, Un Homme, un chef: Léon Degrelle (Bruxelles, Éditions Rex, 1938), p. 107.]

<sup>14</sup>Legros, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup>Étienne, p.14. I have noticed some discrepancies among historians of Rex as to whether or not Degrelle took on the leadership of a newly-established publishing house or simply a renewed one. Étienne claims Rex editions were founded in 1926 and were overhauled in 1930, when Degrelle came in. Hoyois' account, on the other hand, implies that it was only in 1929 that Mgr. Picard decided to found a publishing house, to which, shortly thereafter, he appointed Degrelle. Because Étienne's work is the most recent of the two and has gained considerable repute as a careful piece of research, I shall abide by his dates here, and throughout the thesis.

<sup>16</sup>Saint-Germain, p. 59



quite different from that at the university. They now devoted their attention to much more serious actions which, though they included writing, allowed them neither the freedom of imagination, nor the possibility as before of working tightly together in an autonomous group. Les Editions Rex brought the old gang together again. It gave them a focus. It allowed them to use their old writing and propaganda skills in combination with their strong Catholicism to express a new and developing passion, learned mostly through the guidance of Mgr. Picard at the ACJB: the proliferation of a Christian ideal. For it seemed to them that society around them had fallen into an abyss of immorality which could only be saved if everyone abided by the basic concepts of Christian mores.

Degrelle benefitted from the transfer to Les Editions Rex just as much as his old friends did. In his new leadership position, he too could bring together his enthusiasm for journalism (and for getting people's attention through provocative journalism) and his new-found aim in life, converting the public to Christian morality. In addition, Les Editions Rex finally offered him real leadership opportunity. Granted, as chief editor of L'Avant-Garde he had exercised a certain amount of control over his colleagues, yet because he was a student and because the paper was only one of several student newspapers at the university, the amount of time he could devote to it and the influence he could hold over the Catholic community in general was limited. Now he had an entire publishing house at his disposal and could put into practice what he believed in -- or so he thought.

It is obvious from the development of the editing house in these first few years that his control over the institution was quite firm.<sup>17</sup> It is also obvious, in retrospect, that he used his position to further his personal ambitions of getting involved in politics. Yet it is hard to pinpoint exactly when Degrelle's political aspirations began to take over his Catholic ones. Did he, at first, only want to be a leader of the Catholic

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<sup>17</sup>Because of the importance of the development of the Rexist press, I have decided to accord it a separate section of its own. All future references to the press in this chapter, therefore, will be elaborated upon in the chapter on Rexist press. (See below)



youth movement? Was it only after having tasted the power of leadership at the ACJB that he expanded his sphere of reference -- talked about reaching all Catholics and all Belgians? Perhaps such grand hopes had always been in his mind and the stints at L'Avant-Garde and the ACJB were only conscious stepping stones to something more challenging and glorifying. Anybody who has known Degrelle or has studied him knows of the story of how, when his father asked him what he would like to become when he grew up, fifteen year old Degrelle unhesitatingly answered "Premier Ministre."<sup>18</sup> Of course, such stories may only be stories and one cannot accord them undue significance, yet, true or not, the very fact that it has become part of his story tells us about the impression he gave. By 1930 Degrelle was bent on changing the world; he wanted to be a leader: "Sitôt entré dans la place [Les Éditions Rex], Degrelle décide que 'ça va changer'."<sup>19</sup> From editor of a successful, but nevertheless small student newspaper, he had gone on to become director of the publishing house of one of the Belgian Catholic Church's most important institutions. This certainly was a leap forward and one which brought much power and prestige with it. Was Degrelle looking for this? As director of Les Éditions Rex he could control all literature that issued out of the house. This meant, then, that everything that went out held his approval. With this new and powerful tool in hand, Degrelle's vision of himself as a changer of the world through Catholicism and politics began to take over his vision of himself as changer of the world through Catholicism alone. He wanted to bring attention to himself and to Les Éditions Rex.

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<sup>18</sup>Etienne, p.10

<sup>19</sup>Etienne, p.14

The first chance for this came up when he was assigned to take over the propaganda for the Catholic Party in the November, 1932 legislative elections.<sup>20</sup> The opportunity had come for Degrelle to get his hands into something he had always wanted to do, and it was an opportunity which would bring attention to his excellent propaganda track-record. Thus, he could use the occasion as proof of his skills and as a way of getting himself on the forefront: his name and the name of Les Éditions Rex would be distributed all over the country, as would be his successes. Degrelle was good at his task and his hard work payed off. The Catholic Party carried 38.55% of the vote, up from 35.37% in 1929<sup>21</sup> and gained 3 seats, for a total of 79.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Degrelle's name was no longer unfamiliar within Catholic circles. He was beginning to break out of isolation.

But Degrelle knew that only a varied and exciting press could reach all the Catholic masses and could bring growth in size and importance to Les Éditions Rex. Between Fall, 1932 and Spring, 1933, therefore, he bought out Soirées from the other editors, and launched four new periodicals, Rex, Vlan, Foyer, and Crois.<sup>23</sup> The second of these was purely political and thus marked a first break with the strictly non-political - indeed, anti-political -- attitude that the ACJB and Mgr. Picard had enforced so far. Yet the chaplain had consented to the revue (though with the qualification that it limit itself to Christian discourse on political affairs and never enter into politics, per se), and Degrelle seemed to be getting his way.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Legros, p. 111. Historians differ on whether he was given this task or whether he fought to get it. Legros says that the Catholic Party at first refused to allow Degrelle to take on the propaganda, and that it was only after the youthful leader's insistence that they finally agreed. [Legros, p. 111-112] Étienne, on the other hand, declares that the Catholic Party never hesitated in asking Degrelle to take on the job, particularly in light of his propagandistic successes so far. [Étienne, p. 15]

<sup>21</sup>Roger E. De Smet, René Evalenko, William Fraeys, Collection de Science Politique: Atlas des Elections Belges 1919-1954 (Bruxelles, Institut de Sociologie Solvay, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1958) p. 10.

<sup>22</sup>Legros, p. 111-112.

<sup>23</sup>Étienne, p.15. (See separate chapter on Rexist press, below.)

<sup>24</sup>Étienne, p. 16

### The politization of Rex: a movement emerges

If the publication of Vlan marked the beginning of a self-imposed politization of Les Editions Rex, it also marked the first climax in the development of Rex as a movement -- the second phase of Rex. "Rex devenait donc une sorte de soulèvement des jeunes, soulèvement en général sympathique aux aînés qui suivaient avec intérêt les phases de l'évolution rexiste."<sup>25</sup> Degrelle had already expanded beyond the boundaries set by the ACJB for the publishing house -- the journals, pamphlets and books were geared toward a broader public now -- and,

imbu d'une immense confiance en lui-même, il se tenait pour un être à part et ne cachait pas à ses amis qu'il se sentait appelé à de grandes choses. S'il entendait se livrer à l'apostolat chrétien, toute tutelle d'un comité d'Action catholique ou d'un personnage même des plus sympathiques lui était intolérable.<sup>26</sup>

Degrelle wanted to be his own boss and wanted to enter full swing into political journalism.

Separatism and politization, however, would soon lead to disagreement with the ACJB. For, as Mgr. Picard emphasized in La Doctrine Catholique de l'Etat, Belgian Catholic action was adamant about the separation of religious and political affairs. Tension increased, therefore, as Degrelle led Les Editions Rex into a political press. Money problems also set in, for Degrelle had tried to do too much too fast. The editions' deficit was rising and the secretary general of Belgian Catholic action deemed it prudent to disassociate itself from the publishing house. Luckily, Degrelle was able to collect enough funds to buy Les Editions Rex.<sup>27</sup> Under the agreements made on July 31,

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<sup>25</sup>Legros, p. 116.

<sup>26</sup>Giovanni Hoyois, "Mgr. Picard et Léon Degrelle," in Revue générale belge (Nov. 1959), p.85.

<sup>27</sup>It seems he received most of the money (about 700,000 FB) from his parents-in-law, rich industrialists in northern France. The Lemays would support him frequently in the early development of the movement. [Daye, p. 66; and Étienne, p.84.]

1933, he now leased the building from the ACJB, while continuing to publish for it. As proprietor of Les Editions Rex, Degrelle was able to steer the publications more and more towards the political field. By 1933, "Rex n'était déjà plus un mouvement littéraire."<sup>28</sup> Vlan became overtly political and more and more books on political subjects were published.

Indeed, Mgr. Picard's earlier confidence in Degrelle's good wishes soon dwindled. Degrelle appeared to be leading his "groupies" away from the ACJB:

D'un modeste service d'édition, Rex passait au rang d'un mouvement déclaré... Degrelle soulevait une jeunesse unitaire, en lui infusant une immense ambition: celle de réaliser dans la vie sociale, et d'abord dans l'arène politique, l'idéal spirituel qui avait fait flamboyer des jeunes hommes en masses compactes dans les congrès de l'A.C.J.B.<sup>29</sup>

Degrelle's press had also begun a series of attacks on, first, socialists and freemasons, and, then, actual leaders of the Catholic Party -- starting with the Prime Minister himself, M. Henri Jaspar. The situation was becoming very awkward for Mgr. Picard. Though the Catholic Party was technically not a Church institution, it was still connected with it and supported by it. The fact that the ACJB, an institution of the Church, was closely connected with the very source of this harsh criticism did not bring good light to the organization. In December, 1933, the secretary general of Belgian Catholic action called upon Les Editions Rex to end publication of Vlan, to choose between politics and the support of the secretary general, and to draw up a reasonable and balanced budget.<sup>30</sup> Rex editions' only response was to launch a new attack, this time on the vice-president of the ACJB himself, Helbig de Balzac!<sup>31</sup> This latest scandal proved too much for both the secretary general and Mgr. Picard, and, in late January, 1934, the ACJB officially separated itself from Les Editions Rex. Degrelle

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<sup>28</sup>Legros, p. 116.

<sup>29</sup>Hoyois, p. 85.

<sup>30</sup>Etienne, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup>Etienne, p.21.

remained undaunted by the split, however, especially since his friendship with Mgr. Picard was not affected. (Picard published his book on the Catholic state with Les Editions Rex after the split.) In fact, it seems that the separation was ordered only to enforce the traditional view that Catholic action and political action were truly incompatible. It did not mean a condemnation of Rex editions' activities.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, a most important example of continued politization was the fusion, on March 22, 1934 of Vlan and Rex into a new politico-literary weekly. The new periodical, however, also marked the onset of renewed financial difficulties, for Degrelle saw no limits to the expansion of the publishing house. "Sa confiance en soi était sans limite, et sans limite son ambition. Comme directeur de Rex il déploya une telle mégalomanie et lança un si grand nombre de périodiques...que l'entreprise en arriva au bord de la faillite."<sup>33</sup> Though Rex managed to pay for itself, the other journals operated at great cost to Les Editions Rex. The publishing house was forced to abandon both Foyer and Crois. But Degrelle refused to give up either his cherished political bi-monthly, or his successful Catholic literary revue. So he simply combined them. The fusion of the two was, in fact, a stroke of genius, especially since he managed to convince his readership that he was now offering them one of the pair free -- though at a higher price!<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, the fusion did not solve Rex's severe financial problems. In May, Les Editions Rex was evicted from the ACJB building because it was not paying rent. The editions' total debt constituted 1,500,000 Belgian Francs (FB) in liabilities and about 600,000 in assets.<sup>35</sup> The revenues from publications could never come close to covering this sum. Something had to be done fast. Degrelle at first founded a Fonds de combat and sent out pleas for money through his press.<sup>36</sup> (Such pleas appeared continually

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<sup>32</sup>Etienne, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup>Stengers, p.27.

<sup>34</sup>Etienne, p.22.

<sup>35</sup>Etienne, p.23.

<sup>36</sup>Etienne, p.22.

throughout Rexist press history.) Yet voluntary donations would never be enough. So he decided to replace Les Éditions Rex by a Nouvelle société la presse de Rex which took on the old asset debts, to a sum total of 1,100,000 FB. With the help of his shrewd lawyer, M. Dubois-Clavier, he was able to convince all of Rex editions' creditors to accept immediate payment of 40% of the debt (thus preventing property seizure), and the Prémontrés d'Averbode, Rex editions' printer, to collect their part in shares of the new Presses de Rex.<sup>37</sup> Luckily for the Presses de Rex, the condition for such a deal was that the Prémontrés would have a say in the internal affairs of the new société. They placed their representatives in the administrative council of the Presses, and forced a realistic budget upon them. As a result, and because of the increased profits from the weekly Rex, Les Presses de Rex was put back in the black.<sup>38</sup>

Started on a new career, so to speak, Degrelle accelerated his political activities. Since 1933, he had begun making speeches to small gatherings of supporters.<sup>39</sup> The frequency and propagandistic quality of these increased quickly after the break from the ACJB, though they did not go unnoticed by the Church. The Charleroi case is exemplary. In late summer, 1934, Degrelle began planning for a great gathering of Rexist forces to take place at Charleroi on October 21. The event would gather some 5000 to 7000 Catholic youths in a sort of press conference, where Degrelle would set out his goals for the movement. He had already begun a great propaganda campaign for the meeting in September. October 21 would be memorable as a "journée de propagande, journée de conquêtes, journée de rayonnement et journée triomphale pour REX..."<sup>40</sup> Advertisements in Rex asked Rexist to spend their time at Charleroi distributing

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<sup>37</sup>Étienne, p.22-23.

<sup>38</sup>Étienne, p.23. Rex-Vlan had meanwhile become simply Rex, though it remained a politico-literary revue.

<sup>39</sup>Étienne, p.23.

<sup>40</sup>"Charleroi est mort. Vive Charleroi!" in Rex, no. 40, Oct. 12, 1934, p.16.

100,000 copies of Rex in order to "éclairer et reconforter les catholiques" after the break with the ACJB.<sup>41</sup> (See also Plate 2)

La bataille de Charleroi  
Le 21 Octobre  
tous nos lecteurs, tous nos amis  
se feront apôtres, militants et propagandistes de REX  
(instructions à la page 16)  
100.000          REPANDEZ REX          100.000<sup>42</sup>  
                         FAITES LIRE REX

The day was guaranteed to be a sensational affair. Brought to Charleroi station on special trains, the participants would be accompanied by march music as they processed "en un ordre impeccable" toward the church where mass was to be held.<sup>43</sup> After the service, they would be lead to the tent for the great banquet:

L'ordre le plus énergique sera assuré par cinq cents commissaires rexistes responsables chacun de dix congressistes. Même répartition à table. Un homme de confiance sera placé tous les dix sièges et aura la charge de la tenue, du service et de l'enthousiasme [sic]./... Le banquet sera extrêmement pittoresque. Jass [sic], musiques entraînantes alternent avec des discours enflammés, courts et ordonnés. Vers quatre heures et demie, Léon Degrelle monté sur une tribune de plusieurs mètres de hauteur, au milieu des drapeaux éclatants, haranguera l'immense foule à la lueur des phares.<sup>44</sup>

Sensing the danger of such an event, however, the bishop of Tournai, Mgr. Rasneur, did not authorize the mass. Degrelle's reaction was clever. Instead of denouncing the bishop's declaration and going on with the event as planned, he cancelled the whole thing and proclaimed October 21 a day of prayer for Rex.

Nous sommes ici-bas pour servir le catholicisme. Pour servir utilement il faut obéir. Les évêques sont nos maîtres et nos guides. Nous avançons dans le sens qu'ils nous indiquent, sans discuter, comme des soldats..../ Leurs arguments nous ont convaincus. Nous

<sup>41</sup>"Charleroi est mort. Vive Charleroi!" in Rex, no. 40, Oct. 12, 1934, p.16.

<sup>42</sup>Rex, no.40, Oct. 12, 1934, p. 24.

<sup>43</sup>Soirées, Sept. 28, 1934, as quoted in Etienne, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup>Reading this description, one can understand why Hoyois calls the event "un banquet tintamarresque, avec exhibition spectaculaire de sa personne, à la manière des parades de Mussolini et d'Hitler." (p. 86) I shall discuss the possible influences of both these leaders on the Rexist movement in a later chapter.



nous sommes rendus avec joie à leurs avis et à leurs désirs.<sup>45</sup>

From then on, he continued in the same article, Rexist press would be oriented towards Catholic action and would broach political subjects only if they had religious relevance. Degrelle certainly was a cunning politician, even if he hadn't officially entered politics yet. The ACJB and the Belgian Catholic action were quickly appeased and Degrelle could go on in his activities unhampered.

Though a failure, the Charleroi meeting is an interesting preview of Rex to come. The group of Catholic youths who were part of Les Presses de Rex now formed only the core of a much larger band of adherents. Beginning with the split from the ACJB, the publishing house had transformed itself into a regular movement, calling itself simply Rex. Degrelle had naturally taken on the leadership of the movement, as he had that of the publishing house, since he was its founder. As director of movement and publishing house, he did all he could to enlarge the support of both these institutions, i.e. he embarked on wave after wave of imaginative propaganda that drew more and more Rexist into the fold.

After the appeasement at Charleroi had settled a bit, Degrelle quickly started up his various scandal attacks again. Between November and December, 1934, Rex devoted many of its pages to attacking a certain M. Moreau. Moreau was an ex-abbot who had consented to giving a series of eighty lectures in support of the Socialist Party at various of its "maisons du peuple."<sup>46</sup> In the process, however, he was attacking the good name of the Church. Degrelle took it upon himself to rectify the situation. He set out on the track of the ex-abbot and, at each of the meetings, waited for an opportune moment to openly denounce Moreau. The tactic worked. Within a short time, the ex-abbot was forced to abandon his speaking tour. The Rexist leader of course used the occasion to proclaim himself single protector of the Church and to point out the

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<sup>45</sup>Léon Degrelle, "Au Service de l'Église," Rex, no. 40, Oct. 12, 1934, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup>Etienne, p. 26



repeated failure of the Catholic Party to take a stance on Church issues. In fact, after the Moreau affair, his attacks on the Party became more frequent, culminating in the famous coup de Courtrai.

On November 2, 1935, the conservative branch of the Union Catholique, the Fédération des Cercles catholiques, led by M. Paul Segers, minister of state, held a meeting at Courtrai. On the eve of the reunion, and without previous warning, Degrelle sent out telegrams to all local Rexist groups and ordered them to come to the meeting, bringing with them some bread and a blanket, "pour une aventure que leur plairait."<sup>47</sup> Duly obeying their leader, about three hundred young Rexist arrived, quietly and unrecognized infiltrated the hall at Courtrai and waited for a signal from Degrelle. Some time into the meeting, a voice shouted out from the back "Degrelle à la Tribune," and was echoed by several hundred other voices.<sup>48</sup> M. Segers and other Catholic Party leaders could not prevent Degrelle from speaking to the audience and, after one or two more speeches, ceded him the stand. As soon as he had reached the platform, Degrelle started into a tirade of accusations against Segers and his Party, while his supporters unveiled their Rexist insignia, blocked the entrances to the hall so that no one could leave and loudly applauded the Rexist leader. The meeting ended in chaos, though the Rexist troops nevertheless managed to escape arrest.<sup>49</sup> Degrelle had fully succeeded in getting the country's attention, and in the weeks that followed, the people eagerly read about scandal after scandal that the now admittedly political movement unfolded.

Courtrai more than made up for the failure at Charleroi. Whereas Rex had worked according to Party lines before November 2, 1935, Courtrai marked a new period for the movement: what I have called the third phase of Rex. Rex would now act upon the Catholic Party to change it: "La lutte allait se faire contre lui [the Party], et il lui

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<sup>47</sup>Legros, p. 123-4.

<sup>48</sup>Ladrière and Pfeiffer, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup>I use the word "troops" figuratively, here. There were no military forces in pre-war Rex.

faudrait se soumettre ou se démettre."<sup>50</sup> The Catholic Party, Degrelle cried out at the meeting, was not only corrupt, but also disunified and characterized by a vacuum of leadership. Under his directorship, the Catholic youth of Belgium would rejuvenate the Party and would return it to its former respectability.<sup>51</sup> The coup de Courtrai was indeed a coup. It launched the Rex movement into a decidedly political career and onto the forefront of the public scene. It also provoked a further (though, as we shall see, not as yet a final) condemnation from the Church authorities. On November 20, 1935, the cardinal of Malines, Mgr. Van Roey, defied all Catholic priests from taking part in Rexist meetings of any sort, asks that Rex no longer be sold at church entrances, and called upon teachers to keep students away from any Rexist activities.<sup>52</sup> As before, Degrelle took no heed of the declaration, for he had decided to enter politics no matter what anybody said. On May 24, 1936, legislative elections were to be held. He planned to form a political party before then and to, thus, perform another coup that would finally give him full control over his country -- though within all legal outlines, of course.

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<sup>50</sup>Saint-Germain, p. 95.

<sup>51</sup>Saint-Germain, p. 92.

<sup>52</sup>Legros, p. 130. Legros gives Nov. 28 as the date, while Étienne gives Nov. 20. As before, I shall abide by the latter's statistics as more reliable.

**Chapter two**

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**Rexist Ideology**

By Winter, 1935, then, Rex had become an official political movement. But what was it saying to its supporters? What utopian promises was it making? Like any other serious movement, Rex had an ideology and treatises to explicate this ideology. Although it did change over time, these changes were only minor, and Rex's rhetoric remained basically the same during the pre-war period.

### Rex defined by Rex:

Rex saw itself very much as part of a historical continuum. It was meant to come about because its historical precedents and its historical context made its formation inevitable. Belgium had sunk into a mire of vice, of greed, selfishness, and corruption. If nothing was done fast, the country would break apart into a myriad of enemy factions or, worse, would fall into the hands of the Communists, emblems of all evil.<sup>1</sup> But a few like-minded young people had realized the desperateness of the situation and had spontaneously come together to save their people and country. "Les promoteurs de Rex se sont rassemblés spontanément parce qu'ayant reçu une formation identique et vivant dans un même monde ils se trouvaient d'accord sur l'essentiel et pouvaient, à travers Rex, exprimer leurs identiques revendications primordiales."<sup>2</sup>

Rex defined itself as a revolution against the forces which were pulling Belgium down.<sup>3</sup> From its earliest stages, when still connected with the ACJB, Rex opposed itself to the established political and religious institutions of Belgium. It was determined to be something new -- though it glorified the past and took its cues from history for its

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<sup>1</sup>Degrelle, preface to Denis, Bases doctrinales de Rex, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Streel, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>"Nous nous rendons parfaitement compte qu'il s'agit là d'une révolution COMPLETE," wrote Degrelle, when describing Rex's aims. ["Rex monte à Bruxelles," in Rex, Mr. 22, 1935, p. 32.]

changes for the future --<sup>4</sup> something which would reverse the pattern of immorality that was taking over Belgium. Rex's revolution was first and foremost a social one, for it was believed that politics and economics were subservient to the social laws of society. What was needed was a return to morality, and to Christian morality in particular. This could not come about through simple changes in institutions: the whole mentality of the country had to be reformed. The treatises of Rexist philosophers always began by defining Rex before they devised a detailed program of the proposed Rexist state, because philosophy was more important to them than program.<sup>5</sup> Rex was a movement and the Rexist revolution was a revolution of youth, of unity, and of soul. Rex's revolution was sentimental (appealing to the people's sentimentality about their family, their community, their country), spiritual, mystical and, above all, moral.

#### Rex as a movement:

Rex saw itself as flexible, as adapting to whatever circumstances befell it. When the philosopher of Rex, José Streeel,<sup>6</sup> wrote "REX n'est pas une faction, ni un parti, ni un groupement d'intérêts, ni une secte philosophique. C'est un mouvement," he was using the word in both its senses: movement as social motion and movement as physical motion and change over time. For, unlike traditional parties and sects, which were

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<sup>4</sup>See, for instance, Rex. Renaissance de la Patrie (Brux., Rex Editions, 1940), a photographic essay about the movement. It is divided into three parts: the first section romanticizes Belgium's history, her heroism, her courage in the face of invasion, her magnificent art; the second section documents contemporary Belgium, filled with poverty, misery, and loss of hope; the final part pictures Rexist and Rexist leaders assembled at numerous meetings, with smiles on their faces again and clean clothes on their backs, as in the good old days. Rex has obviously changed the world for them, as it will for the rest of Belgium.

<sup>5</sup>For this chapter, I have especially used as references: Léon Degrelle, Révolutions des âmes (Paris, Les Éditions de France, 1938), and Le Message de Rex (Brux., Rex Editions, 1936); Jean Denis, Bases doctrinales de Rex (Brux., Rex Editions, 1936), Principes rexistes (Brux., Rex Editions, 1936), and La Ligne générale (Brux., Rex Editions, [1935-37?]); José Streeel, Positions rexistes (Brux., Rex Editions, 1935).

<sup>6</sup>See biographical note on Streeel, below, in chapter of Rexist press.

only "stérile parce que c'est immobile,"<sup>7</sup> Rex was constantly evolving and always active. "Rex est... surtout action," Streeel continued.<sup>8</sup> A good Rexist, therefore, was not only deeply religious and a believer in the Catholic creed and the holiness of the Eucharist, but he was also an enlightener, a saviour, a militant and audacious apostle of his faith.<sup>9</sup> He was totally devoted to the collective whole of the movement, for real devotion to Rex meant repudiation of the "I" in oneself for the "we" in the movement.<sup>10</sup> "REX a appris à des centaines, des milliers d'hommes à ne plus vivre pour eux, mais POUR UN IDEAL COLLECTIF, à consentir pour lui, à l'avance, tous les sacrifices, toutes les humiliations, tous les héroïsmes."<sup>11</sup> Devotion entailed utter and total obedience to the leaders of the movement. "Autorité et obéissance, organisation méthodique, travail incessant, dévouement total, si c'est cela que vous voulez, venez à REX" cried Degrelle.<sup>12</sup>

#### Rex movement of the young:

Rex's youthfulness cut across all generational lines. No matter how old individual members were, the movement-itself was still characterized by youth, by "son rythme, ... son allégresse qui éclate dans toute son action, même aux moments les plus douloureux, ... cette faim de vivre, ... ce goût de l'action, ... ce désir de transformations profondes qui exige un détachement du monde dans lequel on vit."<sup>13</sup>

#### Rex movement of unity:

Though based in the Catholic religion, Rex claimed to ignore religious boundaries, as it did those of class and culture. Rex wanted a unified country which

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<sup>7</sup> José Streeel, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> José Streeel, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Josse Alzin, prêtre, "Le Rexiste," in Rex, Jan. 4, 1935, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Degrelle, Le Message de Rex, p. 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Degrelle, Le Message de Rex, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Degrelle, "Rex monte à Bruxelles," in Rex, Mr. 22, 1935, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Streeel, p. 17.

would include all equally, whether believers or non-believers, workers, peasants, or of the middle-class, Flemish, Walloon, or German.

### "Révolution des âmes:"

Unity was to be achieved by viewing every being and every thing in its essence, in its âme. Rex believed that a return to a belief in âme, would bring back to the Belgians a faith in themselves as a people, in Belgium as a fatherland, and in life altogether. Since everything had âme, everything was important and Rex revelled in every detail of life: in love and marriage, motherhood and childhood, death and birth, country and city, town and cathedral.

By appealing to the root of human beings -- their soul -- Rex would unite all people in peace. Rex's revolution would bring out the "âmes" in the people, for this had been lost to them.

Là, est la vraie révolution: apporter un peu de lumière dans ces esprits, le redressement dans ces âmes; moins douter de soi; dompter l'imparfait; se relever vers le meilleur, et vers le beau, et vers les autres; respirer enfin son âme.<sup>14</sup>

Rex's revolution was spiritual and mystical, then. The soul was a cure-all and an inner force which led one through all trials. The soul was an inner force which would enable all kinds of feats of courage.

L'essentiel est d'avoir, au fond de son coeur, une grande force qui réchauffe et qui pousse en avant, qui renoue les nerfs déliés, qui fait battre à grands coups le sang las, qui met dans les yeux pesants de sommeil, le feu qui brûle et qui conquiert.... Alors, plus rien ne coûte, la douleur même devient une joie, car elle est un moyen de plus d'élever son don, de purifier son sacrifice.<sup>15</sup>

### The Rexist state:

<sup>14</sup>Degrelle, Révolution des âmes, ([Paris ?], Les Éditions de France, 1938), p. 155.

<sup>15</sup>Degrelle, Révolution des âmes, p. 6.

Rex negates the concept of the individual and replaces it by that of la personne humaine. The human persons which make up Rexist society are organized into three natural communities, the community of the family, the community of work, and the community of the nation. These are hierarchically superimposed one upon another, each being an outgrowth of the former. Within this framework, the role of the Rexist state is to supervise, to "diriger, surveiller, stimuler, contenir" these communities.<sup>16</sup> Most of the actual planning and organizing is left to organizations within each profession.<sup>17</sup>

#### The community of the family:

The family in a Rexist society is a being itself, with an ame and rights of its own. Children are the defining element of a family -- a married couple without children is more of an intrigue against the State's well-being than anything else, as is divorce, which, at any rate, is illegal -- and the State must recognize that the ideal family is a large family, and must promote its growth through rigorous propaganda campaigns and favorable laws. (Rexist philosophers do not consider infertility or medical problems which might prevent child-bearing, and do not discuss adoption.) The State, for instance, should make sure that every family has a house of its own, with a reasonably-sized yard for children to play in, and a large kitchen-living room to enable the middle-class mother who cannot afford a maid to watch her children while she cooks.<sup>18</sup> The State should also make sure that a father's salary be proportional to how many children he had. And a family vote must be established so that every parent

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<sup>16</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 121.

<sup>17</sup>I shall elaborate on these in my discussion of Rexist corporatism, below.

<sup>18</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 198-200. Denis does not specify who should fund the building, nor does he take into account, as he criticizes cramped apartment buildings, that Belgium is one of the most populated countries in Europe yet also one of the smallest, and that a great part of her land is productive farmland. Where is the space for all these single family, garden-surrounded houses to come from?



of a famille nombreuse (four or more children) receives an extra voice. Since having children is the primary duty of a husband and wife towards the society, contraceptive products are, of course, illegal in a Rexist state. Furthermore, the woman who undergoes an abortion deserves capital punishment, for, not only has she murdered a human being, but she has also committed a crime against the society of which she is a member (by depleting it of a citizen and by committing an immoral -- and therefore detrimental to the common good -- act).

In a Rexist society, the State's main purpose is to maintain morality, for morality is what ensures the pure existence of la personne humaine. Since the family is the root of all other communities, and since its morality is the basis of societal morality, it is the family which defines the duties and laws of society as a whole. The State's main purpose, therefore, is to protect the family against the evils of society, evils which are found in the street, in publicity, pornography, entertainment, prostitution, and even in the work place.

A child's innocence must be protected from anything that is odious in any way, whether it be a turned over garbage can or nudity in publicity or film.<sup>19</sup> In fact, anything sexually explicit should not be allowed, for the morality of society is at stake. To eradicate pornography, the worst kind of sexual explicitness, the State must collaborate with the professional organizations of those specific spheres which dispense the evil. Book and magazine sellers must decide what makes pornography on paper (this being very simple, since "tout homme normal s'en rend très bien compte"), and the State must seize all outlawed works and punish all recidivists.<sup>20</sup> In the film industry, a State controlling commission made up of experts from the field must oversee censorship, but recognized cinematographic organizations must be in actual charge of

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<sup>19</sup>Cleaning up the streets of garbage and offensive publicity should be the job of La Ligue des Familles Nombreuses, since it is children who are most in danger of corruption from these evils. [Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 116].

<sup>20</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 121.

what to allow and what not to allow -- following the guidelines of pornography, films with admission limited to those eighteen and over, and family films (for all ages).

Prostitution, a danger to the morality of all of society, cannot be directly eliminated. However, since it results from male-female inequality and a loss of female dignity, it can be attacked indirectly. Male privileges in regards to sexual offenses must be taken away, and a woman must be supported by law in her complaints of sexual abuse of any kind. In addition, the eradication of pornography in all spheres of the public voice would eliminate a dangerous hindrance to a woman's sense of self-respect. Lastly, every effort should be made to reinforce the family, which is the initiator of all morality, and to provide some kind familial atmosphere for homeless girls.<sup>21</sup> In the work place, too, a woman's dignity must be protected -- this, by strict separation of sexes wherever possible. Female and male workers' changing facilities must be at opposite ends and in totally disconnected parts of the building. If men and women must work together, women's dress must follow strict rules of modesty, a separate entrance and staircase must be provided for them, and the common work area must be open to the critical gazes of passers-by.<sup>22</sup>

#### The Rexist woman:

In its contract with society, the Rexist state's primary function is to protect the weak: women and children.<sup>23</sup> Thus, though Rexist rhetoric makes man and woman equal, this, to us, is an old-fashioned type of equality. The Rexist woman is deified as queen-mother of the household, while the Rexist man is her chivalrous guardian. Nevertheless, the Rexist woman has some surprising privileges. Not only is she respected before the law, but she has the right to vote. "Si on conserve le suffrage

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<sup>21</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 144-45. Denis is not specific about what what sort of replacement for the family should be provided.

<sup>22</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 148.

<sup>23</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 147.

universel, nous voulons que la mère ait une voix comme le père, parce que nous voulons témoigner notre respect à la mère. C'est la mère qui sauvera le pays."<sup>24</sup> She does not, however, have the right to run for political office (at least not for national office),<sup>25</sup> because neither does she have the physical strength or courage to withstand the treacherous in-fighting that goes on in Parliament, nor does she have the material possibilities of knowing the needs of all different kinds of constituents.<sup>26</sup> "Oui, je l'affirme, une part active ne peut être prise par les filles d'Eve, sans entamer fortement leur personnalité, leur coeur et même leur devoir."<sup>27</sup> A woman's duty is to her children and to her family. Thus, though limited work opportunities for women do exist -- "ouvrière, employée, vendeuse," if unskilled, other jobs, if more skilled,<sup>28</sup> once she is pregnant, a woman must leave her job immediately.<sup>29</sup> This will cause her no financial burden, since her husband's salary begins to rise after the third child is born. (Money for the raises comes from reductions in salaries of bachelors and childless couples.)<sup>30</sup>

Though restrained in her emotions (she must have "un visage calme et souriant" and must never show her troubles),<sup>31</sup> and though always concerned about

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<sup>24</sup>Degrelle, speech at Courtrai, Nov. 2, 1935, as quoted by Legros, p. 126-27.

<sup>25</sup>Rex did seem to allow women to enter politics on a local level, at times. See, for instance, the local newspaper *Rex-Ixelles* which lists Jeanne Brasseur, a middle-aged widow and tavern-owner, as a candidate for the 1938 elections. Perhaps the fact that she was a widow made her candidacy acceptable, since she probably had grown children and, therefore, fewer family obligations. [*Rex-Ixelles*, Oct., 1938, p. 2].

<sup>26</sup>Annie Loicq, "Les femmes et la politique," in *Rex*, Dec. 14, 1934, p. 18. Loicq does not specify what these possibilities are that women lack and, presumably, men possess. In addition, she speaks of different classes of constituents, when Rex is negating the very idea of classes.

<sup>27</sup>Annie Loicq, "Les femmes et la politique," in *Rex*, Dec. 14, 1934, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup>"La femme et le foyer," in *Le Pays réel*, Jan. 8, 1939, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup>Female supervisors are installed in every factory in a Rexist state. They act as a liaison between management and female workers, and keep close tabs on the health of their female workers, especially watching for pregnancies. [Jeanne Tournier, "La famille, la femme... et l'enfant [sic]: surintendante d'usines," in *Rex*, Ju. 4, 1937, p. 28].

<sup>30</sup>Denis, p. 98.

<sup>31</sup>"De simples gestes... qui vous feront aimer [sic]," in *Le Pays réel*, Jan. 15, 1939, p. 6.

propriety, the Rexist woman is feminine. The fact that she had to dress modestly in the work place does not mean that she should not wear flattering clothes. As advertisements in the Rexist women's magazine, Votre Bonheur,<sup>32</sup> and in the special sections for women in Rexist newspapers -- "La femme et le foyer" in Le Pays réel, for instance -- prove, clothes exist which can be feminine yet practical, which allow a woman to bathe her child in the morning and look presentable in town in the afternoon.<sup>33</sup>

The Rexist woman's femininity, then, is maternal, and her true calling is motherhood, for, after all, "quatre à six maternités sont indispensables à une femme normale pour éviter certains désordres [!]"<sup>34</sup> Consequently, her true place is in the home. Yet within the domestic sphere she has quite a lot of power. She is "gardienne du foyer," teacher of Catholic morality to the young, and, since children will bring their values with them to the society as they become adults, preserver of societal morality.<sup>35</sup> Her vote, therefore, is a vote for the family; it is to make sure that representatives get elected to Parliament who will enact pro-family legislation. Likewise, while the husband ultimately controls the family's finances, the wife controls all daily household expenditures. And were the husband to be absent from the family or to die, the wife would take over his familial duties; that is, she would gain ultimate control over all the funds of the community of the family, and would act as representative for the family whenever necessary.<sup>36</sup>

Such is the community of the family. At final view, except for the unusual aspect of female suffrage, it is basically a traditional Catholic family. Female

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<sup>32</sup>As advertized in the "La femme et le foyer" section of Le Pays réel, Ap. 2, 1939, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup>Rexist press carried drawings and fashion notes on these easy-to-make dresses, along with all sorts of articles on tips for personal care, child upbringing, and cooking for the family.

<sup>34</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 206. One wonders where he got his medical information!

<sup>35</sup>Annis Loicq, "Les femmes et la politique," in Rex, Dec. 14, 1934, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 193.

deification as protectress of the family and of morality and the focus on children was nothing new in the Catholic world. Equal but separate spheres for men and women was a phenomenon which, if beginning to fade in the early twentieth century, was certainly prevalent in the nineteenth century. Its use by the movement is one example of Rex turning to history for its plans for the future. Rex might have called itself a revolution, but this revolution was more retrograde than new.

The community of work and corporatism:

If the community of the family is the innermost ring of the three-ringed Rexist society, the community of work defines the middle ring. "L'entreprise est la cellule économique comme la famille est cellule sociale."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, if the family is the domain of the woman, the work place is that of the man, since this is where he spends most of his time. Although within the entreprise workers each have their own tasks -- métiers -- they are united in producing "la même œuvre."<sup>38</sup> And just as the family has a life and rights of its own, so the community of work has boundaries and privileges which must be maintained and protected by the State. Because the State is really only a supervisor, a liaison for negotiations with the work world must exist. In the community of work, corporative organizations take on this function.

Rex defines corporatism as "tout simplement une doctrine recherchant une organisation économique nouvelle dans laquelle, contrairement à ce qui se passe dans le libéralisme, le capital sera subordonné au travail."<sup>39</sup> As extensions of the already existing pre-corporatist "organisations professionnelles de toute espèce,"<sup>40</sup> (a concept which enforces Rex's theory that it evolved as part of a historical continuum)

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<sup>37</sup>Streel, Positions rexistes, p. 26.

<sup>38</sup>Streel, Positions rexistes, p. 27.

<sup>39</sup>Saint-Germain, p. 208. The author refers here to hypercapitalisme, or financial capitalism, inherent, apparently, in liberalism, and which puts money (an abstract concept) before work (the product of des personnes humaines).

<sup>40</sup>Streel, p. 29. Streel does not specify which organizations.

corporative corporations<sup>41</sup> will reestablish "la hiérarchie sociale... la dignité et... la responsabilité personnelle."<sup>42</sup> They will bring order and solidarity to industry without hindering personal liberties. For, in a corporatist system, while organization ensures that what is produced is for the social good, each worker can still work for his own immediate benefit. Corporatism thus combines "fonction sociale" and "personnalisme."<sup>43</sup> Corporations perform another public function by acting as qualification judges. They only bestow the title of practitioner of a métier (as opposed to unskilled work) on those who are worthy of it, thus saving society from inept professionals, and only on native Belgians, thus removing the threat of take-over by foreigners.<sup>44</sup> In addition, they make sure that preparation for entering a profession is thorough, by demanding lengthy apprenticeships and "stages" in the specific field of work.<sup>45</sup>

Corporative professional organizations, as self-contained communities, are highly structured. Local sections are represented by larger and larger groups in a hierarchy of sub-groups. Though initiated after the elections of 1936, Rex's Confédération Agricole Rexiste (C.A.R.) will serve as a good example of this hierarchy.<sup>46</sup>

Rex's aim in establishing such an agricultural organization, as defined by Amand Gérardin already before the elections, was fourfold.<sup>47</sup> Rex wanted, first, to help farmers become proprietors by providing low-interest loans payable over an extended period of time, and by exempting buyers of small properties and farmers with loans

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<sup>41</sup>These are not to be confused with business corporations.

<sup>42</sup>Denis, La Ligne générale, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup>Denis, La Ligne générale, p. 38.

<sup>44</sup>Denis, La Ligne générale, p. 73.

<sup>45</sup>Denis, La Ligne générale, p. 73.

<sup>46</sup>The example is taken from the "Statuts de la confédération agricole rexiste" published in Rex, Oct. 23, 1936, p. 22.

<sup>47</sup>"Il faut sauver l'agriculture," in Rex, Jan. 31, 1936, p. 13.

from having to pay certain taxes. Second, Rex wanted to protect its farmers against foreign competitors and big trusts by encouraging higher local production through the use of modern materials and methods (these to be made available, again, through credit). Third, all of these services must be controlled and implemented by a corporative organization. And finally, the savings of farmers must be protected by a "régime répressif," i.e. one which will make it an offense to exact unnecessary taxes from the peasantry. These were the aims. Since Rex never came fully to power, it is impossible to know whether they would have been effective. But since the movement didn't seem to concern itself much with that side of things, it went full steam ahead and formed its agricultural corporation.

C.A.R.'s hierarchy consists of a Section Centrale, a Conseil Supérieur, several Section d'Arrondissement, and many Section Cantonale, each with its own leaders and functions. Degrelle chooses the directors of the Section Centrale and approves the nomination of lower officials. The Section Centrale acts as a liaison with other Rexist organizations, specifically the Confédération rexiste du travail (formed on July 19, 1936)<sup>48</sup> and the Front populaire of Rex (the organization in charge of movement propaganda; see below, chapter on Rexist press and propaganda), as well as with the Belgian Parliament in general, for which it must research various agricultural issues and present relevant legislation. Within the agricultural corporation, it collects all dues, controls the treasuries of all C.A.R. sub-groups, and creates and organizes all the services offered to C.A.R. members. It edits its own agricultural newspaper and keeps tabs on pertinent articles in other Rexist newspapers. It also publishes agricultural and recreational journals for its members, and organizes educational congresses when needed.

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<sup>48</sup>The Confédération was set up as a general organization to protect workers' rights, improve the intellectual, moral, and social standards of worker populations, and to imbue workers with a sense of solidarity as they work for the general good. [Saint-Germain, p. 172].



Seven of the directors of the Section Centrale are chosen by that body and approved by Degrelle to form the Conseil Supérieur. They are Rexist Parliamentarians expert in agricultural matters and meet once a month to discuss topics selected by the Section Centrale, though they too may make suggestions. The council is a consultant organization within the corporation. It does the leg-work for research needed to be done by the Section Centrale, examines and makes suggestions on proposed agricultural reforms, and acts as a mediator between different agricultural interests.

The third body, the Section d'Arrondissement, is the equivalent of the Section Centrale at a lower level. It is made up of representatives of all the cantons within the arrondissement. Its leaders are chosen by all representatives and are approved by the director of the arrondissement council (his own nomination approved by Degrelle) and by the Section Centrale. They meet on their own once a month and make reports to their superiors once every three months. They conduct research on local agricultural problems and suggest appropriate reforms to the Section Centrale.

Finally, under them fall the Section Cantonale from all over the country. Every Rexist farmer is a member of his Section Cantonale. The body appoints a President, one or two Vice-Presidents, a treasurer, and a secretary, all of whom are first approved by both the Section d'Arrondissement director and the Section Centrale. These leaders meet every two weeks, while the entire body must only come together once a year. The committee's functions are those of the arrondissement on a smaller scale. In addition, members must recruit other members, propagate Rexist press and thought, and encourage use of Rexist services. They must also organize themselves into recreational and sport groups for entertainment. Though subject to the Section d'Arrondissement, they may appeal directly to the Section Centrale with problems.

Corporative organizations, then, group together workers and leaders of one profession. They are hierarchically structured and geographically decentralized, although individual farmers may appeal directly to the corporative directors. (One can



imagine, however, that he would be sent back to his local committee before his concerns would be acted upon.) Their functions are social within the movement, and political outside of the movement. They create a self-contained community for their member farmers, and act as their representatives before the nation's Parliament and Executive. In the context of political checks and balances, they are a check on Executive authority.

The community of the nation:

Corporative bodies are a crucial part of the overall structure of the nation. They are one of three systems which make up the State, Parliament and the Executive being the other two. Rexist society is, as defined by Rex, liberal-authoritarian. It takes the element of order -- consented to by the people because it is for the common good -- from dictatorship, but continues to allow for individual initiative, as in a liberal society.<sup>49</sup> Control doesn't mean nationalization: "L'Etat doit même contrôler la famille et chaque personne en particulier, mais il ne doit pas les nationaliser."<sup>50</sup> This, especially, in light of the fact that nationalization is a Socialist and Communist concept and, as such, completely antithetical to Rex. (Of course, there is an awfully fine line between control for the common good and control for the sake of control. Rexist philosophy is vague enough to avoid commenting on this danger.)

The only person who seems to be able to walk the tight-rope between dictatorship and "good" control is a king, for a king is the representative of all the

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<sup>49</sup>Saint-Germain, p. 209.

<sup>50</sup>Denis, La Ligne générale, p. 91.

people, an emblem of an entire nation and, therefore, of unity.<sup>51</sup> The contract between king and people is a natural one, founded on patriotism and mutual love.

Le Roi c'est l'élément d'unité, de continuité splendide. Celui qui dans les moments difficiles, quand une décision d'importance doit être prise, peut et doit poser à son peuple la question de confiance sous forme de question d'attachement et d'amour.<sup>52</sup>

Monarchical power emanates from the people, for "la puissance appartient au peuple et le pouvoir appartient au Roi."<sup>53</sup> The king can take large liberties in his actions and is in fact responsible for harsh punishment when necessary, but he is not all-powerful and is not in direct control of every function of the State. With the advice of private industrial corporations, he appoints various corporative councils to represent the community of work before the State. (Note that since the king in a Rexist society chooses the corporative councils, the very bodies which will counter his power, he must always be benevolent and must never harbor wishes of personal aggrandisement -- a very utopian and rare situation.) The king also chooses ministers to advise him on different political issues. These career politicians (as opposed to specialists in the area of a department who have little or no political experience) must have an affinity for good behaviour and for exemplary composure: "le ministre doit être un homme qui physiquement en impose à son entourage."<sup>54</sup> Though balanced out by the corporative councils, the king and his ministers nevertheless sit above them in the hierarchy of the State. One of the most important powers of the king and his ministers is to decide which questions are beyond the competence of corporative councils and must be resolved by referendum. (Referendum is also, of course, a way of giving voice to the

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<sup>51</sup>Rex's monarchism came from Charles Maurras and his Action française movement. Though Maurras himself was condemned by the Church in 1926, his theories continued to strongly influence many Belgian students after that date, including those who later formed Rex. The exact relationship between Action française and Rexist ideology is unfortunately beyond the limitations of this thesis, and would be a fascinating topic for a later article.

<sup>52</sup>J. Carlier, "Vers la réforme de l'Etat," in Rex, Aug. 21, 1936, p. 14.

<sup>53</sup>Denis, Bases doctrinale de Rex, p. 29.

<sup>54</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 55-56.

whole population at once.) Neither the king, nor his ministers, nor even Parliament, however, initiate legislation: it is the corporative councils at the State level (those appointed by the king) which draw up the laws.

In following with Rexist emphasis on hierarchy, legislation becomes official only after having ascended through many levels of selection. Proposals for legislation are submitted to the councils by the corporative association of the profession concerned. The corporative councils then screen the proposals and prepare first drafts of laws. Their version is in turn passed on up to a Conseil d'Etat, "... sorte de commission juridique supérieure; chargé de la toilette juridique du projet et de sa coordination avec la législation existante."<sup>55</sup> Only once it has been successfully subjected to the scrutiny of this committee can a proposed law be ratified by Parliament and implemented by the appropriate ministry.

The Parliament in a Rexist state, then, is rather minor. Although it is a body elected by absolute universal suffrage and is, therefore, directly representative of the people, it has been greatly reduced in number and in function. Its only roles are to pass budgets, ratify laws, and control the general politics of the State by acting as a check on the Executive.<sup>56</sup>

Punishment of crimes is left to a separate judiciary body. The role of this "Justice humaine"<sup>57</sup> is pedagogical: to teach the populace, through example, about the consequences of illegality. Capital punishment ought frequently to be used, for it is "une simple opération chirurgicale" which cleanses society of an unnecessary evil.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>J. Carlier, "Vers la réforme de l'Etat," in Rex, Aug. 21, 1936, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup>Carlos Leruitte, "Pour un corporatisme libérateur," in Rex, Feb. 28, 1936, p. 13. Leruitte writes that corporation leaders should not be members of Parliament, for this would be spreading politics into non-political realms (as the politico-financiers had done). The Status de la Confédération Agricole Rexiste, however, specifically mentions that the seven members of the Conseil Supérieur are Parliamentarians interested in agricultural matters. [See above]. Such contradictions are frequent in Rexist philosophy.

<sup>57</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 62.

<sup>58</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 62.

In general "chaque verdict [doit dépasser] toujours par sa valeur exemplaire et préventive les individualités qui font leur objet."<sup>59</sup> The judiciary, too, has its own corporative organization, a Chambre judiciaire with representatives from all levels of the nation's magistrature as well as from the assemblies of lawyers, attorneys, clerks, etc.<sup>60</sup> Like any other professional corporation, the Chambre judiciaire has full control of its own workings and remains totally independent of whatever regime is in power -- thereby preventing blackmail or corruption of one of the most important law-enforcing bodies of the Rexist nation.

This diversification of duties and assigning of tasks to expert committees allows the Rexist government -- the king and his ministers -- to concentrate on more all-encompassing issues. The government must sustain the unity of all classes, religions, and cultures within the nation. It must engage in a foreign policy always favorable to national interests. It must promote tourism from within through education, and from without through propaganda. It must, especially, uphold "une BONNE ADMINISTRATION, économe, expéditive, disciplinée, tout entière dévouée au bien commun."<sup>61</sup> For the government represents the State, the common good of the State, and the national unity of the State. And on a broader scale, the government also represents the nation.<sup>62</sup> As such it is, in essence, the emblem of patriotism.

Rexist patriotism harkens back to the past, specifically to the revolution of 1830, when all of Belgium, no matter what class, religion, or culture, came together to fight for independence. (Rex, of course, only sees the united part of the revolution and ignores the fact that it was sparked by a resurgence of the liberalism begun in the French revolution, an event which Rex categorically condemns.) It is the State's role,

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<sup>59</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 62.

<sup>60</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 67.

<sup>61</sup>Denis, Bases doctrinales de Rex, p. 30-31.

<sup>62</sup>Here, I am defining the State as the bureaucratic and political structure within the nation, which is the larger, more abstract entity which holds not only the State but also the concept of patriotism and, if existent, nationalism.

or rather, the role of the military and of community groups supervised by the State, to imbue patriotism -- appreciation of the value of submitting to order and authority to uphold the common good -- in the hearts of young Belgians.<sup>63</sup> Both men and women must devote one year of their early adult life to community service: men, in army training, women, in community help (notice the traditional gender roles). For all citizens must, at some point in their lives, experience commonality by being reduced to "un strict commun dénominateur."<sup>64</sup> That is, they must realize that everyone is a personne humaine and has an âme. This concept of commonality does not, however, preclude the natural hierarchies defined in Rexist philosophy, e.g. the system of professional corporations, where each committee answers to the professional association(s) above it. While being reduced to total equality with co-trainees teaches appreciation of the "common" part of the common good, hierarchical order is the only way to assure that citizens and citizen-groups will work for the "good" of the common good. In their one year of service, then, young Belgians learn

... ce que c'est vraiment la discipline, ce que c'est que la hiérarchie, ce que c'est matériellement que la responsabilité d'un grade, ce que c'est que la solidarité, simplement humaine, ce que c'est que l'esprit de corps.<sup>65</sup>

Rexist patriotism also appeals to the sentimentality of all Belgians, young and old. There is an "Équilibre mystérieux entre un sol et nos forces secrètes [humaines]," writes Degrelle.<sup>66</sup> Just as every being, living or non-living, has an âme, so the love of every âme is necessary for true patriotism, for "C'est cela aussi, la pierre, le fer et la toile transfigurés par le génie de notre peuple qu'il faut regarder, pour retrouver la

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<sup>63</sup>The military is autonomous in a Rexist society and is solely responsible for national defense. Parliament and other government bodies have little if no say in military matters.

<sup>64</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 70.

<sup>65</sup>Denis, Principes rexistes, p. 70.

<sup>66</sup>Degrelle, Revolution des âmes, p. 13.

Patrie..."<sup>67</sup> Rexist patriotism, therefore, binds all Belgians, no matter what class, religion, or culture, into one whole. Yet it does this, it affirms, without hindering the individual developments of different peoples. In Rexist society, there is cultural autonomy within political unity.

Cultural federalism is Rex's answer to cultural individuality and need for self-expression. Cultural federalism gives Flanders and Wallonie (and, to some extent, the German-speaking areas in the east) the autonomy they want, without threatening the splitting up of the nation into different states. In cultural federalism, each language group has its own ministry of education, of culture, and of other specifically indigenous areas of interest. All official transactions are performed in the original language of the area (Flemish in the north, French in the south, German in a small part of the east), except for Brussels, where both French and Flemish should be used. Children in schools learn only their native language, for, Rex argues, a worker in the south of Belgium has no opportunity to speak with someone from the north anyway.<sup>68</sup> The State must encourage each culture to propagate itself, though only within the set boundaries of its geography. Once established in this system, Rexists insist, the Flemish will soon realize the magnificence of national unity and will discard their thoughts of separatism and of political, as well as cultural, autonomy.<sup>69</sup>

Rexist philosophers hesitated to call their partriotism nationalism -- in fear, it seems, of being compared to the contemporary Fascist and National-Socialist forms of nationalism. Legros dared to use the term but carefully qualified it: "Si l'on veut, c'est du nationalisme, parce que c'est une idéologie de la patrie, non au sens péjoratif du mot

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<sup>67</sup>Degrelle, *Revolution des âmes*, p. 107.

<sup>68</sup>This philosophy ignores the possibility of mobility and assumes that everybody stays in place. It is based on the ideology of the everlasting and never-changing Rexist community, one in which everyone wishes to remain.

<sup>69</sup>Saint-Germain, p. 206. This is a questionable assertion, especially in light of the 1936 VNV-Rex agreement which failed precisely because the Flemish nationalists, VNV, came to the conclusion that Rex would not support it in its efforts to form its own Flemish state. (See the second chapter on chronology, following).

[probably an allusion to dictatorial German and Italian types of nationalism] mais avec une juste notion de la hiérarchie des valeurs."<sup>70</sup> Rex was aware of this comparison and constantly asserted its originality. The Rexist professional corporative association, for example, "ne sera rien comparable au fantôme de corporatisme crée en Italie ou en Allemagne; Belges nous sommes, Belges nous resterons..."<sup>71</sup> Rex always denied being dictatorial and did not allow any kind of violence in its political action (even Rexist security forces were forbidden from carrying self-defensive weapons).<sup>72</sup> Aware of being accused of Hitlerian or Mussolinian kind of dictatorship, it made special efforts to deny the charges: "Nous ne sommes ni en Allemagne, ni en Russie, ni en Italie, ni au Mexique.... Nous ne voulons pas de dictature, ni avouée, ni camouflée. Le peuple, souverain, doit choisir ses mandataires en toute liberté."<sup>73</sup> Though order, cleanliness ("propreté," in the general and specific sense of the word), and authority govern Rexist society, they do not and will not lead to dictatorship.<sup>74</sup> (On the other hand, there is a fine line between the two which Rexist philosophy does not admit. If order and authority can exist separately from dictatorship in theory, in practice they rarely do.) Yet Degrelle and the Rexist movement were nevertheless fascinated by both the Hitlerian and the Mussolinian State and did, in fact, keep up relations -- even if clandestine -- with both regimes. A brief study of these relations, as well as those between Rex and Spain follows.

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<sup>70</sup>Legros, p. 232.

<sup>71</sup>Carlos Leruitte, "Le Rassemblement populaire de Liège le 9 février 1936," in Rex, Jan. 31, 1936, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup>Since the war and his experience as an SS officer, Degrelle has lauded both Hitler and fascism, the first as a genius and the second as a saving ideology whose influence still reigns today (though he doesn't specify). [Degrelle, Hitler pour 1000 ans, p. 227].

<sup>73</sup>Raphaël Sindic, "Pour une démocratie libre et propre!" in Rex, Jan. 31, 1936, p. 18. Of course, Rexist writers find the trick useful and themselves accuse their enemies of espousing totalitarian tactics, e.g. "Chronique du totalitarisme: un totalitarisme anonyme et sans grandeur" on Prime Minister Van Zeeland and his cabinet, in Rex, Ju. 4, 1937, p. 7.

<sup>74</sup>Daye, p. 20.



### Rex and the Third Reich:

Hitler came to power in January, 1933, when Rex was not yet a real movement and Degrelle was still working for the ACJB. There could not have been an immediate impact on Rex, therefore, but there could have been a long term impact. By the time Rex had become a movement and, later, a political party, it had had time to observe the new regime in Germany and to absorb or reject elements from Nazi ideology and practice. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Degrelle himself was fascinated by the way Hitler came to power through a "legal" coup d'état. Though it is really only during and after the war that Degrelle openly expressed his admiration (or even passion) for the Führer, in the development stages of the movement some influences were also felt.

Through the efforts of the Reich delegation to Brussels, a few Rexist leaders did actually come into contact with Nazi leaders before 1940. Only a few months after Hitler's coming to power, Degrelle and two of his journalist colleagues were invited by the delegation to visit Germany and to write a feature article on the new regime in the Rex editions journal Soirées. In Berlin between April 29 and May 3, 1933, the three journalists met with M. Braun von Stumm, press counselor to the Reich ministry of foreign affairs, who undoubtedly gave them the tour and answered the appropriate questions.<sup>75</sup> Though there doesn't seem to be any evidence that Degrelle openly applauded the Nazi regime in these early years, the fact that the German delegation took the initiative in organizing the excursion proves that Degrelle must have, at least, given the impression of thinking favorably of the system. Yet, in 1933 Rex as a movement did not exist, and the Reich regime saw little point in supporting a lone journalist like Degrelle who, even if sympathetic, had no power. Only once Rex had

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<sup>75</sup>Émile Krier, "Le Rexisme et l'Allemagne 1933-1940: une documentation," in Cahiers d'histoire de la seconde guerre mondiale (Bruxelles, CREHSG, 1978:5), p. 178.



declared itself political and had started publishing Le Pays réel would the Reich renew its ovations towards Degrelle.

Though these advances were purposely restrained in order not to thwart Rex's possibilities for power by angering the Belgian government too much, the German government did welcome prominent Rexist leaders into its country. On August 12, 1936, the Brussels industrialist and financial consultant to Degrelle, Gustave Wyns, met with von Stumm and other propaganda officials to discuss the sale (at an "among friends" price) of German printing machines to Rex -- in which effort he failed. In late Summer-early Fall of that same year, the Rexist senator Xavier de Hemricourt de Grunne made a visit to Germany to observe their educational system. The reason why the only government official he met with was a Dr. Holthöfer, press director for the mining association of Essen, remains unclear.<sup>76</sup> Pierre Daye, another Rexist Parliamentarian, was Hitler's guest of honor for the Parteitag in 1936, and later (beginning December 8, 1936) led a series of conferences in Berlin on "Rex et l'évolution de la politique belge."<sup>77</sup>

But it is Degrelle's trip of September, 1936 which received the most publicity at home. Between September 25 and 26 Degrelle, his wife, Gustave Wyns and his wife, and Pierre Daye met in Berlin with Otto Abetz, director of French and Belgian affairs in the office of Dienststelle Ribbentrop (later the foreign ministry), von Ribbentrop, and, finally, Hitler himself.<sup>78</sup> Discussion focused mostly on Belgo-German affairs, specifically about setting up a meeting between Hitler and Belgian King Léopold to arrange the giving back of the German-speaking Eupen-Malmédy region to

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<sup>76</sup>Krier, p. 182.

<sup>77</sup>Krier, p. 183.

<sup>78</sup>Degrelle at first denied having made the visit to Berchtesgarden, but then, under pressure from press attacks within Belgium, he admitted to it. The admission was undoubtedly one of the reasons for his downfall in 1937. (See next chapter).

Germany.<sup>79</sup> The Rexist group also came away with 250,000 RM,<sup>80</sup> a sum which could be used only within Germany -- not a problem for Rex, since Gustave Wvns entertained close relations with Otto Abetz and with Dr. Max Winkler, director of the press supply association, Cautio, under the Reich ministry of Propaganda, and directed both as to how he wished the money to be disposed of.<sup>81</sup> Later that fall, Degrelle met with Goebbels, though it is unclear what the exact intention of the visit was.

Reich support for Rex was only intensely sustained between 1936 and 1937, that is, during the years when Rex was thriving and looked like a profitable ally for the Nazi regime.<sup>82</sup> After the failure of Degrelle in the 1937 elections and after the dissolution of the accord between Rex and the Flemish nationalists, Reich monetary and political support drastically diminished. Degrelle's capabilities as the Belgian politician of the future were doubted, and when Degrelle once again visited Germany in early 1938, he met with no important officials.<sup>83</sup> Only the war would return Nazi support to Rex in full force.

Rex, then, was backed politically and financially by the Nazi regime.<sup>84</sup> What about ideologically? There were obvious similarities between Rexism and Nazism. Both wanted order and were authoritarian (if not dictatorial), both were anti-Communist, both were populist (claiming all actions were for the common good), and both were

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<sup>79</sup>Krier, p. 184. The fact that Hitler suddenly made Degrelle an official representative of the monarchy is puzzling. Did he really think that the king would concur with Degrelle's plans, let alone listen to his advice? At least in this instance, Hitler lacked a flair for étiquette in foreign affairs.

<sup>80</sup>Degrelle still denies ever having had financial relations of any sort with the Reich. [Charlier, p. 174].

<sup>81</sup>Krier, p. 181 & p. 186. Under pressure from Gustave Wvns, Winkler also raised for Rex some 30,000 to 35,000 RM among private friends in 1936-37. [Krier, p. 186].

<sup>82</sup>See next chapter for the chronology of these events.

<sup>83</sup>Krier, p. 192.

<sup>84</sup>Dr. Winkler seems to have been able to collect among private circles some 30,000 to 35,000 RM extra for Rex. [Krier, p. 186].

corporatist. But the race factor was not an element in pre-war Rexist ideology, while the Catholic Church was.

Though Rex did talk a lot about the supposed Judeo-Communist plot underway in Belgium, it did not have a systematic program of anti-semitism comparable to the Nazi's, and was not expressed until the late '30s. Rex's anti-semitism was more economic than racial. Rexist believed that the State should have an official policy of anti-semitism in order to protect Belgian workers and to prevent spontaneous and violent anti-semitic accurances.

Il y aura un antisémitisme d'Etat raisonnable, humain et juste ou  
il y aura un antisémitisme incontrôlable, capable des pires excès....  
Ce n'est pas parce qu'on aime ou qu'on n'aime pas les Juifs qu'il faut  
s'occuper d'eux; c'est parce qu'ils risquent de provoquer des pertur-  
bations économiques, sociales et morales, préjudiciables au Bien  
Commun.<sup>85</sup>

Of course, anti-semitism is anti-semitism, no matter for what reason. Yet, in talking about ideology and ideological influences, distinctions have to be made. The fact that Rex waited so long to formulate its ideas on anti-semitism seems to imply that it did not initially consider anti-semitism an issue, and only drew up a proposal because it felt pressured by the contemporary situation (specifically, anti-semitic policies in Germany) to come up with an opinion.

Whereas Nazism opposed established religions, Rex was founded by one -- Roman Catholicism -- and, though separated from the establishment of the Church, still operated within the context of its ideology. From the very beginning, Rexist articles denounced Reich policies towards the Church, and attacks continued up until the war.<sup>86</sup> It was only during the war that Rexist anti-semitism became more overt.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>José Streeel, "Antisémitisme d'Etat," in Le Pays réel, Jan. 31, 1939, p. 6.

<sup>86</sup>Etienne, p. 111.

<sup>87</sup>Discussion on this subject is beyond the limitations of this thesis. I await with anticipation to read what Mr. Conway has to say about this issue in his soon-to-be-published dissertation on Rex during the war.

These two factors especially, as well as the threat of invasion by the increasingly powerful Reich, separated Rexism from Nazism. This is not to say that Degrelle and Rex were not greatly influenced by the regime. They were. But one cannot go the next step to say that pre-war Rex was simply Belgian Nazism.

#### Rex and Mussolini's Italy:

Neither can one say that Rex was the Belgian twin of Mussolini's Fascism. As with Nazism, there were ideological, political, and financial relations between Rex and Fascist Italy. In fact, Rex felt more of a correspondence with Italy than with Germany. These can easily be explained by the simple fact that Mussolini was less of a threat than Hitler was. Degrelle himself admits that "le Duce n'avait pas la moindre idée d'une expansion aux dépens de la Belgique.... Mussolini ne s'intéressait qu'à la Méditerranée et à l'Afrique.... Internationalement, la collaborariotn italo-belge était sans problèmes."<sup>88</sup> Italy was also Latin, and since France had lost its favor with the Rexists with the advent of the leftist Front Populaire and the pact with the USSR, Italo-Belgian latinity could be seen as a barrier against a German cultural invasion.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, as a Catholic, Mussolini was respected among quite a few Catholic circles in Belgium, and very important for Degrelle was the fact that the Duce had good relations with, if not actually controlled, the Vatican. Mussolini was able, it seems, to prevent a condemnation by the Pope of Rex, as requested by the Cardinal Van Roey in December,

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<sup>88</sup>Charlier, p. 178.

<sup>89</sup>Etienne, p. 114. The idea of a cultural threat was probably fairly sincere since, though friendly with the Reich, Rex still wanted to keep its political and cultural autonomy. (During and after the war, Degrelle repeatedly justified his relations with Hitler as a way of assuring Belgian autonomy within a New Order Europe.) Puzzling about this theory, outlined by José Streeel in an article in Rex on April 8, 1938 is that it excluded the non-Latin, Flemish Belgians whom Rex so much wanted as allies, and thereby made Rex appear more like a Walloon movement than a Belgian one. True, Streeel wrote the article in 1938, after the failure of the pact with the Flemish nationalists (see next chapter), but it is doubtful that the idea of brotherhood in latinity was a new theory. It is more likely that Streeel simply overlooked the inconsistency with Rexist ideology -- easy to fall into, since Rex really was more Walloon than Flemish.

1936.<sup>90</sup> In his interview with Jean-Michel Charlier, Degrelle describes the event in dramatic detail: how he telephoned the Duce immediately upon hearing about the plan (how he heard, he does not tell us), how Mussolini told him to come directly to Rome, how the former then settled the affair by simply ordering the Vatican not to act upon this rumor, how Degrelle was then escorted to the Vatican in Mussolini's private limosine, and how nobody ever found out about the trip because Degrelle was flown to France by an Italian military plane and then made his way to Belgium secretly.<sup>91</sup> No matter whether this account is accurate or not, it seems that the Duce cared enough about having Degrelle as an ally to protect him.

Formal relations between the two leaders began directly after Rex's success in 1936, with an invitation to Degrelle from Mussolini. Degrelle claims to have spent "une huitaine de jours passionnants, presque familiaux, puisqu'il m'a annoncé lui-même la naissance de ma fille Anne, à qui j'ai donné le prénom de sa dernière fille à lui." Eight days is an unusually long time for an important political leader like Mussolini to spend with a "brand-new" political leader like Degrelle, and one wonders where all of the fatherliness associated with Degrelle went, if he deemed it more important to visit the Duce than to be near his wife at the imminent time of birth.<sup>92</sup> At any rate, however formal or close, a friendship between the two was established from 1936 on: "j'avais aussitôt trouvé en Mussolini un ami véritable qui m'a toujours conseillé, guidé, m'offrant spontanément de me prêter de l'argent," affirms Degrelle.<sup>93</sup> As will be discussed in a later chapter, Mussolini allowed Degrelle to make some speeches on Turin radio in January, 1937, after the Rexist leader was denied radio-time in Belgium. Between 1936 and 1937 (that is, when Rex was at its height) Rex also received much

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<sup>90</sup>Charlier, p. 176.

<sup>91</sup>Charlier, p. 177-78.

<sup>92</sup>Of course, it was still not the custom for the husband to be on-hand at a birth itself in 1936, but, nevertheless, one might expect such a professed father as Degrelle to at least stay in the same country where his wife was.

<sup>93</sup>Charlier, p. 175.

financial support from the Italian Fascists -- about 250,000 FB per month, or a total of 19 million FB.<sup>94</sup> Mussolini seems to have been somewhat of an advisor to Degrelle on how to manage relations with Hitler, as well, and, hating the Germans, according to Degrelle, forwarned the Rexist leader against their powers -- warnings which, as seen, Degrelle ignored. The friendship was most likely reinforced by the alliance between Germany and Italy which began to develop in September, 1937 when Mussolini visited Hitler in Germany, and became concrete in the pact on May 22, 1939.<sup>95</sup> For, if Rex wanted to keep on good terms with Hitlerian Germany, it would have to stay especially friendly with the Reich's major ally.

#### Rex and Spain:

As for the other Latin country with sympathies towards Rex, relations seem to have been low-key. Degrelle supported Franco and saw in him one of the great conquerors of Communism. After a ten-day visit with the Spanish leader in February, 1939, for instance, he wrote an article in Le Pays réel entitled "La fin des Rouges."<sup>96</sup> In 1937-38 he used the Spanish civil war to bring accusations against the Belgian government for its military support to the Republicans. Degrelle claims to have been named "no. 1 de la Phalange de l'extérieur" by the Phalangist leader José Antonio Primo de Rivera in 1934,<sup>97</sup> but, though some Rexistists were part of the French Fascist Drieu La Rochelle's forces in the Balearic islands,<sup>98</sup> there were no organized Rexist troops in

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<sup>94</sup>Degrelle's assertion that the money was spontaneously offered seems exaggerated. Intermediaries like the Count Galeazzo Ciano probably repeatedly asked Mussolini on the Rexist leader's behalf. The figure of 250,000 FB per month is one noted in Ciano's agenda of August, 1937. The second figure is that of Count de Grunne who wrote of two million FB per month over a period from August, 1936 to April, 1937. [Krier, p. 183-84].

<sup>95</sup>Robert Demoulin, "La Presse liégeoise et la politique italienne du 25 septembre 1937 à la signature du pacte d'acier du 22 mai 1939," in Michel Dumoulin and Jacques Willequet, Aspect des relations de la Belgique, du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg et des Pays-Pas avec l'Italie: 1925-1940 (Bruxelles, Istituto italiano di cultura, 1983), p. 125.

<sup>96</sup>Etienne, p. 116.

<sup>97</sup>Degrelle, Hitler pour 1000 ans, p. 64.

<sup>98</sup>Etienne, p. 116.

Spain. (Rex didn't have an armed brigade of any sort until the SS-Wallonie in WWII.)

There is no evidence that Rex received financial support from Franco either.

Relations, then, were rather distant before the war.<sup>99</sup>

### Conclusion:

What can one say about Rexist ideology and other Fascist ideology? It is evident that Degrelle and other Rexist leaders were fascinated by Nazism and Italian Fascism, and that they did have contact with the propounders of these doctrines. But whether the Rexist, or at least Degrelle, had an in depth knowledge of either ideology is questionable. First of all, Degrelle (and probably other Rexist as well) did not read either German or Italian before the war. Then again, not many people read Mein Kampf anyway, and since Rex insisted that its ideology was new and, in the beginning, denied having relations with the Nazis, there was no compelling reason to study Nazi or Italian Fascist writings. Like everybody else, Rex learned about the two regimes through the press and through observation. It had a fairly peripheral understanding of the ideologies and could, therefore, borrow from them without much thought as to what the implications of a certain section were, or whether the particular ideology made any sense for Belgium.

Rex was attracted by the trappings of Nazism and Italian Fascism -- by the authority, the order, the hierarchy, and all the dramatic stagings which symbolized these aspects (a podium for Degrelle, for instance, with other leaders behind him on a lower step and the crowd far below them both, suggesting a hierarchy of authority).<sup>100</sup> Rex then tried to incorporate this paraphernalia into its own ideology, all the while insisting that it was original, yet not making much effort to disguise the acts which

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<sup>99</sup>Not so after the war. Franco welcomed a wounded Degrelle who was trying to escape the allies in 1945, gave him a false passport, and probably supported him financially. Degrelle still lives in Spain.

<sup>100</sup>See chapter on Degrelle, section on him as orator, below.

were distinctly Nazi and/or Italian Fascist. The Rexist arm gesture, for instance, was an arm thrust forward with a hand open and facing downward. Rex described it as a "geste du bras tendu dans le signe du serment et... la main ouverte dans le signe de la fraternité."<sup>101</sup> Rex was trying to make the gesture uniquely Christian and Rexist, but it was obviously drawn directly from the Nazi salute.

Thus, I would argue, Rexist ideology learned much from Nazi and Italian Fascist ideology. But it learned not in an academic way, but more through osmosis, as it were, through observation and casual borrowing of their dramatics and rhetoric. Perhaps one of the reasons for Rex's failure (and there are several) was because it did not take the time to consider the real basis of all the external appearances of Nazism and Italian Fascism, and did not make the effort to truly adapt their ideology to the Belgian situation.

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<sup>101</sup>Degrelle and Denis, Rex. Renaissance de la Patrie (Brux., Éditions Rex, 1940), no page numbers.



### **Chapter three**

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### **Chronology: Rex in Parliament**

Having outlined Rexist ideology, I now continue with the narration of events. The first chapter discussed Rex in its pre-phase (when still but a group of students at L'Avant-Garde and then at the ACJB), Rex in its first phase (from when Degrelle took over Rex editions to when the group broke with the ACJB), and Rex in its second phase (from the break with Catholic action up to the coup de Courtrai). Courtrai marked the beginning of the third and most important phase of Rex: when it turned from being a non-political protector of the Church to becoming a political attacker on the Catholic Party, a guardian against corruption, and a defender of morality. In this phase, Rex would break off from the Catholic Party for good and would form its own political movement-party.<sup>1</sup> Elements of this phase would last throughout the rest of Rexist history, but the glories of Rex would end with Degrelle's electoral failure in 1937. Phase four, then, is the period spanning 1937 to the German invasion on May 10, 1940 -- the period of Rex's downfall.

In preparation for the elections: the scandals:

The decision to enter formal politics was a very rushed one. The success of Courtrai lead directly into a massive, pre-election propoganda campaign against Catholics, first, and against other established parties, later. One may well wonder at this sudden declaration of politicization. It seems unlikely that Degrelle would have been so foolish as to intentionally postpone political preparation until the last moment. Of course, it is true that he managed to take the country by storm with his amazing propogandistic talents. Yet six months was really a very limited time in which to inform the public at large (not just already loyal Rexist) about a totally new political party. The decision must have been a last minute one, then, prompted by the success at

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<sup>1</sup>I refer to Rex in Parliament as a movement-party in deference to Rexist rhetoric, which rejected the very institution of political party as societally separatist and insisted that Rex before 1936 and after 1936 was the same, that it was simply acting within another sphere, a political one.

Courtrai and Degrelle's own impatient ambitions for the movement. For Degrelle was taking a tremendous risk and he must have been extraordinarily self-confident and visionary to make the attempt. If Rex had lost the elections or received much less than it did, it would have been ignored as simply one of the many other extremist parties which were gaining ground in mid 1930s Belgium. But the Rexist leader did have a fondness for the grand and, once he had set his mind on something, he could rarely be dissuaded from it. By December, 1935, he was quite sure about wanting to make his movement into a movement-party. Rather a show-off as he was, he was determined to use every personal skill he had to make his movement succeed.

Since propaganda through scandal-raising seemed to be his and the movement's forte, Rex soon launched into a series of vigorous attacks upon the Establishment. Though many of these cases exposed genuine problems with the operation of the nation, their purpose was, most definitely, to draw attention to the movement and gather supporters. Judging from the results of the elections, the technique was quite successful.

On November 11, 1935, Degrelle organized a huge gathering in direct response to Courtrai. It was to be the first of a long succession of meetings attacking politico-financiers, politicians who, beside their necessary political ties, held immoral affiliations with the financial quarter.<sup>2</sup> Degrelle, as usual, planned the event very well. His very choice of the day was clever; for, being Armistice Day, almost all Belgians would have a holiday and would be more inclined to attend the meeting (though it was, in any case, held in the evening). In addition, the Rexist leader had had the meeting very well publicized and on the said day the Brussels Palais des Sports was stock full. "Le succès était complet, Rex et son Chef recueillaient une ovation inconnue

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<sup>2</sup>In 1934, Rex had published a few short notices about politico-financiers in France, as this one: "THIVRIER, député socialiste, possède deux châteaux à Montassière (Allier) et un troisième château à la Motte-Beuvron." ["La politique au ralenti: Place aux pauvres," in Rex-Vlan, Mr. 30, 1934, no. 12, p. 11].

en Belgique jusqu'alors pour un mouvement politique," wrote Legros optimistically.<sup>3</sup> The audiences paid an entrance fee (probably between 5 FB and 10 FB) and the total sum collected apparently covered the 100,000 FB budget allotted for the occasion by Degrelle, with a surplus of 7000 FB, as well!<sup>4</sup> Though it is virtually impossible to estimate how many Rexists were won over on this one day, one can assume -- in view of the heat surrounding the Courtrai affair, and judging from the increasing popularity of Rexist meetings -- that Degrelle's dramatic and emotional performance certainly worked its charms on a fair amount of the attending petit peuple.

Degrelle must have been urged on by this success, for he continued to expose scandal after scandal. The distinction between political man and financial man was one that all Rexists adamantly upheld.

Le politique et le financier sont deux hommes différents; s'ils se confondent, celui-ci a toutes chances de l'emporter sur celui-là; la sincérité des idées disparaît et, la faiblesse humaine aidant, des compromissions tentatrices risquent de faire succomber bien des bonnes volontés.<sup>5</sup>

Alongside the whole campaign against politico-financiers, the campaign against big capitalists, in general, followed logically. Jean Denis called "l'homme d'affaire" the most repugnant bandit of his era; a man who, undoubtedly, also had political dealings and who regularly usurped industrialists and "le petit peuple travailleur" for his own profit.<sup>6</sup> Such men ought to be dealt with harshly: "Hyènes puantes et répugnants chacals. Et vous savez le moyen dont on se débarrasse des hyènes et des chacals."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Usnard Legros, Un Homme, un chef, Léon Degrelle (Bruxelles, Éditions Rex, 1938), p. 129.

<sup>4</sup>Degrelle made this claim in his interviews with M. Charlier. However, he also confused this meeting with a series of six meetings he held in 1937 -- Les Six Jours de Rex; so one must be wary of his assertions. [Jean-Michel Charlier, Léon Degrelle: Persiste et signe: interviews recueillies pour la télévision française par ... (Paris, Éditions Jean Picollec, 1985), p. 104. (See note 27 for dollar equivalents).

<sup>5</sup>Jacques Saint-Gemain, La Bataille de Rex (Paris, \_\_\_\_\_, 1937), p. 33-34.

<sup>6</sup>Jean Denis, La Ligne générale (Bruxelles, Éditions Rex, [1935-1937?]), p. 83.

<sup>7</sup>Denis, p.84.

Early in 1936, Rex began attacks against Socialist party "banksters," as the wrongdoers soon came to be called. By January 31, 1936, Rex was carrying long articles with bold headlines like "Le brigandage des politiciens socialistes un scandale: les 3000 millions de la banque du travail. Des pires moeurs de banksters à la capitulation devant la Haute-Finance."<sup>8</sup> It called on workers of all classes, poor but free, strong in their truth and belief in the justice of their cause, to demand immediate changes.<sup>9</sup> "Ils doivent balayer les préjugés..." which meant, literally, that they were supposed to go out and symbolically sweep away corruption by sweeping the streets in front of Parliament!<sup>10</sup> (See plate 3 in appendix.) Rex continued its attacks against the Socialist party for several months, summoning grass roots action through multiple advertisements and articles on the subject in its newspapers.

At the same time, it moved into more specific attacks on the Catholic party and its affiliates. On February 21, 1936, on the front page of Rex, Degrelle disclosed his next important discovery of corruption -- the agricultural organization, Boerenbond.<sup>11</sup> Here, he accused the Boerenbond of usurping its control over farmers' savings by using the money for totally non-agricultural and, indeed, scandalous purposes.<sup>12</sup> In particular, he accused it of having figured out a devious plan, so that it could borrow money from the Banque National at 3 % interest, but then sell it back at 6 % interest, thereby taking in a considerable profit.<sup>13</sup> The campaign succeeded in alienating a

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<sup>8</sup>Degrelle, in Rex, Jan. 31, 1936, no. 5, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup>Degrelle, in Rex, Jan. 31, 1936, no. 5, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup>Degrelle, in Rex, Jan. 31, 1936, no. 5, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup>Saint-Germain, p. 20-22. This was a kind of nation-wide corporative agricultural-assistance organization formed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Abbé Mellaerts, under the auspices of the Catholic party. The Boerenbond assisted peasant-farmers and small landlords in all sorts of agriculture-related issues and, besides acting as a bank for their savings, established special services, such as agriculture-case courts, for its members. The fact that from its inception it held strong ties with the Catholic party was undoubtedly influential in Rex's decision to act against it.

<sup>12</sup>Degrelle, "MM. Rapport, Brusselmans et van Dievoet sont servis. Voici des documents terribles sur le Boerenbond," in Rex, Feb. 21, 1936, no. 8, p. 1, 3 & 5.

<sup>13</sup>Saint-Germain, p. 124-127.

considerable part of the peasantry from the Catholic party, many of whom went over to Rex.<sup>14</sup>

The Boerenbond affair was part of a long string of attacks against the Catholic party, attacks which had begun, in essence, with the coup de Courtrai. As the weeks went by, Rex's language became more and more violent in its attacks. The February 7, 1936 issue of Rex, for instance, carried an extensive, full-page, bold-lettered battle cry, as it were, against the party:

L'offensive des pourris [term used for the banksters] contre Rex bat son plein; bombardements à coup de droits de réponse dans nos journaux, bombardements à coup de procès, Segers, Balthazar, Philips; bombardements à coups de saletées anonymes! Ils voudraient nous terroriser ou nous affamer! Nous les attendons et nous les défions!!! S'ils veulent la bataille, ils l'auront! S'ils ne la veulent pas, ils l'auront quand même! Ils sont les ennemis du peuple. Ils ont bu son sang, exploité son travail, insulté sa misère. L'heure est venue où ils vont payer! BELGES! Rassemblons nous tous autour de REX pour la bataille désespérée des honnêtes gens contre la dictature des politiciens-bansters! Ils nous ont écrasé pendant 10 ans! Ca suffit! Prenons nos balais, nos fouets, et nos fourches! Chassons-les! Pour un pays libre et propre, pour nous sauver, pour bâtir l'Etat Nouveau, unissons-nous!<sup>15</sup>

If Rex's intention was to alienate the Catholic party, it certainly achieved its goal. On February 21, Minister of the Interior and President of the Union Catholique, M. Hubert Pierlot, forbade all collaboration of party members with Rex.<sup>16</sup> In its usual manner, Rex responded by simply turning the situation around to make it look (in its own press, that is) as if it had taken the initiative. Jean Denis declared, in the next issue of Rex, that the movement had stayed within the party only for purposes of aggrandizing it; but, once the Catholic party had rejected Rex's advances, the latter had no reason to remain loyal.<sup>17</sup> A final and official break was in order, therefore, wrote Degrelle: "REX

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<sup>14</sup>Saint-Germain, p.128.

<sup>15</sup>Degrelle, in Rex, Feb. 7, 1936, no. 6, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup>Legros, p. 133.

<sup>17</sup>Denis, "Faut-il liquider le parti catholique," in Rex, Feb. 28, 1936, no. 9, p. 8.

de son côté NE VOIT PAS LA POSSIBILITE DE S'ENTENDRE AVEC LE PARTI CATHOLIQUE  
[sic]."<sup>18</sup>

The split and the general ambiguity surrounding the growing Rex movement was especially well represented by l'affaire Segers. Sometime in late Winter-early Spring of the year, Degrelle had published an inflammatory pamphlet against the Catholic leader, appropriately entitled "J'accuse M. Segers. J'accuse M. Segers d'être un cumulard, un bankster, un pillard d'épargne eta un lâche." Understandably enraged, the accused filed a case against Degrelle for defamation of character. However, this only resulted in his ouster from the party and a court plea in Degrelle's favor on May 8!<sup>19</sup>

One may well wonder why the court gave such an important victory to the Rexists. Couldn't they have foreseen its implications? They were obviously performing their job in the expected, unbiased way, but one might have expected that, considering the circumstances, they would have decided that a motion in support of Segers, however wrong, might have been a crucially important political move. The conclusion that emerges seems to be that the real threat of Rex had not yet dawned on all Belgians. Either they supported, in relief, what the movement was doing -- the country was full of corruption, after all -- or they simply did not believe that Rex could achieve any kind of leadership position in the political scene. At any rate, the court decision being handed down barely two weeks before the May 24 elections had a great impact on voter turn-out in favor of Rex. If Rex had gotten rid of Segers, it would get rid of other incitors of political vices, it would clean up that body of law-makers.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Degrelle, "REX luttera seul aux elections prochaines," in Rex, Feb. 28, 1936, no. 9, p. 16-17.

<sup>19</sup>Legros, p. 151. The case was tried before the tribunal court of Bruxelles.

<sup>20</sup>Jean-Michel Etienne, Le Mouvement rexiste jusqu'en 1940 (Paris, Librairie Armand Colin, 1968), p. 62.

### Specific election propaganda:

The scandals uncovered by Rex were made public not only in Rex, but, starting on May 3, also in a new daily, Le Pays réel. In March, 1935, Mgr. Picard had already predicted that, should Degrelle realize his dream and begin publishing a daily newspaper, "personne au monde ne peut prévoir à quoi il l'emploiera."<sup>21</sup> The daily added to the weekly Rex, allowed Degrelle to literally bombard readers with propagandistic material. And, since Rexist press had been carrying Rexist propaganda from the outset, the election campaign merely required an intensification of past processes.<sup>22</sup> Degrelle wrote articles exposing scandals on front and back of Rex, and throughout Le Pays réel and Action rexiste, a special campaign paper appearing only during the pre-election period.<sup>23</sup> In addition, propagandistic phrases would appear in bold letters and enclosed in thick-lined boxes at random throughout the various publications. They would say things like "REX dit la Vérité!"<sup>24</sup> (obviously a reference to the lying occurring at top government levels), or "Rex ou Moscou" (for, in spring 1936, Rex accused almost all of its enemies of being figureheads of the Communist regime in the USSR).<sup>25</sup> Rexist newspapers presented their candidates, as well, and often with photographs in addition to short biographies on their accomplishments as private persons and as Rexist.<sup>26</sup> Propaganda ploys extended into non-press areas as well. Rex started producing little insignia and gadgets that were distinctly Rexist -- carried its name, usually. The January 31 issue of Rex advertised a whole series of such items: Rex

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<sup>21</sup>Mgr. Picard in a letter, dated March 13, 1935, to his Cardinal, Mgr. Van Roey, quoted in Giovanni Hoyois, "Monseigneur Picard et Léon Degrelle," Revue générale belge, Nov. 1959, p. 87.

<sup>22</sup>Legros, p. 146.

<sup>23</sup>Legros, p. 148.

<sup>24</sup>Rex, Feb. 21, 1936, no. 8, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup>Robert Brasillach, Léon Degrelle et l'avenir de Rex (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1936), p. 499.

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, the short article by Roger Dessart, Chef de REX-Huy, nominating Amand Gérardin for the Huy-Waremme position, in "Prélude à la campagne électorale," in Rex, Feb. 7, 1936, no. 6, p. 13.



insignia for 2.50 FB, Rex "fanion" (small flag) for 3.00 FB, Rex arm badges and Rex stamps (these last, in packages of 1000) also for 3.00 FB, Rex blotters (100 at once) for 10.00 FB, and Rex card-game for 2.00 FB.<sup>27</sup> With such an assortment of useful objects, and with such reasonable prices, one can imagine that the sales were many in this period of rising Rexist popularity.

Degrelle also increased the number of speaking rounds he made, travelling from province to province, proclaiming the Rexist revolution. The meetings were always advertized and reviewed in great detail in Rexist press. They all followed the same, basic format of before, some more organized and elaborate than others. On January 31, for instance, Rex published the schedule for a weekend-long reunion to be held at Liège. On Saturday February 8, at 7:30 pm, the cadres actifs and Front Populaire would come together to hear reports from local Rexist groups of Huy-Waremme, Verviers and Liège. An hour later, Degrelle would speak at a general meeting and would ceremoniously hand over the Rexist flag to a representative of the Ougrée-Sclessin section (probably some kind of welcoming ritual for a newly formed group). At 8:00 am Sunday morning all would convene at the Cathedral to hear a mass for peace and in remembrance of those dead at war. This would be followed by, first, a meeting on the "Doctrine et Programme de Rex" at 9:30 am, then a "dîner démocratique [sic]" at 1:00 pm, accompanied by the "création du chant du Front Populaire de Rex," and, finally, after a pause, a "Meeting monstre avec Carlos Leruitte [Rexist leader] et LEON DEGRELLE."<sup>28</sup> The grand scale of this meeting is reminiscent of the one that was supposed to take place at Charleroi in 1934. Due to lack of time, however, Degrelle gave most of his speeches in the context of evening meetings only two- or three-hour long. The campaign in Flanders, which started after the one in the French-speaking part of the country, was characterized by this type of meeting. Perhaps this was deliberately

<sup>27</sup>Rex, Jan. 31, 1936, no. 5, p. 7. 1 FB = \$ .03384 (1936) = \$ .267 = 26.7 ¢ (1984)

<sup>28</sup>Carlos Leruitte, "Le Rassemblement populaire de Liège le 9 février 1936," in Rex, Jan. 31, 1936, no. 5, p. 15. The towns listed are all within the province of Liège.

planned this way because Degrelle did not speak Flemish, though it seems more likely that pressing time was the real factor involved.<sup>29</sup> At any rate, Degrelle's enthusiasm was in no way hampered by the circumstances. On January 31, 4000 people came to hear him in Antwerp; on February 3, 1200 came to hear him in Brugge. Rexist accounts of the first meeting claimed that despite continued disruption by Communist infiltrators and prolonged police non-action against them, "il n'en est pas un sans doute qui ne sentit augmenter son respect pour cette force jeune et saine, réfléchie mais écrasante, qu'est REX" (note the forceful language).<sup>30</sup>

Degrelle's personal eagerness and the Rexist press' paralleling enthusiasm and over-confidence in reporting the various propaganda events evidently won over a lot of voters, whether discontented with the present regime, in search of an all-encompassing doctrine, or simply easily persuaded by colorful rhetoric. Writing shortly before the elections, Raphaël Sindic foresaw that "... tous les hésitants viendront à nous et avec eux, nombre de socialistes et quantité de libéraux" (and Catholics).<sup>31</sup> Though an exaggeration, the statement does describe, in a broad sense, the playing out of the events in Spring 1936. Degrelle and his followers performed really rather extraordinary feats of propaganda in the six months that lapsed between Courtrai and the May elections, feats which resulted in a virtual repeat of the earlier coup, this time not only against the Catholic party, but against the whole country.

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<sup>29</sup>These speeches in Flanders were presumably in French. (I have not come across any references to translators or interpreters being on hand.) Of course, it is possible that Degrelle learned a speech in Flemish for the occasion; yet this seems unlikely, since his style was based so much on spontaneity. It is no wonder, then, that Rexist support was weak in the north -- besides the fact that the Flemish, if extremist, were separatist-extremists, in line with groups like the VNV (see below on the Rex-VNV pact).

<sup>30</sup>"Léon Degrelle parle à Anvers," in Rex, Feb. 7, 1936, no. 6, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup>Raphaël Sindic, Rex devant l'opinion catholique (Bruxelles, Eds. Rex, 1936), p. 34.

### The elections of 1936:

The Rexist party won 11.49 % of the national vote on May 24, 1936.<sup>32</sup> Out of 2,362,454 eligible votes counted, it received 271,491. Out of 202 députés seats in the Parliament house, Rex won 21 seats (in addition to twelve seats in the senate). The greatest number of representatives concentrated in one area were in the Brabant and Liège provinces, returning 6 and 5 seats, respectively. Other provinces returned between 1 and 3 seats. (See plates 4 and 5 for map and chart.) Similarly, the capitals of the two important provinces, Brussels and Liège, each voted in the most députés within the province, with 5 and 3, respectively. These results are not surprising, since the two towns were centers of worker and middle class population. In comparison to the other parties, Rex did quite well. It received the most votes of all the dissident extremist parties (Communist and Flemish Nationalist) and just one percent less than the Liberal party, which came in with 12.40%. It drew its votes especially from the Catholic party, but considerably, also, from both the Socialist and the Liberal parties.<sup>33</sup> Though Rexist success was understandably greater in Wallonie and Brussels, the 7 % (out of 100% regional voting percentage), i.e. over 72,000 votes, it obtained in Flanders must not be overlooked, especially since this represented half of Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond (VNV) returns in the region.<sup>34</sup> In addition, what 21 representatives meant for Rex was more than what it meant for other, more popular parties, because the counting system used (the Hondt system) assigned more seats per votes counted to stronger parties; thus, the Catholic party was given one seat for less than 11,000 votes, while Rex had to obtain about 13,000 seats to be eligible for one seat.<sup>35</sup> That is, 21 députés represented more

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<sup>32</sup>Voting is obligatory in Belgium. About 90% of the population votes. The statistics are taken from Roger E. De Smet, René Evalenko & William Fraeys, Collection de Science Politique: Atlas des Elections Belges 1919-1954 (Bruxelles, Institut de Sociologie Solvay, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1958), p. 10 & p. 14-15; and from Etienne, p. 53-56.

<sup>33</sup>Etienne, p. 57.

<sup>34</sup>Etienne, p. 58.

<sup>35</sup>Etienne, p. 53-54.

votes for Rex than it did for the established parties. (1 Rexist seat equaled 1.18 Catholic party seats, for instance.)

Where did these votes come from? Who voted for Rex, anyway? Dividing the results by linguistic region, Flanders, as mentioned above, brought 7% of its votes to Rex, Wallonie, 15.1%, and Brussels (officially bilingual), 18.5%.<sup>36</sup> Looking at them from the class point of view, and though specific statistics are not available, one can generalize that Rexist supporters were as before the elections mostly merchants, small artisans, professionals, petits bourgeois, and farmers, with a few aristocrats as well.<sup>37</sup> The linguistic and class composition of the Rexist movement didn't really change after the elections; it was essentially more of the same. It was the age factor which redefined Rex in 1936. Because most Rexist were still too young to enter Parliament in 1936, Degrelle had to go scrounge around for older supporters to represent the movement-party. Having been a mouvement de génération before 1936, it now became a movement of split generations, with older, more mature Rexist as leaders or Parliamentarians and younger Rexist grouped into shock troops of various sorts. The dichotomy would, later on, cause internal problems within the movement, as Degrelle found he had to assert more and more authority on his sometimes disorderly and unserious forces.

The sudden switch to official politics must, indeed, have caused confusion for many of the younger Rexist who had joined in a vision of adventure and utopian, anti-establishment change. For, wasn't running for elections, even if separate from the Catholic party, and even as an official non-traditional-party movement-party, nevertheless joining the enemy? Wasn't it deceiving the very revolutionary base of

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<sup>36</sup>Etienne, p. 57.

<sup>37</sup>Legros, p. 166. There is no evidence that many clergy belonged to Rex, especially after Rex entered politics. I did, however, come across an article on "Les Rexistes," in Rex Jan. 4, 1935 (p. 24) by a "Josse Alzin, prêtre." (See chapter two, note 10.) Alzin was not a regular journalist of Rexist press had, whatever his connection with the movement, it must have been an exception.

Rex? How much adventure would there be in a stuffy old Parliament, especially since they, the young blood, would have no control over what happened within? It is evident that, once entered into traditional politics, Rex was forced to become more traditional itself, and Degrelle was forced to exert more authority -- paternal, perhaps -- over the young lycée or university students who still constituted a large part of his following. Though it had always been hierarchically organized, I would argue that, once in official politics, the hierarchy was accentuated even more. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why Rex started to lose impact drastically in 1937, and why many of the Rexistes de la première heure left, beginning in late 1936.

Reasons for Rex's success:

Ironically, anti-Rexist propaganda helped Rex almost as much as its own propaganda, for it informed the entire country about the threat. It wasn't only regular and chance readers of Rexist press and posters who knew about Rex, everybody knew about it. On the one hand, the attacks upon the movement dissuaded many who might have been attracted to its flashiness and idealism, especially once it was categorized as dictatorial. On the other hand, the publicity must have drawn a fair amount of curious and potential supporters to Rexist meetings and press. Those not so stable in their beliefs might then have been seduced by Rexist dramatics and rhetoric.

Anti-Rexists approached Rex with Rexist tactics; that is, through accusatory and angry speeches and through the press. All opposing factions were united in accusing Degrelle and Rex of being a "danger fasciste et dictatorial."<sup>38</sup> The Catholic party, in particular, having the most axes to grind with the dissenters because of the brutal politico-financier scandal episodes, retorted with equally harsh charges: "Le but véritable du mouvement rexiste est l'anéantissement du parti catholique, le

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<sup>38</sup>Legros, p. 149.

renversement des institutions et l'instauration de la dictature."<sup>39</sup> Legros claims that the established parties' intense concentration on an anti-Rexist campaign was at the expense of their own political programs. Once they realized that they had no programs to fall back on as comparison-propaganda to Rex, they reverted to insult as a campaign ploy, which, says Legros, were "symptômes évidents de la défaite."<sup>40</sup> What Legros chooses to ignore, being biased and an affirmed Rexist himself, is that the parties had every right to return like insult for like insult. (Politics by the 1930s was no different from today: in the heat of the campaign, one tends to exaggerate and become aggressive.) The three big parties may not have iterated specific programs, yet everybody knew what they were, for they had been in use for years. As for the Rexist, they were not so good at setting forth programs themselves, their campaign being based more on pointing to problems in the present system than on proposing solutions. However, the combined efforts of all traditional parties against Rex proves that it was a threat, and a serious one.

Specifically anti-Rexist press often copied Rexist press format. Judex, for instance, was identical to Rex and concentrated on personal attacks on Degrelle and other prominent Rexist. It was founded by Catholic activists of the Liège area, a Rexist stronghold, and ran weekly from March 26, 1936 to June 11, 1936.<sup>41</sup> Anti-Rex, another election-period anti-Rexist weekly, was published from March 26, 1936 to May 29, 1936. More long-term and post-election opposition papers included the Communist La Voix du Peuple<sup>42</sup> Antidote (a weekly in defense of public liberties, based in Liège, running from Sept. 13, 1936 to Dec. 17, 1936), and Vigilance (bi-monthly, published by a group of

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<sup>39</sup>Saint-Germain, p. 100. Their choice of words was more controlled than Rex's, of course.

<sup>40</sup>Legros, p. 150.

<sup>41</sup>Information on anti-Rexist press was taken from Legros, p. 150-51, and Étienne, p. 128-30 & p. 190.

<sup>42</sup>Legros, p. 222.

anti-fascist intellectuals, appearing from Apr. 1, 1936 to Nov. 1, 1936).<sup>43</sup> The already established L'Indépendance belge (directed by the banker and big industrialist, J.-E. Solvay, from November 1936 on) took the lead in anti-fascist press after the elections.

What was most unusual for Belgium was the violence involved in these anti-Rexist attacks. Rex had not engaged in any violent acts so far -- the few scuffles occurring at meetings were not initiated by Rex and were not preplanned or organized -- so the response was surprising. As leader, Degrelle was the main target for these assaults. The most famous one occurred on September 15, 1936 at Seraing, a mostly Socialist town on the left bank of the Meuse, near Liège. Because his meeting had been banned by the town, and because he knew that, if he tried to enter the town by usual routes, he would be stopped, the Rexist leader (determined to speak and always full of ingenious ways to get around barriers to his actions) decided to make his entrance on a barge down the river and deliver his speech through a microphone! All went fine until shots were suddenly fired from the banks, where Socialist and Communist groups had gathered to hold a counter-meeting to Degrelle's. Three Rexist were wounded, including the local chef of Rex-Liège, M. Willems. Degrelle, invincible, survived the attack unharmed.<sup>44</sup> Such incidents repeated themselves frequently during the movement's lifetime, and Degrelle suffered a few injuries, though never serious ones.

Rexist and historians have had different theories on why the movement succeeded. Degrelle himself gives credit to his own imagination and stamina (during the campaign he often gave up to six lectures per day!),<sup>45</sup> as well as to Rexist youthfulness. "En un an, sans appui de quiconque, à force d'acharnement, de sacrifices

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<sup>43</sup>Étienne, p. 190.

<sup>44</sup>Saint-Germain, p. 176 and Étienne, p. 128-29. One Government minister considered the Seraing occurrence serious enough to order his wife and children to take refuge in the house if Degrelle was killed. He apparently feared an ensuing street war. [Legros, p. 186-87]. If Legros's claim is correct (he doesn't cite sources), the incident points to the growing tension evolving within the country around Rex.

<sup>45</sup>Étienne, p. 62.



et de foi, nous avons, à quelques milliers de jeunes garçons et de jeunes filles, révolutionné toute la Belgique."<sup>46</sup> His formula for success included political flair, a sense of action, inventiveness, and fear of nothing.<sup>47</sup> "La victoire est à ceux qui veulent et à ceux qui croient."<sup>48</sup> Legros associates Rex success not only with its innovative propaganda techniques, but also with the contemporary, politically vacuous situation, one in which the established parties concentrated so much on inner politics, on working together, that they ignored the national problems of social, religious and linguistic peace. With its call for unity above class, religious and language differences, Rex appeared "comme une délivrance."<sup>49</sup> "Et, c'est ainsi que l'électeur dégoûté n'hésitait pas à donner à Rex la faveur de son vote. Pour lui, Rex apparaissait comme un mouvement révolutionnaire animé d'un idéal, conforme aux aspirations du peuple..."<sup>50</sup> Etienne notes that the resolution of the Segers case in favor of Degrelle, just two weeks before the elections, was a big push for the movement (Rex was doing good things for the society), as was the decision by Parliament to increase its size from 187 to 202 députés (seen as a selfish move to keep itself very much in power)<sup>51</sup>. Etienne focuses more on Rexist propaganda techniques acting in a favorable framework of inner party disunity and loss of identity due to prolonged coalition policy-making.<sup>52</sup> The Catholic party was split by language, political leaning (conservatives versus Christian Democrats), and class differences, he writes; it took on party qualities only in questions of the Church, and acted as a unit only at election time. Liberals had to contend with in-fighting between anti-clericists, demanding a return to lay-controlled schools, and more moderate advocates of Church-controlled education. Even the Socialist party, of

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<sup>46</sup>Léon Degrelle, Hitler pour 1000 ans (Paris, La Table Ronde, 1969), p. 45.

<sup>47</sup>Degrelle, Hitler, p. 41.

<sup>48</sup>Degrelle, Hitler, p. 46.

<sup>49</sup>Legros, p. 164.

<sup>50</sup>Legros, p. 165.

<sup>51</sup>Etienne, p. 62.

<sup>52</sup>Etienne, p.60-62.



all the parties, the strongest, was generationally split between the old guard, under Emile Vandervelde and Louis de Brouckère, and a new group of activists, lead by Henri de Man and Paul-Henri Spaak.<sup>53</sup> In comparison, Rex was unified and young. It drew its forces from the nation's youth, and, in particular, from Catholic youth. To them, who had been brought up and educated in very religious institutions, and who had gone on to Catholic action, the disunified, disorganized and old Catholic party seemed to hold no openings for their activism.<sup>54</sup> Rex's vitality and cohesiveness, therefore, could easily have appeared as the answer.

As for economics, Étienne continues, Rex was a political movement, not an economic one. Therefore, economics played less of a role in its rise to power than it did with other fascist movements of the 1930s. Belgium did suffer from the Depression, but, by 1935, the economy was on the rise again, with higher production and lower unemployment figures recorded (see plate 6 for chart).<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, it is true that the recovery effected parts of the middle class -- retailers, in particular -- later than other classes. By 1935-36, these sections of the economy were still struggling and were, as a consequence, more likely to be resentful towards government policies. In addition, even if the standard of living was ameliorating, remnants of the psychological impact of the depression were still evident.<sup>56</sup> Many were still searching for guarantees of economic stability. Rexist newness and promises of a better life (even without programs outlined) must have seemed hopeful.

What to me seems even more important, however, was the fact that Rex was the Opposition. In election years, when a society is disgruntled with political processes and in need of a change, whatever the Opposition is offering always seems better. 24.67% of Belgians were obviously unsatisfied with things as they were before 1936. 6.06% found

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<sup>53</sup>Etienne, p. 60.

<sup>54</sup>Etienne, p. 60.

<sup>55</sup>Etienne, p. 58-59.

<sup>56</sup>Etienne, p. 59.

an answer in Communism, 7.12%, in Flemish nationalism (VNV), 11.49%, in Rex.<sup>57</sup> 1936 saw the rise of extremist groups, in general. Rex happened to be at the top. It was at the top, I would argue, because it was the most all-encompassing. VNV, for obvious reasons, interested only Flemish Belgians. Communism, though it did not carry the overly negative overtones it did (and still does) in this country, was still Communism, an arm of the USSR, and not so appealing to devout Belgium. Rex, on the other hand, was for all of Belgium and had Catholicism, or, at least, Christianity, as the very foundation of its philosophies. Thus, though it seemed to be proffering new ideas, these were only a reinterpretation of old, familiar ones. To vote for Rex in 1936 was, to 11.49% of the population, to vote for forgotten ideals, to vote for the return of a longed-after vision of the good old days.

#### Rex in Parliament:

The election of 21 députés and 12 senators was just as unexpected to Rexists as it was to the rest of the country. Rex had immersed itself so completely in the fierce campaign that it had lost sight of what was to come next. (This, ironically, was the accusation Legros and other sympathetic historians of Rex made about the three big parties.) Once it had got its representatives into government, it didn't really know what to do with them! As Pierre Daye, a Rexist leader, put it, "puis ce fut, pour nous, le dur travail d'organisation, en profondeur."<sup>58</sup> Degrelle was even more frank:

Ils ignoraient tout de cette taverne [Parliament]. Ils n'y avaient même jamais mis les pieds.... Pour nos vingt-et-un députés rexistes c'étaient donc l'avance mystérieuse, doigt sur la gachette du fusil, parmi la brousse où il faut s'attendre à tous les traquenards et à tous les coups de canailles.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Étienne, p. 53.

<sup>58</sup>Pierre Daye, Léon Degrelle et le Rexisme (Paris, A. Fayard et Cie., 1937), p. 14.

<sup>59</sup>Degrelle, "Rex au parlement ou huit jours chez les bêtes [sic]," in Rex, July 3, 1936, no. 27, p. 1.

As a result, Rexist tactics within Parliament were essentially no different from those without. They were based more on violent attacks than constructive programming. From the beginning, Rexist representatives acted as a block against the established parties. The old parties were pourris and characterised, in typical Rexist fashion, by deformities of all kinds. Degrelle continues, in the article already cited above, this way:

...le mastodontesque Brunfaut, la tête convulsée, essayait de renverser le service d'ordre, le vieux Vandervelde, avec son nez ignoble en flamme de bougie, brandissait son cornet acoustique.... Les Rexistes, Raphaël Sindic en tête, se défendirent comme des sangliers, à coups de crocs.<sup>60</sup>

Once in Parliament, Rex found every pretext to find fault with the system as it now stood (they had not, as yet, rejected the institution of Parliamentarism itself).

Nos Rexistes doivent s'attendre à tout: aux injures les plus basses, aux traquenards les plus odieux et même, un jour ou l'autre, à des violences sanglantes. Ils doivent s'attendre, par dessus le marché, A PERDRE ROYALEMENT LEUR TEMPS dans cette baraque où nul travail n'est possible au milieu des luttes actuelles des partis, seul élément qui compte là-bas.<sup>61</sup>

Rex-Parliament interaction was a race for who could keep ahead of whom. If Rex made accusations, Catholics, Liberals and Socialists would team up to devise some way of getting back at it. A good example is the Sindic case. In July 1936, Degrelle received a tip from an ex-Catholic minister about corruption within the Caisse d'épargne, the national savings bank for les petites gens. (The bank apparently had under-the-desk contracts with big capitalist firms, an action which contradicted the original reason for its founding.) Degrelle chose his best speaker in Parliament, Raphaël Sindic, to expose the scandal in the the next session. On July 10, at 2 pm, after the order of the day had been taken care of, the President of the Chamber, M. Camille Huysmans, turned the podium over to Sindic. But the scheduled Rexist speaker was not there. Neither was he there at 2:15 pm, and his Rexist compatriots were so stunned that

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<sup>60</sup>Degrelle, "Rex au parlement ou huit jours chez les bêtes," in Rex, July 3, 1936, no. 27, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup>Degrelle, "La sale boîte du Parlement," in Rex, no. 28-29, p. 3.

they did not even think to choose someone else to take the stand and stall for time. Huysmans closed the session. Barely ten minutes later, Sindic arrived; but it was too late.<sup>62</sup> As expected, Rex reacted with fury. But even violent articles in Le Pays réel couldn't stop the country from pointing its finger at the movement in ridicule.<sup>63</sup> This time, Parliament had won one over Rex. Unprepared to conform to Parliamentary policy-making procedures, Rex in Parliament was more of an annoyance than a true and constructive opposition party.

#### Rex makes political moves:

This did not mean, however, that Degrelle did not mean to bring changes; on the contrary, change was all he wanted. But he seemed to lead his movement into political moves more for the sake of getting attention and collecting supporters, than to create steps towards effective reform. Having learned the propaganda routine, he seemed unwilling, or unable, to find new ways. His and the movement's actions after May 1936, therefore, were not very different from before. They were carried out more for tactical reasons (to improve Rex's standing) than as means to fulfill some moral goal.

An example was Rex's support of the strikers in June 1936. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of this month, strikes broke out on the docks of Antwerp. Rex denounced them as Socialist and Communist incited and rebuked the government for its passivity in the matter. On June 14, however, the strikes were taken up by miners in Liège and transformed into a general strike. To everybody's amazement, Le Pays réel of June 15 published an article in support of the strikers' demands for a forty-hour week, paid vacations, and a minimum salary of 32 FB per week.<sup>64</sup> In following weeks, Rex organized soup kitchens for the strikers and vacations with Rexist families by the sea and in the country for

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<sup>62</sup>Etienne, p. 124-25; and Ladrière and Pfeiffer, p. 75-76.

<sup>63</sup>Ladrière and Pfeiffer, p. 75-76.

<sup>64</sup>Etienne, p. 117-18.

some 8,000 children of strikers.<sup>65</sup> Degrelle and his wife were featured prominently at these various charity events for the strikers. One must note that, if the Socialists had perhaps supported the Antwerp protests, neither they, nor the Catholics and Liberals concurred with a general strike. Rex's support of the strikers on June 15, was another way of opposing the three big parties. Furthermore, Antwerp was in Flanders and was not a base of Rexist support. Liège, on the other hand, was a Rexist stronghold, and Rex had to support the city's workers in order to keep its standing there.

The next political move caused even more of a fuss within, as well as outside of the movement. Since the beginning, Rex had quietly avoided any confrontation with Flemish nationalist groups, especially those in Parliament, and had, in fact, worked towards a mutual agreement between the two sides. On October 8, 1936, Rex announced an accord with VNV. Because negotiations had been kept secret until that date, the pact came as a great shock to the country. Rex avowed that Prime Minister Van Zeeland had been briefed on the talk and had given his approval to them.<sup>66</sup> Rex-Flanders leader, Paul de Mont, had indeed informed Van Zeeland during the months of August and September about Rex-VNV discussion, and the Prime Minister may even have responded favorably to the attempt at linguistic unification,<sup>67</sup> but from there to endorsing an official Rex-VNV alliance is a far step. For an accord of the two strongest extremist organizations in power was a serious danger to the Belgian Parliamentary system. Rex claimed the pact was the beginning of a cultural federalism which would settle the age-old differences between Flanders and Wallonie.<sup>68</sup> VNV defined Rex as Walloon

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<sup>65</sup>Degrelle, Le Message de Rex, p. 10; and Legros, p. 167.

<sup>66</sup>Le Pays réel, Apr. 9, 1936, as quoted by Étienne, p. 99.

<sup>67</sup>Legros, p. 203.

<sup>68</sup>Writing sometime between April and June, 1937, Pierre Daye seems truly optimistic about the prospect of unity. He claims that VNV has finally come around to the idea of "l'unité nationale belge, qu'ils avaient souvent refetée jusqu'alors, et ont admis de ne plus mettre en cause la monarchie." He is confident that "ce problème...semble donc résolu." [Daye, p. 180.] One wonders how he could really believe that VNV would surrender its Flemish nationalism so easily.

nationalist (which it was not) and, therefore, compatible in the fight for nationalist autonomy.<sup>69</sup> Rex, surprisingly, accepted to turn Rex-Flanders over to VNV in the near future; VNV accepted Rex's federalism, while affirming that this did not negate the concept of a Dietsland, the Großdeutschland of the Flemish (though the contradiction is blatant).<sup>70</sup>

In actuality, the purpose of the pact was more to keep mutual tabs on each other than to form a working partnership. VNV nationalism was simply contradictory in every way to Rexist nationalism, and neither party was willing to budge from its stance. Their only commonality was their ardent, violent anti-communism, anti-establishment and authoritarianism. Yet, within this context, they were vying for power. True, acting together, they could form more of a block against, both, the three traditional parties and the Communists in Parliament, but they had been voting the same way all along anyway, and 37 députés against 175 was no better than 21 or 16 against 175.<sup>71</sup> But, if they were officially working together, then they could make sure the other did not get out of line; VNV, especially, could slowly recoup its sole control of rightist extremist opinion in Flanders. Fortunately, the agreement existed only in theory and lasted barely a year. On June 25, 1937, Staf De Clercq, leader of VNV, wrote in his newspaper Volk en Staat that, though he still respected Rex and its leader, he had been misled by Degrelle's overtures, that Rex was not going to support Flemish political autonomy, and that, therefore, the agreement was useless.<sup>72</sup> Rex's political ploy had once again failed.

But Degrelle didn't give up. Instead, he decided to assemble 250,000 Rexist in Brussels in a great propagandistic show of force. On October 22, however, three days

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<sup>69</sup>Étienne, p. 99-100.

<sup>70</sup>Étienne, p. 100.

<sup>71</sup>Étienne, p. 101. Daye stresses this aspect of the pact. Rex wanted an enforced, anti-Marxist Right against a coalesced Left (Rex defined all non-Right parties as Left). With an alliance with VNV, it hoped to achieve that end. "De cette manière, le pays serait rentré, par un détour assez inattendu, dans la vraie conception parlementaire: deux partis seulement, le Gouvernement et l'Opposition..." [Daye, p. 187-88].

<sup>72</sup>As quoted in Étienne, p. 101.

before the appointed day, the meeting was forbidden by the government.<sup>73</sup> In his usual stubborn way, Degrelle simply ignored the decree and called for the meeting to take place, as planned. Only, now, he ordered all Rexists to calmly and quietly join the rest of the ceremony at the tomb of the unknown soldier -- it being the day of commemoration for the WWI battle on the Yser river -- and to then attend the scheduled mass at the St. Gudule cathedral. It certainly was calm and quiet at first, for on October 25 only 3,000 to 5,000 showed up at the tomb.<sup>74</sup> At the end of the mass, however, some fighting broke out as Degrelle, perched out of a high-up window in a building opposite the cathedral (draped with a large Rexist flag, no less) encouraged his followers down in the street to resist police attempts to disperse them. Rexists and anti-Rexists blew the whole incident out of proportion. Le Pays réel wrote that the police had been brutal and that M. de Grunne had been "égorgé," when he had only been slightly scratched. The other side nick-named the Rexist meeting the "marche sur Bruxelles," an allusion to both Hitler's and Mussolini's marches.<sup>75</sup> At any rate, the demonstration to end all demonstrations resulted only in Rex being mocked at, once again, by the entire country. At this point, the only way Rex could save face was by returning to the one tactic that was guaranteed to work: speech-making.

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<sup>73</sup>Étienne, p. 119-21; and Legros, p. 189.

<sup>74</sup>250,000 was, in any case, a totally unrealistic number; perhaps, again, only a figment of Degrelle's over-zealous imagination.

<sup>75</sup>Étienne, p. 120. Degrelle claims that général Chardonne of the great Chasseur ardennais had written him a note a few days before the event and had offered his troops in support of a coup d'état. Since, according to Degrelle, "presque tous les gendarmes étaient rexistes; quatre-vingt-dix pour cent au moins l'étaient, comme presque toute l'armée l'était" (extremely doubtful, in light of the fact that the army was most loyal to the king and that the king was in no way a supporter of Rex), success seemed possible. Yet, peace-loving as he claims he then was, Degrelle refused, for "c'était dans la légalité et le libre consentement du peuple que je voulais gagner. J'étais sûr de le convaincre et de me hisser au pouvoir porté par lui. Pourquoi recourir à la force matérielle alors que je disposais de la force suprême, celle de la conviction?" [Charlier, p. 137].



Degrelle seemed to realize this -- at least for a while -- and started into marathons of speeches, such as Les Six Jours de Rex,<sup>76</sup> which were a tremendous success. But the thirst for greater things quickly drew him back to secret dealings and political moves. Degrelle claims that, once Rex was in Parliament, he had begun fostering a close relationship with the two leaders of the Right in Flanders and Wallonie, respectively. Gustave Sap was well respected among Flemish nationalist circles as director of the popular Flemish newspaper Standaard.<sup>77</sup> And Comte d'Aspremont-Linden was, in Degrelle's words, "le grand chef morale de la Droite conservatrice" in Wallonie.<sup>78</sup> Together with Degrelle, they apparently worked on preparing the country and Parliament for a smooth take-over by Rex. Though one must be wary of Degrelle's retrospective interpretations of events, it is obvious that by Spring 1937 he had gained enough confidence in his ability to conquer to put the legal putsch plan into action.

On March 7, 1937, Le Pays réel announced that the Rexist député from Brussels, M. Alfred Olivier, and all his seconds had resigned, and that Degrelle would run in their place.<sup>79</sup> The Rexist chef wanted to use the elections as a referendum of Rex's popularity, or so he said (one might speculate on his personal intentions in putting himself up for elections after having sworn off Parliamentary life):<sup>80</sup>

C'est parce que je sentais que je tenais les atouts en main, malgré la campagne féroce que menait contre moi le régime tout entier, que je décidai au printemps de 1937 de lâcher mes chiens, de braver le régime lui-même et de provoquer, par un coup de théâtre une espèce de référendum national. Référendum veut dire consultation popu-

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<sup>76</sup>See below, chapter on Degrelle as orator, for details on this series of orations.

<sup>77</sup>Charlier, p. 141.

<sup>78</sup>Charlier, p. 142.

<sup>79</sup>Wim Dannau, Ainsi Parla Léon Degrelle (Strombeek-Bever, Editions Byblos s.p.r.l., 1973), vol. V, p. 135. At the time, seconds were elected to the legislature at the same time as representatives, so that, if the député should for some reason leave his post, his second would take his place. Frequent and troublesome elections could thus be avoided.

<sup>80</sup>Dannau, vol. V, p. 135. See discussion on this issue below, in the chapter on Degrelle.



laire. Donc démocratie. Donc légalité.<sup>81</sup>

Degrelle saw the capital as "le coeur, le poulx, la voix du pays;" whatever it thought, the country thought.<sup>82</sup> How Rex could realistically think that it could win -- "nous étions convaincus de gagner," recalls Degrelle -- or even give a good showing is hard to understand.<sup>83</sup> Several unexpected occurrences did work against it, however. First of all, Degrelle had gone in expecting to be opposed by three different candidates, one from each of the three big parties. Yet, in a Parliamentary session at the end of February, the three parties, as well as the Communists (Degrelle claims they instigated the whole thing), all endorsed the same candidate, Prime Minister Van Zeeland, also a lively and competent speaker.<sup>84</sup> Degrelle rode over this first blow and launched into one of the fiercest campaigns in Belgian history so far. For, since 1936, Rexist tactics were no longer novel, and anti-Rexist knew that the only way to combat Rex was on equal footing; that is, by engaging in the same kinds of confrontational and, sometimes, violent campaign strategies that Rex used. Both sides, therefore, held meetings (Degrelle did another marathon of oratory with Les Huits jours de Rex, i.e. eight days of attacks on the government, from April 4 to April 11), distributed posters all over the city, and used the press to its utmost possibilities. Trying in vain to stay ahead in the propaganda part of it, Rex used mocking and joke-making as a tool -- a return to the pranks of Louvain days. It even put up mock anti-Rexist posters, with lines like, "Camarades! Restez toujours fidèles à votre programme...La dictature du prolétariat doit être instaurée, tous à l'action, triomphe de l'Internationale communiste...Contre le patriotard Degrelle, votez Van Zeeland."<sup>85</sup> A further hindrance came on April 9, when, in response to Degrelle's statement on April 7 that if Malines (the seat of the cardinal)

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<sup>81</sup>Charlier, p. 143.

<sup>82</sup>Charlier, p. 143.

<sup>83</sup>Dannau, vol. V, p. 139.

<sup>84</sup>Charlier, p. 144.

<sup>85</sup>Dannau, vol. V, p. 141.

was against Rex it would have already said so, Cardinal Van Roey forbade all Catholics from either voting for Rex or not voting at all.<sup>86</sup> This was essentially the last turn of the sword for Degrelle, for, Catholic as it was, Belgium was not going to go against its cardinal's word.

On April 11, 1937, Van Zeeland won an overwhelming victory, carrying 275,880 (75.89%) out of 363,440 votes cast. Degrelle came away with 69,242, or 19.05% of the vote -- the figure including Rex and VNV supporters, who had formed a coalition for the election. In addition, 18,358 blank votes were cast. As compared to 1936, when Rex had obtained 53,382 votes in Brussels, Rex actually gained in 1937. But now that VNV was included in the count, we must make the comparison to Rex plus VNV in 1936, i.e. some 75,000 votes. In that light, 1937 represented a loss of about 6,000 votes.<sup>87</sup> This may not seem very much, as, in fact, it wasn't, but in the context of Rex's expectations, it was significant. Rex had not only not won, it had actually lost votes. The referendum had ended up being a referendum in favor of the traditional democratic parties, and not of Rex.

The reasons for Rex's defeat included not only the single opposition candidate and the cardinal's declaration, but, also, Rex's new style of propaganda. Belgians did not appreciate the mocking and, instead, found the lack of seriousness valid proof that Rex was not Parliamentary material.<sup>88</sup> The fiasco of the October 25 gathering, the discovery that Degrelle had secretly met with Hitler end of September 1936 (even though nothing important came out of the encounter)<sup>89</sup>, as well as the Rex-VNV pact, which suddenly put two very authoritarian groups in alliance, alienated possible Rexist supporters. Degrelle alone had not suffered a blow, his whole movement had.

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<sup>86</sup>Etienne, p. 137.

<sup>87</sup>Etienne, p. 137-38 & chart on p. 178.

<sup>88</sup>Etienne, p. 139.

<sup>89</sup>Etienne, p. 111.

Rex, of course, tried to get beyond the defeat as soon as possible. An article by Degrelle in Le Pays réel was entitled "Le 'Moustique' n'a pas été écrasé! REX, renforcé par cette lutte titanesque, va repartir à l'assaut, plus ardent que jamais."<sup>90</sup> Yet the situation could not be reversed. The failure of the staged elections marked the beginning of the fourth and final pre-war phase of Rex. Rex had been defeated a first time and, from then on, would lose more and more support.

In November, 1936, after an apparent personal argument with Degrelle, Robert de Vroylande du Bois, a past chief editor of Rex, left the movement. The ex-Rexist's rebuttle to Degrelle and to an anonymous article published in the November 10, 1936 issue of Le Pays réel which made all sorts of outrageous accusations against him, was cruelly sarcastic.<sup>91</sup> In a pamphlet appearing shortly after his resignation, he described Degrelle this way:

On sait que ce glorieux individu...ne se sent à l'aise que dans le purin qu'il déverse à jet continu sur tous ceux qui ont commis l'impardonnable crime de ne pas le considérer comme un comprimé de toutes les perfections imaginables.<sup>92</sup>

Similarly, Xavier de Grunne, a Rexist senator, separated himself from the movement on December 10, 1937. His reasons for leaving, however, were more personal than anti-Rexist. De Grunne had made declarations against Parliament which were not in line with Rexist doctrine, and Degrelle and he both decided that it would be better if he broke off from the movement.<sup>93</sup> He did, however, continue to serve in Parliament as an independent senator (without party affiliation), and remained an outside supporter of Rex until the war. Raphaël Sindic, on the other hand, left Rex in anger in 1939. In

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<sup>90</sup>As quoted in Dannau, vol. 5, p. 228-29.

<sup>91</sup>Robert de Vroylande du Bois, Léon Degrelle Pourri (Louvain, Les Éditions Lovanis, 1936)

<sup>92</sup>de Vroylande, p. 11.

<sup>93</sup>Xavier de Grunne, Pourquoi je suis séparé de Rex? (Wesembeek-Ophem, X. De Grunne, 1937)

his pamphlet stating the reasons for his resignation, he wrote about disorder and lies within the movement:

Il règne à Rex une atmosphère trouble, faite de mystère, de duplicité, d'intrigues et de mensonges, atmosphère à laquelle on risque de s'habituer à la longue, mais qui est empoisonnante pour ceux dont les poumons manquent d'habitude.<sup>94</sup>

Although in his introduction he did affirm that the tract was not a personal attack against the Rexist leader,<sup>95</sup> he did accuse Degrelle, especially, of usurping and wasting Rexist funds and Rexist supporters, who went out on a limb to earn these funds; of inconsistency in his doctrines, or, rather, of having no real doctrines at all and only beliefs which fluctuated with public opinion; of entering avidly into politics, after declaring that Rex was apolitical; of ruining the movement's possibilities of achieving its original ideal; and, finally, of striving for personal dictatorship. "M. Degrelle veut une dictature personnelle, sans programme bien défini, capable de s'adapter au jour le jour aux circonstances qui se présenteront."<sup>96</sup>

By 1939, then, Rex had been rejected not only by enemies, but also by former friends. Degrelle had become too dictatorial, it seemed, and the original ideologies of the movement had disappeared under a storm of accusations against whoever came in the way and under a fury of propaganda. By 1939, Rex seemed to act more for Rex as an end in itself, than for Rex as a means toward moral reform and national unity. As a result, those who had believed in Rex the first time round, in 1936, and those who had tried to believe in Rex again, in 1937, found that Rex was not following its intentions after all. In local elections on October 18, 1938, though the three big parties had lost votes as compared to 1932 elections, Rex, responsible for the losses, had nevertheless already received considerably fewer votes than in 1936 (a drop from 18.72% to 10.90% in Brussels, for instance). In the April 2, 1939 legislative elections, Degrelle finally

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<sup>94</sup>Raphaël Sindic, Pourquoi je quitte REX (Bruxelles, Éditions du Sanglier, 1939), p. 3.

<sup>95</sup>Sindic, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup>Sindic, p. 8.

received a seat as député for Brussels, but Rex, in general, sunk into near invisibility. What few faithfuls remained returned 103,821 votes out of 2,338,437 cast, only 4.43 %, as compared to the 11.49 % of four years before. Parliament now held four Rexist députés and four Rexist senators (as opposed to 21 députés and 12 senators in 1936).

As war became imminent, Rex supported the king's reaffirmation of Belgian neutrality and constantly objected to seeming tendencies towards alliances with the allies against Germany. For Rex, neutralism was to be of the strictest kind, for only thus would invasion by either side be prevented. Neutralism, however, quickly changed to passivism after Reich troops enter Belgian territory on May 10, 1940 (an event which surprised Rexist greatly, for they had firmly believed that neutralism would keep the peace). During the entire eighteen-day military campaign against the Germans, Rex kept demanding surrender to the invading forces, which, it declared, could never be overcome anyway. By August 1940 when Degrelle, miraculously returned alive from imprisonment in France, got permission to start up Le Pays réel again, passivity, in turn, became collaboration. For the next four years, Degrelle and Rex, though slowly drawing apart, would each in their own way work closer and closer with Nazi occupation forces. In 1944, Degrelle would be honored with the Ritterkreuz and would be complemented by Hitler with "Si j'avais un fils, je l'aurais aimé tel que vous."<sup>97</sup>

The story of this collaboration must be left to a separate work.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup>Etienne, p. 171.

<sup>98</sup>M. Martin Conway of Oxford University, Oxford, England, is presently writing a dissertation for the Doctorate of Philosophy on this subject.

**Chaper four**

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**Léon Degrelle**

As I have discussed in the last chapter, phase four of the Rexist movement began with the 1937 elections. Rex in this period was not only fading fast and far, but Degrelle was separating himself more and more from the movement. There were specific reasons for this: his background, his character, his personal ambitions. It is necessary, therefore, to take a look at where the foremost Rexist leader came from, what he was like, and what were his goals. This chapter is a brief window into Degrelle as a person, as a politician, an orator, and a writer.

#### Biographical chronology:

Léon Degrelle was born on June 15, 1906 to a middle-class family of comfortable means in the southern Belgian town of Bouillon. He was the fourth of eight children (the eldest son having died before Léon's birth) and was named after his paternal grandfather. The Degrelle family can be traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Ardennes, bordering between France and Belgium. Léon's branch of the family had moved to Gonrioux, then to Solre-le-Château, near Maubeuge, France, in the 1800s, before Edouard, his father, set up shop as a brewer to the château of Bouillon and became a Belgian citizen -- the family had, until then, always been citizens of France. On June 12, 1895, Edouard married Marie Boever, from Laroche, on the Luxembourg side of the Moselle river. Mme. Boever-Degrelle came from a long line of doctors -- respected citizens of the community -- and her own father had long been involved in the local Catholic Party: at first, in campaigns against liberalism in the late 1870s, and then, as head of the local Party organization.<sup>1</sup> His position would later on greatly influence the young Léon. Degrelle describes his father as a well-off, yet modest and honest man; like others,

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<sup>1</sup>Usnard Legros, Un homme, un chef, Léon Degrelle (Bruxelles, Editions Rex, 1938), p.28.

[m]on père était un bourgeois, et le notaire ou le médecin étaient des bourgeois. Mais ils saluaient en passant devant leur porte le forgeron et le tanneur, parce que le forgeron et le tanneur, comme eux, gagnaient leur vie, et avaient beaucoup d'enfants, ils étaient honnêtes et travailleurs.<sup>2</sup>

So the young Léon grew up in a stable environment, with, undoubtedly, a considerable amount of attention paid to him -- since he was the oldest son -- but attention limited by the rules of strict Catholic upbringing. Indeed, not only did he attend primary school at the Collège diocésain de Bouillon, run by secular priests, but his mother brought all her children to mass every morning and held daily evening prayers at home before the family statue of the Virgin Mary.<sup>3</sup> The boy's early education was only briefly interrupted by the Great War. In 1914, as the German armies were moving across Belgium, the Degrelle family (and most of the rest of Bouillon) fled across the border to Sedan, only to return to their native town when the French city began to be attacked itself. Degrelle later recounted in rather elaborate (and, often, gruesome) detail his impressions of the flight south and the four year occupation.<sup>4</sup> As a quiet and meditative eight-year-old boy, the experience was obviously quite shocking and memorable, though life soon returned to more normal conditions, as he continued the daily school routine.<sup>5</sup> At twelve, he switched to the Institut Saint-Pierre, in Bouillon, and, at fifteen, was sent off to the Jesuit Collège de Notre-Dame-de-la-Paix at Namur, 91 kilometers north of Bouillon. Having always been somewhat unhappy at school, the young Degrelle soon found comfort in his literary exploits at the Collège. He read avidly -- even secretly, late into the night, with the help of a flashlight and a blanket, says Pierre Daye -- and excelled especially in

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<sup>2</sup>Léon Degrelle, as quoted by Brassillach, Léon Degrelle et l'avenir de Rex (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1936), p. 478.

<sup>3</sup>Legros, p. 33-42

<sup>4</sup>Pierre Daye mentions this unpublished work, written in Degrelle's adolescence, in his Léon Degrelle et le rexisme (Paris, A. Fayard et Cie., 1937), p. 35-46.

<sup>5</sup>Legros, p. 33-42.



rhetoric, perhaps already a sign of his future career.<sup>6</sup> His peers and teachers didn't think favorably of him, yet nevertheless stood in awe of him: "Ils l'aiment peu pourtant, car ils sont déconcertés par son caractère si entier. Elève espiègle, vif, spirituel, il agace parfois et fascine toujours par sa facilité et son abondance littéraires."<sup>7</sup> Degrelle completed his second latine (roughly equivalent to our secondary school) and decided to stay an extra year in Namur, in order to get his candidature en philosophie et lettres. Unfortunately, the end of the year did not bring him success. After failing his candidature exam, he opted for a drastic move and enrolled himself at Louvain university to prepare for a doctorate in law. He successfully finished his first three years of study there, passing exams for philosophy and letters, art and archeology, and philosophy according to Saint Thomas.<sup>8</sup> After this initial success, however, he nevertheless failed to complete his degree, though this time because of extra-curricular activities.

No matter how applied a student Degrelle was, his efforts were usually diverted to some sort of journalism. Writing had been one of his favored pastime from early on. As an adolescent, he had had several pieces published in various journals, including a reflective one about All Souls' Day in L'Avenir du Luxembourg, a conservative journal begun partly under the auspices of his maternal grandfather.<sup>9</sup> It is at Louvain, however, that his writing career really took off. Soon after entering the university, he had joined Nouvelle Equipe, a writer's group directed by Yvan Lenain, and had become

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<sup>6</sup>Daye, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup>Legros, p. 43. Rexist biographers of Degrelle disagree on the leader's psychological state while in Namur. Daye writes that the Bouillon student was prone to frequent and severe depressions. Legros, on the other hand, refutes these and says that they were only usual, adolescent crises, out of which, and with the help of his strong religious faith, Degrelle always managed to lift himself: "...les traits dominants de sa nature étaient la joie et la volonté." [Legros, p. 16.] One wonders why neither of them ever ventured to ask Degrelle himself; after all, he was alive at the writings. At any rate, both authors characterize the student as a loner in his thoughts, however happy or melancholic they may have been.

<sup>8</sup>Daye, p. 50-51.

<sup>9</sup>Legros, p.50.

its secretary. Around 1927, Degrelle also began supporting himself by writing at XX<sup>ème</sup> Siècle, a well-known Catholic journal with offices in Brussels. (He would continue to do so until he became head of his own publishing house at the ACJB.) More importantly, in 1927, he became director of the student newspaper, L'Avant-Garde, and launched his career not only as a prolific and regularly-published journalist, but also as a leader -- a career which would continue to develop, first, at the Cahiers de la Jeunesse Catholique (Giovanni Hoyois, director), then, at Les Éditions Rex (ACJB) and Les Presses de Rex.

Though a loner as a child, immersed in whatever books he could get his hands on, Degrelle had always had visions of himself as a leader of social change. "En outre, la justice sociale vivait en moi parce que vivait en moi la passion de la justice tout court et l'élan vers la fraternité que le Christ a apportée aux hommes."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, he had developed his ideas on how to bring about such changes from early on, and he waited only for the right moment to declare them to the world around him and to put them into action. An opportunity for the first arose when he began writing for the journal XX<sup>ème</sup> Siècle and, specifically, when they published his series of articles on "Les Taudis" in 1929. While exposing the sometimes horrendous conditions of worker slums in several prominent Belgian towns, he also articulated some of his theories on social change.<sup>11</sup> Established political parties weren't paying attention to the workers, he argued, and the Catholic Church was too closely tied to political and capitalist powers -- especially those in the Catholic Party, even if technically distinct from the Church -- to be trusted by the workers. It was no wonder, therefore, that most of them lived "en dehors de toute vie spirituelle."<sup>12</sup> Yet, if anything, it was religion which would make the difference. It was up to Christianity to turn the situation around, to bring back the faith in a mystical

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<sup>10</sup>Jean-Michel Charlier, Léon Degrelle: Persiste et signe: interviews recueillies pour la télévision française par Jean-Michel Charlier (Paris, Jean Picollec, 1985), p. 65.

<sup>11</sup>Because I was unable to get hold of a copy of "Les Taudis," I am relying on my other readings for information as to its contents.

<sup>12</sup>Léon Degrelle, as quoted in Charlier, p. 58.

and awe-inspiring religion to the Belgian people; though, a Christianity emanating not directly from the Church, but, rather, from her lay activists:

La religion devait redevenir pure, se libérer de ses compromissions, ramener tout à sa mission strictement divine. C'était aux laïcs chrétiens à retrouver leurs manches pour pétrir la pâte temporelle.<sup>13</sup>

Degrelle's strong Christian upbringing and education undoubtedly steered him towards this goal, but it was Mgr. Picard and the ACJB which transformed a vague intent into real action. In a relationship of student-teacher with the chaplain, he was taught that social change through Christianity and lay action meant Catholic action. His months at the Cahiers de la Jeunesse Catholique gave him the opportunity to refine his rhetoric of social change under close pedagogic supervision. Yet the supervision did not prevent him from pursuing his own visions at the same time. By 1928-1929, his purely apostolic career had acquired more and more political characteristics. As he himself declared,

A vingt ans, je voulais, je l'ai dit, je le répète, me vouer totalement à une vie d'apôtre./ Mais ma situation était déjà, quand même, assez compliquée parce que ma vie apostolique était mêlée aussi -- que je le voulusse ou non -- à un certain nombre de positions extra-religieuses.<sup>14</sup>

This may be so, but however much the infringement of politics on his religious mission seemed inevitable, Degrelle also deliberately brought on politization of his actions. His attacks on politicians in "Les Taudis" were certainly intentional, as were those on the Mexican leftist regime. The story of the latter is interesting as a case study.

In 1929, a year after President Obregón had been assassinated, Degrelle wrote an article for XX<sup>ème</sup> Siècle denouncing the cruel treatment of Catholics by the Mexican government and praising the act of the assassin: "A chaque nouveau Torral, nous nous écrierons de tout notre coeur: bravo!"<sup>15</sup> This, of course, caused a scandal among leftist

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<sup>13</sup>Charlier, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup>Charlier, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup>Jean-Michel Etienne, Le Mouvement rexiste jusqu'en 1940 (Paris, Librairie Armand Colin, 1968), p. 13.

circles in Belgium and Degrelle was challenged to go see for himself. Unexpectedly, perhaps, but with determination, Degrelle did set out at the end of the year for Central America (using a pseudonym for safety, Paul Nanson, a 28 year old doctor).<sup>16</sup> One may well ask just what his actual motives were in acknowledging the challenge. Was it adventure that sent him on his way? Was it his Christian faith? Was it a political move? All three seemed to have played a role, though the first two served as base for the third. Degrelle yearned for the new, for the exciting; and, as a strong believer, he felt a bond of brotherhood with the oppressed Mexican Catholics. But, most of all, he had visions of himself saving the world.

Nous serions bientôt, nous, jeunes révolutionnaires de l'Europe qui naissait, les porteurs du véritable socialisme, réconciliant l'ordre indispensable de l'Etat et la justice sociale, dans la collaboration des classes artificiellement et criminellement dressées l'une contre l'autre par le marxisme et, tout autant, par l'hypercapitalisme.<sup>17</sup>

Degrelle probably saw himself as the new conqueror of Marxist evils. An investigatory trip to Mexico, commissioned by a leading Catholic newspaper -- XX<sup>ème</sup> Siècle (the Italian newspaper, L'Avenire d'Italia, also paid him in advance for articles) -- could only enhance his chances at making a name for himself within the Catholic world. Thus, with a façade of active faith (a façade which, granted, had its genuine counterparts on the inside) and with a longing for thrilling adventure, Degrelle's

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<sup>16</sup>Etienne, p. 13. Legros, p. 95. He is then supposed to have received two grants for translation of his notes on Mexico in English and Spanish, respectively. The funds he collected he used for a speedy sight-seeing trip north through the United States and into Canada. [Degrelle, Mes Aventures au Mexique (Louvain, Editions Rex, 1933), p. 80-81] Though most historians of Rex note this trip, Martin Conway, a present-day historian of the movement, doubts it ever took place. His argument is supported by the fact that no specific references to the journals who published the articles have ever been found. [Letter from Martin Conway to me, dated 17 Feb., 1987].

<sup>17</sup>Charlier, p. 48. One must be careful not to assign Degrelle's later theories on these early events, for, no matter how much he has convinced himself that his ideas remained unchanged from day one, they did evolve over time. Thus, what he recalls may not actually have occurred exactly as he thinks. Here, however, I think one can safely assume that his dreams of a youthful world-changing revolution had, at least vaguely, already emerged at an early age. These would later become more refined, as they became more specific and inflammatory.

hopes for recognition could become true. Apostolicism was certainly no longer the only purpose he had in life.

Back in Louvain in early spring 1930, Degrelle's apostolic-political career received a big push from his appointment as director of Les Éditions Rex (though his education suffered, since, after passing the first exam for his doctorate in law, he failed the second and never bothered to retake it).<sup>18</sup> Here, finally, was the chance he had been waiting for to let the world know about his theories for social change. The relationship with Mgr. Picard now transformed itself into a true partnership, with Picard as director of the entire ACJB organization and Degrelle as director of its branch of propaganda. Equipped with refined theories and rhetoric, as well as a founding base of co-workers and co-believers (drawn from L'Avant-Garde days and Cahiers writers), Degrelle was ready to become a leader of social change.<sup>19</sup> As head of his own institution, he certainly exercised much control, yet this control was still qualified by ACJB rules; that is, the purpose of propaganda was apostolic. Involvement in politics was allowed only for religious purposes.

Ce qui importe, disait-il [Degrelle], c'est de s'intéresser aux problèmes politiques de chez nous, d'étudier, d'assurer la pénétration chrétienne dans le pays et les mesures à prendre pour assurer le redressement matériel et moral d'une Patrie que la Charité et la Justice nous imposent d'aimer et de servir.<sup>20</sup>

This was not an alien phenomenon to Degrelle, and apostolicism remained an integral part of his theorization throughout the pre-war period. However, the weight it carried in relation to politics in the mission for social transformation changed over time.

Before 1934, apostolicism held a higher position in Degrelle's mind than politization.

The books he published were on rather subdued subjects, and, if political, not

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<sup>18</sup>Etienne limits Degrelle's trip to about one month, January-February 1930. In Mes Aventures au Mexique, however, Degrelle writes about three months in Mexico, followed by unspecified weeks in the north American continent. [Degrelle, p. 80-81]

<sup>19</sup>Future Rexists already at the Cahiers included men like Albert Fasbender, Georges Buquet, Charles d'Ydewalle, and Jean Denis. [Legros, p. 80-81].

<sup>20</sup>Degrelle, as quoted by Legros, p. 82-23.

outrightly so. In 1930, for instance, he compiled a short volume on his experiences at Louvain and at L'Avant-Garde in Les grandes farces de Louvain. Here, he continued his presentation, begun earlier in Jeunes plumes et vieilles barbes de Belgique, of the many pranks and jokes he and his companions engaged in as students.<sup>21</sup> Though the anecdotes included attacks on various politicians, the intent and main body of the book was not explicitly political. Even his travel analogue on Mexico avoided any thought-out attacks on the government.<sup>22</sup> It is more a romantization of what must have been a not all too luxurious trip than a political treatise on the evils of Marxism and the glories of Catholicism. Degrelle also kept the journal Rex more apostolic than political. Before 1934, the titles varied between Rex: Toute la Vie des Lettres and Rex: Toute la Vie des Catholiques. Rexist propagandists were emphatically reminded:

N'oubliez pas non plus que votre première arme, votre grande arme, est la prière./ Chaque matin, le propagandiste de Rex doit demander à Dieu de bénir son travail et tout notre mouvement./ Soyez fiers de votre mission. Vous collaborez à une oeuvre qui ne veut que la rechristianisation de la Belgique. Vous êtes les ouvriers de la première heure et des temps difficiles; vous êtes, par excellence, des apôtres modernes...<sup>23</sup>

Whereas before 1934, Rex was a tool of the ACJB, after the split, it was a tool for itself. Propagandists now spread not only the Catholic Word, but also the Rexist Word. The message to the troops was different: "... Tout ancien militant de l'A.C.J.B. doit être membre actif des organismes d'Action Catholique existants. Mais EN MEME TEMPS [sic] il doit être 'de Rex'."<sup>24</sup> Degrelle was now head not only of a publishing house, but also of a new movement -- for, as outlined above (chapter one), by 1934, Rex had become a movement. Once released from the confines of the ACJB, Degrelle freely politicized his movement until, at Courtrai, he openly declared it political. By 1935, the balance had

<sup>21</sup>Léon Degrelle, Jeunes plumes et vieilles barbes de Belgique (Louvain, L'Avant-Garde, 1928)

<sup>22</sup>Léon Degrelle, Mes Aventures au Mexique (Louvain, Editions Rex, 1933)

<sup>23</sup>Amand Gérardin, "Coin des propagandistes," in Rex, no. 22, Sept. 9, 1933, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup>René Jurant, Jean Denis, Roger Saussus, "Aux anciens de l'A.C.J.B: Pourquoi, nous vos anciens dirigeants, nous sommes Rexistes," in Rex, no. 40, Oct. 12, 1934, p. 9.



most definitely been tipped. Courtrai marked the end of the supremacy of apostolicism and the beginning of the supremacy of politics in Degrelle's theories on social change. Politics was no longer limited to religious issues. Politics was engaged in for the sake of politics -- Rexist politics.

In these early political stages, Degrelle saw himself primarily as leader of a movement, not as politician *per se*. This is why he chose not to run for election in 1936. He wanted to direct the stage from above and remain outside the petty workings of the Parliamentary system.

Pour le redressement total, il faut la mobilisation de l'opinion publique./ C'est là que REX [sic] veut faire la grande et salutaire besogne. C'est là qu'est la véritable offensive./ Et c'est pour cela que j'ai voulu rester moi-même à ce poste capital et essentiel du combat, laissant sur le front partiel et momentané du Parlement un groupe de Rexistes sacrifiés à l'avance. <sup>25</sup>

By 1937, however, he was willing to throw himself whole-heartedly into the political scene. He wanted to direct from the inside. Degrelle had long been fascinated by the way Hitler "legally" came to power and secretly longed to do the same. He, too, thought he could get to the top by popular acclaim -- or, at least, make it appear so. The 1937 election was certainly planned as a propaganda move for the Rexist party-movement in general, but it was also the next step for Degrelle. Degrelle was a tricky politician. He watched his career very closely, careful not to make too large steps too soon. As specific events occurred, he figured out exactly how they could serve his personal career. He wanted to lead the nation. This was an extravagant goal, but one which he seemed determined to reach. Looking back at this attempted "legal" coup, one might, at first, think that Degrelle had, once again, really played his cards right. All odds pointed towards a close race, even when faced with one candidate, M. Van Zeeland, instead of the expected three, and it was only the Cardinal's declaration *ex cathedra* which ruined his chances. But, not only was Van Zeeland an unusually charismatic

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<sup>25</sup>Degrelle, as quoted by Jacques Saint-Germain, La Bataille de Rex (Paris, \_\_\_\_\_, 1937), p. 160-161.

politician, Degrelle, as Etienne so astutely points out, had also been too ambitious in his endeavor.<sup>26</sup> He was not swept into power because he simply did not have the support. The many who had voted for his party in 1936 had believed in Rex's newness, in its promises. But, as the year went by, and Rexist rhetoric and propaganda contained only ridiculing of the establishment, -- "[p]olitiquement, le ridicule tue toujours..." -- only seditious attack after seditious attack, they lost faith.<sup>27</sup> Degrelle had miscalculated, had, indeed, made a fatal mistake. No matter how many thousands he might have attracted to his meetings, his personal popularity on these occasions could not win Brussels over to the Rex movement. Degrelle did not lose in 1937, his whole movement did. And though he was able to get a seat in Parliament in the 1939 general elections, this personal success did not imply a Rexist success.

One might wonder just how much Rex was Degrelle. He did, of course, form the movement initially and did mold it, in its early years, according to his ideals. He made it political, he started it in Parliament, he tried to have it become the ruling party in 1937. Up to 1937, then, Degrelle was indeed Rex; his personal success meant the movement's success. Yet 1937 marked a turning point in the movement. For, I would argue, not only did it not collect the vote of confidence it had expected, but its leader, for the first time, put his own career before the movement's career. 1937 represented the point at which his personal ambition began taking over the movement's goals. Indeed, he had first wanted to reach ultimate power within Parliament by getting himself elected to all seats, one after the other (i.e. once elected, he would resign, and then run and get elected to the next seat, and resign, and so on until he could declare that he had the support of all).<sup>28</sup> Though this plan would never have worked -- and was just another example of Degrelle's "megalomanie," his lack of any sense of proportion -- it

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<sup>26</sup>Etienne, p. 139.

<sup>27</sup>Etienne, p. 139.

<sup>28</sup>Etienne, p. 133.



exemplifies his impatience for personal power.<sup>29</sup> In other words, after 1937, Degrelle was the leader of Rex, but Rex was Rex, the party-movement, and not synonymous with Degrelle. Having reached a peak in its growth, the movement had developed an identity of its own. Its philosophies and rhetoric might still be those of its leader (as, in fact, they were), but its life course would not parallel that of Degrelle's.

The pattern of the movement's development was cyclic, and was controlled by its leader only at the outset. Degrelle had created the movement in 1933-1934. Degrelle would recreate the movement after the plummeting of the 1939 elections and the turmoil of the outbreak of war. Then, once it had again reached a strength of its own, it would branch off and evolve separately, unrelated to its founder's personal political developments. After 1941, Degrelle devoted all his energies to the Légion Wallonie and, purposely, it seems, ignored the movement back home. Having travelled the path from movement leader to political leader, he now became military leader as well (or, rather, primarily). At the end of the war, Degrelle and his movement were condemned separately. He, as a collaborating military leader; it, that is, Rexist wartime leaders, as a collaborating movement. Both had run their course separately. The movement died out on its own, left without support and leadership.

(Degrelle lives a comfortable life in Spain. He owns a luxurious villa on a hillside, filled with expensive antiques and an array of books, many on Rex and Rexist Degrelle.)

#### Degrelle as orator:

Everybody agrees that Degrelle was a forceful speaker. In fact, it was his speaking skills along with his innovative propaganda techniques which really won him public recognition in 1935-36. Degrelle seems to have had the ability to entrance his audiences. Listening to the Rexist chef was more like undergoing a religious

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<sup>29</sup>Etienne, p. 32.

conversion than attending an intellectual or political lecture. In his introduction, Pierre Daye relates how he first met Léon Degrelle, when arranging a publishing contract with Les Presses de Rex in January 1935. The chief editor seemed like just another publisher. "Je le confesse, cette première rencontre avec Léon Degrelle n'a pas marqué d'une façon extraordinaire dans ma mémoire."<sup>30</sup> Three months later, however, Daye took his chances and went to hear the Rexist leader in his first big public meeting in Brussels, at the Cirque Royal (May 1, 1935). The results were astounding: "Cette fois, je m'en souviens, je me sentis impressionné. Quel feu dans la parole de ce jeune garçon, quelle conviction, quelle force dans le raisonnement! Je sortis enchanté..."<sup>31</sup> Degrelle was an actor and certainly had a way with words, though critics accused his speeches of having no worthwhile content. The New York Times made him out to be a kind of incomprehensible nimcompoop:

As he speaks, he gesticulates without any special relation to what he is saying, flinging his arms forward and backward and raising and lowering them in movements long practiced before mirrors.... He does not win his hearers by the soundness of what he says but captures their hearts with sentimentality.<sup>32</sup>

Degrelle had obviously caught on to the importance of image-politics.

The beginnings of Léon Degrelle's speaking career are almost synonymous with the beginnings of his political career. He had, of course, often given stimulating speeches to his L'Avant-Garde colleagues, enticing them to their many farces. His first public address, however, was at Charleroi, in 1933, a rather minor speech in support of several radio stations whose air-time had suddenly been cut by the government.<sup>33</sup> In the ensuing months, Degrelle frequently stood before small groups of local Rexist supporters and educated them in a passionate voice about Christian morality and how

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<sup>30</sup>Daye, p. 7-8.

<sup>31</sup>Daye, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup>The New York Times, Jan. 25, 1937, p. 4:6. Pierre Daye, of course, found perfect harmony with the speaker's gesticulations. "Quels gestes magnifiques, amples, faciles, justes! Eloquence *naturelle* [sic] avant tout." [Daye, p. 243].

<sup>33</sup>Legros, p. 117-118.

Rex was going to rejuvenate it. In February 1934, he tried his luck in Brussels and spoke at a gathering of 1,000 at the "salle de la Madeleine" about a program of national reform.<sup>34</sup> He planned the Charleroi meeting in October 1934 because he was encouraged by these small successes. What ended up in a fiasco was to have been the first meeting of a really magnanimous scale, where Degrelle's audience would suddenly have been enlarged from several hundred to several thousand listeners. This last event having failed, it was not until April 21, 1935 that Rex managed to organize its own grand meeting -- at Namur, with Father Laffineur, on the theme "Catholiques, réveillez-vous," a phrase which appeared frequently in Rex before and after the meeting.<sup>35</sup> On May 1, as Pierre Daye recounted (above), Degrelle moved into the capital once again, this time to rent the huge Cirque Royal and to speak, along- side Father Laffineur and the well-known writer, Pierre Nothomb, on "Le salut du peuple."<sup>36</sup> All 4,000 places were sold. (Prices ranged from 50 FB for reserved seats to 2 FB for aisle seats or standing room.)<sup>37</sup> The success of the event must have proven to Degrelle that he could now hold meetings on his own, without the crutch of such famous men like Nothomb, for, from then on, he was the only featured speaker at the great gatherings. From then on, also, as the meetings became more and more frequent and more and more elaborate, Degrelle's language became more and more flamboyant. Courtrai made him famous throughout the nation not only because of his clever engineering of manoeuvres (getting 300 followers infiltrated inot the hall) but also because of his language. Huge crowds of Rexists and simply curious people now came to see and hear him. On November 11, 1935, he rented Brussels' Palais des Sports, a building which

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<sup>34</sup>Etienne, p. 23.

<sup>35</sup>Usually, enclosed within a square of thick, dark lines, as, for instance, it appeared within an article by Mary Mace, "L'action maçonnique," in Rex, no. 49, Dec. 14, 1934, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup>Etienne, p. 27.

<sup>37</sup>Legros, p. 142.

could hold at least 12,000 people. As usual, Rex prepared for the great event with frequent advertisements, such as this one:

Le 11 novembre aura lieu à Bruxelles, au Palais des Sports, le plus formidable meeting que des catholiques auront jamais donné en Belgique. Il groupera en effet 25.000 auditeurs. Ce meeting géant sera signé: REX. Sujet: Debout, les vivants!<sup>38</sup>

The whole presentation was dramatic, as was the speaker's oratory. A military march served as prelude to his discourse. Then, when Socialist groups who had gotten in with false Rex cards (much as the Rexists had at Courtrai), began clamoring and playing their own "Internationale," he shouted out with vehemence but complete control,

Si on croit nous empêcher de parler...on se trompe, un rexiste ne se laisse jamais vaincre!...[And, after more disruption,] Je recommencerai tant qu'il faudra. Nous resterons ici jusqu'au matin s'il le faut. Ceux qui veulent m'empêcher de parler sont des hommes qui prétendent agir au nom de la liberté. Les perturbateurs qui veulent interrompre seront expulsés

(as, indeed, they were, by "gendarmes" and "service d'ordre").<sup>39</sup> Following, came a long eulogy to those dead for Belgium in the 1830 revolution, and a questioning of whether the ideals they had fought for had come true.

Comment se fait-il que le monde ne soit pas chrétien, que la famille et la morale soient bafouées? [asked Degrelle. He concluded with] .... Il n'y a aucune force au monde qui nous détournera de notre chemin parce que c'est pour la vérité que nous luttons. Nous nous sommes jurés de sauver notre peuple./ Nous sommes soutenus dans notre action dans tous les coins du pays. Réveillez-vous si vous avez du sang dans les veines./ Debout les vivants!<sup>40</sup>

It is undoubtedly this kind of engaging talk which attracted so many Belgians to the new political Party in 1936 (and which, as the language became too violent,

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<sup>38</sup>"Rex," no. 41, Oct. 11, 1935, p. 32. The 25,000 figure was obviously an exaggeration. The hall probably held from 12,000 to 15,000, and a few thousand more attempted to hear from outside. [Étienne, p. 123].

<sup>39</sup>Jean Ladrière and Robert Pfeiffer, L'Aventure rexiste (Bruxelles, Pierre de Méyère, 1966), p.36. The authors do not make clear whether the "gendarmes" and "service d'ordre" were the same thing. It appears that Rexist meetings were protected both by official police forces and by their own "troupes de choc." [Degrelle, as quoted by Ladrière and Pfeiffer, p. 37].

<sup>40</sup>Ladrière and Pfeiffer, p. 38-39.

subsequently sent many old or prospective Rexist away in 1937 and 1939). The Brussels meeting was followed by other such gatherings, until early 1937, when Degrelle found a new tactic, six meetings in a row! The Six Jours de Rex, as they were named, took place again at the Palais des Sports and covered the expected, already iterated topics: "Les scandales et la révolte des citoyens," "Rex reconstruira l'Etat," "Justice sociale. Paix flamande," "La jeunesse. Les valeurs morales de l'Eglise," and "Au-delà des partis: la Patrie."<sup>41</sup> As with the single meetings, these too filled the Palais and overflowed into the street outside.<sup>42</sup> Whatever he did, Degrelle always seemed to manage to gather a crowd around him, whether of supporters or enemies.

Theatrics characterized Rexist meetings. Audiences were seated in orderly rows of chairs, standing room was sectioned off so as not to block passageways. The hall was arrayed with large red, black and white Rexist flags and was brightly illuminated by stage lamps. Banners carrying messages in French and Flemish strung the walls, e.g. "Les parties, c'est la haine..." or "... Rex Vaincra!" Aisles were kept clear by blue-uniformed order-keeping forces, especially the central one, to allow the procession of the chef a grand approach. Degrelle would deliver his speeches from a podium several feet above the crowd, standing, with groups of his young supporters behind him, in order, at attention, Rexist style (women on one side, men on the other, arms crossed, listening intently to their mentor).<sup>43</sup> The leader would speak forcefully, enthusiastically, actively. He would have a microphone at his disposal, though his voice seemed to carry without it. To borrow from Daye again, who admired Degrelle's oratorical mannerisms so much:

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<sup>41</sup>Ladrière and Pfeiffer, p. 84. The sixth evening was given over to "Un magnifique gala artistique." [Ladrière and Pfeiffer, p. 84].

<sup>42</sup>Étienne, p. 123.

<sup>43</sup>This description is my interpretation of several photographs of Rexist meetings found in Degrelle and Denis, Rex. Renaissance de la Patrie (no page numbers). Though the plates are not dated, I think one can assume the format was the one employed from early stages on. The description, in Rex, of the 1934 Charleroi meeting which never took place mirrors these pictures almost exactly. (See plate 7).

Des mots à tout le monde, mais des traits à pres, ironiques, lancés d'un organe sonore, métallique, si puissant qu'un jour où, devant douze mille auditeurs, les fils des haut-parleurs avaient été sabotés et coupés, Degrelle put continuer à parler durant une heure sans que l'on perdit, aux derniers rangs, une syllabe de ce qu'il disait.<sup>44</sup>

No matter how accurate the description, it still gives an impression of what Degrelle must have sounded like; strong and authoritarian to those who liked him, violent and dangerous to critics. The forcefulness still remains today. Even when having a normal conversation, he speaks loudly, gruffly, to the point where it is almost unbearable to hear.<sup>45</sup>

#### Degrelle as writer:

Besides being an orator, Degrelle was, of course, chiefly a writer. His early, pre-1936 writings cover a wide variety of subjects, with Belgium as the only common denominator. In 1928, while still at L'Avant-Garde, he published both Les flamingants and Jeunes plumes et vieilles barbes de Belgique. The first stressed the need for mutual understanding between the historically antagonistic cultural communities of Belgium. The second, on the other hand, was a comical representation of the student journalists at Louvain and various Catholic leaders, here made out to be Turks!<sup>46</sup> Being independent and young, Degrelle was able to seek out adventuresome topics for his articles. His journalism did, in fact, often bring him to far-off lands. In 1929, still a student, but now also newly-appointed associate editor at XX<sup>ème</sup> Siècle, his series of

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<sup>44</sup>Daye, p. 242.

<sup>45</sup>De Wilde, "Au ban de la SS," pt. 8 of television-series L'Ordre Nouveau, RTB-Français, 1983. P. de Vos, "Léon Degrelle, par Léon Degrelle," taped interview, 1976.

<sup>46</sup>Pierre Daye rightly notes that Degrelle will later use this love of laughter as a political tool, beginning with his farces at Louvain and continuing with his scandals as part of the Rex movement's tactics. But it is doubtful that the little book had any premonitory intents. [Daye, p. 52] Because I have not been able to get hold of these tracts, I am relying mostly on Étienne's, as well as other historians', descriptions of them. [Étienne, p. 12. Daye, p. 52].

articles on "l'Opera Ferrari" took him to Italy.<sup>47</sup> January 1930, as mentioned above, saw him off to Mexico for another set of articles for XX<sup>ème</sup> Siècle. Once settled as director of "Les Editions Rex," Degrelle's travels were restricted, though he didn't stop writing or publishing his works. In 1930, he published both a collection of poems -- "vers enflammés," as Etienne calls them -- entitled Les tristesses d'hiver,<sup>48</sup> and Furore Teutonico, a commentative tract on a hot issue of the times, Louvain university-Germany relations.<sup>49</sup> Shortly thereafter, Les Taudis was published in book form (see above). In 1931, "Contre l'incinération; va-t-on, chez nous, rôtir les morts?" (a tract against cremation and its freemason promoters), as well as Méditations sur Louis Boumal, an admiratory eulogy to one of Degrelle's favorite authors, appeared.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, even when head of the ACJB propaganda wing and, then, of his own, evolving movement, Degrelle continued to turn out pamphlet after pamphlet, book after book. (All this, in addition to his newspaper articles!)<sup>51</sup> After Rex had definitely turned to politics, however, Degrelle's writings were almost solely political. They consisted either of attacks on parties or party members, such as J'accuse M. Segers, J'accuse le ministre Segers d'être un cumularde, un bankster, un pillard d'épargne et un

<sup>47</sup>This first trip to the Italian state deeply influenced him. He encountered fascism for the first time and began speculating on the different uses of Catholic action. [Etienne, p. 13].

<sup>48</sup>Etienne, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup>The university's rector, Mgr. Ladeuze, was being accused of dangerous pro-German tendencies because he refused to authorize the installation of a new, Anglo-favoring portal-tablet inscription, "furore teutonico diruta, dono americano restituta." Degrelle sided with the rector against the anti-clerical accusers. [Etienne, p. 12]

<sup>50</sup>Louis Boumal was a young Walloon poet who wrote mostly on Wallonie, and whose romantic and sentimental style Degrelle admired and imitated. Boumal died at an early age in the First World War.

<sup>51</sup>Degrelle may have been a prolific writer, but he had no qualms about reusing material. Many of the supposedly original articles by "great authors" which appeared in Rexist newspapers were actually a patchwork of bits and pieces from other articles or works by the author (the patchworking being done by Degrelle himself). Degrelle even reused his own writings. The beginning of Le Message de Rex, for instance, is repeated word for word in the chapter entitled "Champs" of Revolution des âmes. (See quote for note 55.) No wonder he was able to turn out so much writing: half of it was cut and paste!



lâche (sic) (1936), or of handbooks to his movement, his Le Message de Rex, for instance, written in September 1936 as an explanatory pamphlet on his new political movement-party.

Degrelle's writing style has not really changed over time. It only got more extreme as the movement entered the political realm. Degrelle uses essentially the same style for his books as for his journalism. He writes very fluidly, often, as in Mes Aventures au Mexique, almost stream-of-consciousness-like. It is not the language of a great intellectual, and the grandiloquent phrases followed by many suspension points are mostly for effect. Though he would undoubtedly deny it, it seems that his concern is more with the sound and appearance of the text, than with content.<sup>52</sup> Legros, an admirer, describes it so:

Léon Degrelle écrit d'un jet, spontanément, sans se corriger. Ses oeuvres reflètent l'harmonie de la nature qui l'inspire profondément. Toutes les ressources de son talent viennent de ses ascendances et des puissants paysages ardennais qui vivent dans son âme.<sup>53</sup>

Listen, for instance, to his description of Belgium in his opening paragraph of Rex.

Renaissance de la Patrie:

Un fleuve qui descend entre les collines blanches ou les lins vers la mer; des quais endormis sous des géraniums à Bruges; les ardoises d'une vieille abbaye du Brabant; des chevaux de maraîchers près d'une borne patinée par les hivers; une femme, sa dentelle ou sa hotte; les ors des maisons d'une grand' place, tout nous rappelle -- berge, pierres, visages, eaux que convient les mers du Nord -- le passé magnifique et débordant de notre peuple... On ne nous a pas improvisés hier.<sup>54</sup>

His ardent patriotism does come through very well, and the language is very lyrical.

But, once one has read several examples of his writing, one has read them all. After a while, it gets boring.

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<sup>52</sup>Such a statement could be used to describe not only his oratory, but the whole movement itself!

<sup>53</sup>Legros, p. 76.

<sup>54</sup>Léon Degrelle and Jean Denis, Rex. Renaissance de la Patrie (Brux., Editions Rex, 1940), no page numbers.



Degrelle doesn't differentiate between political and non-political language. This is because Rex is primarily a movement -- it entered politics only because it was the only available route towards recognition -- and, specifically, a mouvement des âmes. Therefore, wherever he can, Degrelle includes a paragraph or two of sentimental phrases in his political pieces, serving as reminder that emotion, sentiment, âme must govern all other aspects of life and social action. Le Message de Rex was written in September 1936 for old and new Rexists as an explanation of the new Rex party-movement. The bulk of the thirty-one page pamphlet covers Rex attitudes on the usual questions, Rex finances, workers, the people's rights, Belgium as a nation, Communism, dictatorship (a denial of its merits). The first two chapters, however, introduce the âme part of the movement. "Calme et douleur du soir" describes two idyllic lovers watching and listening to the sounds of a summer evening, and compares this pastoral scene to "... la route où les autos arrachent le sol avec un crépitement de pluie tenace...des lumières brutales, des visages vidés, des yeux sans âme..." which inhabit the real world.<sup>55</sup> In "L'âme rexiste" (chapter two), Degrelle begins with a narrative of a recent Rex meeting at Liège and uses it to move into a discussion of âme. "Mais ce qui émanait par-dessus tout et qui fait vraiment la valeur des assemblées rexistes, c'était cette qualité de l'âme, cette vibration, ce don total d'une assistance, cette volonté de placer par dessus tout, un idéal dans son désintéressement le plus absolu."<sup>56</sup> Degrelle also had no qualms about mixing this kind of peaceful tone with loud, often violent outcries. The last chapter of Le Message de Rex is filled with phrases like

il faut agir et PRENDRE PARTI. (sic)./ Soit pour le redressement audacieux et complet du pays par le programme, la mystique et les chefs de REX./ Soit pour la révolution du front commun, à la sauce des Soviets. (sic) Ce sera Rex ou ce sera Moscou./ L'heure brutale est arrivée où il faut bien faire son choix.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup>Léon Degrelle, Le Message de Rex (Brux., Editions Rex, 1936), p. 3.

<sup>56</sup>Degrelle, Le Message de Rex, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup>Degrelle, Le Message de Rex, p. 31.

In summary, then, Degrelle's writings are numerous and varied, especially in the early years. His language is both lyrical and extreme and, frequently, repetitive. It seems that he wrote each of his pieces in one fell swoop, without taking much time to revise, the aim being that it should all emanate directly from the soul, without hindrance.

Degrelle continues to write today, apparently, though his works may not be published in Belgium.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Telephone interview with John Darnton, correspondent for The New York Times, on Nov. 25, 1986. These are mostly autobiographical, concentrating on the war years.

**Chapter five**

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**Rexist Press**

If Degrelle was the Rexist movement only until 1937, Rexist press was the movement throughout the history of Rex. Degrelle himself declared at a meeting in January, 1939 that "[c]'est par la presse que nous devons retourner le pays."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Rex started out as a publishing house and the press was always an intergral part, if not a definition, of the movement. It is out of the press that the movement evolved, through the press that it developed, and by the press that it was sustained. Its ups and downs were signals of movement well-being or setbacks. This final chapter is therefore devoted to the press as the most important unifying aspect of Rexism.

#### Press History:

Before 1930, Les Editions Rex had published the Cahiers de la Jeunesse Catholique, various pamphlets on Catholic subjects and an occasional book or two. Their scope was too limited for Degrelle. He wanted to catch the attention of all Catholic youth, if not of all Catholics. Les Editions Rex ought to disseminate literature having to do with Catholic actuality as well as Catholic issues, he said. Soirées, a weekly guide to movies, radio and travel, appeared for the first time on October 10, 1931. It was sponsored by the Action Catholique, the Catholic cinema association, the Catholic radio association, the travel agency Dux and Les Editions Rex.<sup>2</sup> Though technically not owned by Rex editions -- and, therefore, not officially controlled by Degrelle -- Soirées was published by Les Editions Rex and was edited by a close friend of Degrelle's and a future Rexist leader, Jean Denis. In effect, Degrelle directed the operation. And in April, 1933, when Les Editions Rex bought out Soirées, Degrelle actually directed the magazine, though still with Jean Denis as chief editor. Soirées was geared towards the family -- the most important social unit in a Catholic society -- with articles on spiritual

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<sup>1</sup>Léon Degrelle, as quoted by Jacques Lacomblez, "Léon Degrelle chez les rexistes d'Etterbeek," in Le Pays réel, Jan. 12, 1939, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-Michel Etienne, Le Mouvement rexistes jusqu'en 1940 (Paris, Librairie Armand Colin, 1968), p. 15.

matters as well as information on entertainment events.<sup>3</sup> It averaged from 80 to 120 pages, 32 of which were devoted to listings of and commentaries on the week's radio programs -- apparently a first in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Propagandist and salesman that he was, Degrelle made sure every issue had a full-page picture of "une actrice magnifique" on its front page. As he told a questioning Cardinal Van Roey, "Eminence! si je mets votre visage en première page, je vendrai vingt mille exemplaires de moins que si je mets une jolie fille."<sup>5</sup> The magazine was a hit, it seems, and collected some 10,000 FB to 12,000 FB each week.<sup>6</sup>

Proof that Degrelle was the true director of the magazine is the fact that he was able to use Soirées to advertise Les Editions Rex, which was, after all, only one of the many sponsors of the journal. On September 30, 1932, the first issue of Rex appeared as a four-page monthly insert to Soirées. Subtitled "pour que les catholiques lisent," it was at first restricted to advertisements for Rex edition books and journals.<sup>7</sup> Within a short time, however, it began adding book excerpts, book reviews and commentaries. Rex expanded so much that, on January 1, 1933, it detached itself from Soirées and was published as a full-fledged, sixteen-page, bi-monthly, literary review with the title "Rex: toute la vie des lettres." The new Rex had quite a following from the outset: its circulation increased rapidly from 25,000 in January, 1933 to 37,500 in December, 1933.<sup>8</sup>

In subsequent months, the journal's various titles reflected the evolution of the movement. On March 22, 1934, as Rex was becoming more political and had separated from the ACJB, Degrelle fused Rex and Vlan, a purely political newspaper, into a new, 32 page weekly. As mentioned earlier, there were also financial reasons for the fusion:

<sup>3</sup>Jacques Saint-Germain, La Bataille de Rex (Paris, \_\_\_\_\_, 1937), p. 69.

<sup>4</sup>Jean-Michel Charlier, Léon Degrelle: Persiste et signe: interviews recueillies pour la télévision française par Jean-Michel Charlier (Paris, J. Picollet, 1985), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup>Charlier, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup>Charlier, p. 68. This is equivalent to about \$ 2,500 to \$ 3,000 (1984 \$)

<sup>7</sup>Etienne, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup>Etienne, p. 16.

publishing the two together was cheaper than each separately. The title "Rex: toute la vie des lettres" appeared on the front, "Vlan: toute la vie politique" on the back. Having a double front page, so to speak, was a simple way of catching not only the eye of the reader, but also that of the passer-by looking at the paper from behind! It also proved that Rex still saw literary and political issues as distinct and equal in importance. Though articles on each were intermingled with each other, one type did not necessarily draw more weight than the other. On October 12, 1934, the title of Degrelle's journal was again "Rex: toute la vie des lettres," on the front, and "Rex: toute la vie catholique," on the back, only to change once more to "Rex: l'apostolat, les lettres, la cité," on both front and back, by February 22, 1935. Then, starting around October, 1935, the title "Rex" alone appeared on front and back.

Rex was obviously looking around for the right phrase with which to define itself. Although it did suddenly find itself independent after its expulsion from the ACJB in January, 1934, Rex nevertheless tried to stay on friendly terms with the Church. Omitting the political part of the title would perhaps somewhat soften the Church's heart. "Rex: l'apostolat, les lettres, la cité" encompassed most of the characteristics of the specific Rexist movement that was emerging. Still strongly apostolic, Rex was committed to apostolicism through the written word, and was developing an ideal of bringing reform to the body politic and to society as a whole. La cité could refer to the Catholic Celestial City, to a people unified into a cité, or to the rights of citizenship of one living in a cité. Although not all aspects of cité may have been addressed at one time, the word's many implications were a decided advantage. Finally, "Rex" by itself identified the movement as a movement: one which cut across all lines of class, religion and cultural background. By this time, Rex was Rex, and the

single word was enough to define it.<sup>9</sup> The movement had found its base, a very wide base which covered all facets of society, without having to differentiate between them. The word "Rex," at this point, took up a quarter of the front page, and, as the movement became more and more political, individual article titles became bolder and bolder, often filling up another half of the page, as every effort was made to catch the reader's attention. Chief editor of the paper during this period of transformation was Amand Gérardin, replaced in August, 1934 by Robert de Vroylande. Degrelle, of course, as director of the entire establishment, remained backbone of all operations.

Vlan, the political twin of Rex was the realization of another of Degrelle's dreams. Like Rex, it began as a bi-monthly, appearing on alternate Saturdays with that publication. By early February, 1934, Vlan was published as a weekly, but was never as successful as Rex, drawing a maximum of only 9,000 copies per week in December, 1933.<sup>10</sup> Vlan followed Rex closely in format, so that fusion of the two papers in March simply meant binding two like elements together. Hubert d'Ydewalle was the official director, but Degrelle was in ultimate control. Robert de Vroylande, Camille Jordan and Raphaël Sindic took turns at the job, as well.<sup>11</sup>

There were other minor and short-lived early Rexist publications. Foyer, first published in April, 1933, was, as the name suggests, an entertainment magazine for the family. A young Rexist by the name of Guido Eeckels was in charge. Unfortunately, his sometimes risqué choice of serialized novels caused the newspaper some problems, so that, when the movement hit financial hardship in 1934, Foyer was one of the first Rexist publications to go. Crois, edited by Roger Saussus and also initiated in 1933, tried to make up for the not so apostolic leaning of other Rex publications. As with Foyer, its

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<sup>9</sup>Notice, too, that Degrelle chose an opportune moment to reduce the title; in less than a month he would make the first grand statement of Rexist politization at Courtrai. Identical copies of Rex were simultaneously published in Flemish, as Rex-Flamand, and in German, as Rex-Allemand.

<sup>10</sup>Etienne, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup>Etienne, p. 16.

life was brief and unsuccessful.<sup>12</sup> Soirées itself was replaced on January 1, 1936 by Rex-Illustré. The illustrated magazine lasted only until May 6, 1936, however, by which time the other major Rexist papers had become partly illustrés themselves.

During election time, a number of new newspapers would start up. For the October 16, 1938 provincial elections, for instance, Rex-Auderghem and Rex-Jette appeared monthly from July to October, and Chant-clair (later Chant-glorieux) appeared bi-monthly from June to October.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Le Salut du peuple came out just for the 1939 campaign.<sup>14</sup> It is the 1936 elections, however, which had the greatest impact on the Rexist press. For these elections, two new organs of the press were founded. L'Action rexiste was an educational monthly which lasted only from January to May. Le Pays réel, however, managed to last until May 1940. Hubert d'Ydewalle was its chief editor until his resignation from the movement in June 1937; although, as always, Degrelle made all the decisions. As the first Rexist daily, Le Pays réel was able to saturate the country with Rexist propaganda, giving the movement the final push necessary to win 11.49% of the vote on May 24, 1936. The paper started out with a morning and evening edition, as well as several local editions; beginning in September, 1936, a Flemish version, De Nieuwe Staat, was also published under the direction of Paul De Mont, head of Rex in Flanders.<sup>15</sup> As could be expected, once the Rexist movement began to decline, so did the various editions of Le Pays réel. If circulation for the main French-language version was about 97,000 in October 1936, it

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<sup>12</sup>Étienne, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup>It is unclear how long other section newspapers lasted. The term mensuel or bi-mensuel at the top of the front page might mean that they were issued only during election time, or that they came and went as local financial situations dictated (since each section was responsible for its own press and propaganda). Rex-Ixelles, for instance was a four-page monthly whose October, 1938 issue was devoted solely to Rexist candidates for the upcoming elections -- with photographic portraits and biographical notes, but which must have continued to cover local events afterwards, since it was advertised in Rex, Jan. 4, 1939, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup>Étienne, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup>Étienne, p. 69.



had sunk down to no more than 50,000 by the end of 1937, and to barely 18,000 by 1939.<sup>16</sup> (Even less economically stable, local papers undoubtedly ceased publication completely when financial hardship set in.) Similarly, the number of pages fluctuated with the movement's rise and decline. In June, 1936 Le Pays réel was six pages long, in December twelve. The increase proves that Rex was thriving during that year. But by May, 1938 it was only four pages long, although two more pages were added later that summer; by this time, the Rexist movement had lost much of its popularity and was searching for a new plateau of stability. It remained at six pages (eight on Sundays) throughout the first half of 1939 until, by late August, it was again reduced to four pages -- this time, apparently, due to the imminent war. The price per issue in 1936 was 25 centimes; in 1939, it was 50 centimes. (An issue of Rex cost 75 centimes in 1933 and 1 FB in 1937.) Like Rex, Le Pays réel offered deals on subscriptions for different periods of time, which saved the reader a few francs, though not many.

Le Pays réel's format was much more changeable and disorganized than Rex's. Articles were crammed together, especially as the number of pages decreased, and all sorts of topics were placed indiscriminately side by side. Degrelle himself described the difference between the two papers: the daily was "essentiellement de combat et destiné à la masse, tandis que Rex s'adresse aux intellectuels."<sup>17</sup> Perhaps mixing all sorts of articles would expose this not-so-differentiating audience to a wide variety of issues; or was the intent of variety to prevent boredom? A more plausible explanation seems to be simple inexperience, bad planning, and lack of seriousness on the part of both writers and editors of Le Pays réel. It is true that articles on political issues were usually concentrated on the front and back pages, but they also appeared in the inner

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<sup>16</sup>Etienne, p. 69-70.

<sup>17</sup>As quoted by Jacques Lacomblez, in "Léon Degrelle chez les rexistes d'Etterbeek," in Le Pays réel, Jan. 12, 1939, p. 3.

pages, along with feature articles, articles on entertainment, serials, and radio programs.<sup>18</sup>

At the outset, Le Pays réel was less literary than Rex, although by 1936 they were quite similar in content. Both covered political issues, and both engaged in sensationalist and inflammatory language, while stressing a particular moral code. Topics varied from such heart-rending themes as "Une jeune fille, née sans jambes, va apprendre à danser sur des jambes artificielles," to world events like "Des mesures américaines de représailles contre Tokio?"<sup>19</sup> The front page articles of both papers were usually of a political nature and were most often written by Degrelle himself -- which means not only that he was quick with his pen, but that he felt confident about writing on most any subject. Both papers also had feature columns which appeared in every issue and which Degrelle left to other journalists. In the early stages of Rex, Pierre Nothomb wrote a weekly column on contemporary political events, entitled "La critique internationale." Similarly, in January, 1939 José Streel started writing an opinion column in Le Pays réel in which he commented on Rexist philosophy, contemporary events, and attacks made on Rex. Other regular columns were anonymous. Short-takes on local events, for instance, filled Le Pays réel's "Les faits divers." "Ces Messieurs et ces dames" was the Rex equivalent, with more emphasis on interesting (or funny) events in the lives of important personalities -- a kind of comic-strip in words. In addition, Le Pays réel regularly published stock market figures and also covered sporting events. And Rex always had one section devoted to literary and film criticism, neatly organized according to what could and could not be read or seen. Finally, Rex, Le Pays réel, and even Rex-illustré all spiced up their issues with the nasty but hilarious caricatures of "Jam." (See examples on plate 8.)

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<sup>18</sup>An example of articles on the second page of Le Pays réel of Jan. 4, 1939: "Une révolution presque faite" (continued from page one, on the new multiplicity of greeting cards!), a serialized installment of The Count of Monte Cristo, "La Vie à Bruxelles" (on local entertainment), "Des étudiants belges in Espagne nationale," etc.

<sup>19</sup>Le Pays réel, Jan. 4, 1939, p. 3.

### Advertisements in Rexist newspapers:

Both papers also ran many of the same kinds of advertisements. These were divided into two categories, those for the Rexist movement and those for pro-Rexist businesses. The first consisted of slogans enclosed in thickly outlined boxes which let readers know about upcoming Rexist events or called on them to do something particular for the growth of the movement. Most were short and to-the-point, "Lisez Foyer!"<sup>20</sup> "Lire REX et VLAN c'est bien, S'Y ABONNER, c'est mieux,"<sup>21</sup> or "Ouvriers! Lisez tous les jours 'Le Pays réel' le seul journal qui dise la vérité."<sup>22</sup> Some spoke directly to Rexist aims: "Justice d'abord/ Il n'y aura plus de désordres dans la rues, le jour où il y aura de l'ordre dans la société."<sup>23</sup> In general, calls for action were in some way sentimentalized. In the January 22, 1939 issue of Le Pays réel, for instance, Degrelle lauded the many sacrifices Liège Rexist had made in order to come up with donations for the movement (giving up food and clothing, apparently...). If they could do it, why couldn't others? asked Degrelle. "Vous rendez-vous digne par vos efforts, de l'idéal qui suscite des sacrifices complets comme ceux que nous venons de citer?" (p. 6)

Sentimentality, then, was often reinforced by guilt. Editors and writers used every opportunity to advertise Rexist press and Rex editions. Coupons were frequently offered to promote a new book, e.g. the coupon with "Un livre gratuit!" on it in Rex of March 22, 1935 (p. 9) would get one a free copy of H. Carton de Wiart's La Cité ardente (Brux., Rex eds., 1935). Rex-brand products were especially advertised. There were Rex insignia, "REXA" cigarettes, Rex "apéritifs," Rex camera films, even Rex shoes -- "Une seule chaussure/ LA CHAUSSURE REX/ En vente partout!"<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Rex, Mr. 3, 1934, no. 9, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup>Rex-Vlan, Mr. 12, 1934, no. 12, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup>Le Pays réel, Ju. 6, 1936, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup>Le Pays réel, Ju. 6, 1936, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup>Rex, Ju. 26, 1936, p. 21. If these last really existed, they were probably shoes made by a Rexist shoemaker who simply replaced his name on the label with Rex's. The same must have applied to the other products.

Commercial advertisements came from Rexist supporters. These were small firms or artisans who were "amis de REX" and who, therefore, must be patronized (which meant buying their products, telling friends to buy their products, and always mentioning that they had found out about the store through Rex).<sup>25</sup> "Rexistes, rendez-vous de préférence dans les salles de nos annonceurs" was a typical slogan.<sup>26</sup> (This could be advantageous, since some businesses offered rebates for Rexist customers. "Pour vos lunettes. Henri Delhougne... remise 5% aux Rexistes.")<sup>27</sup> The same businesses frequently advertised in both Rex and Le Pays réel. The distributors of "Chicorée Trappiste Vincart," for instance, advertised first in the weekly Rex, and later, once it came out, also in the daily Le Pays réel.<sup>28</sup>

There were, nevertheless, some differences between the advertisements in the two Rexist papers. Le Pays réel tended to have fewer commercial ads and more personal/want ads. These were grouped together in one section, usually on the next-to-last page and suitably entitled "Nos petites annonces." The cost of placing one depended on the kind of ad and the number of lines. Ads varied in size from one-liners to large, almost half-pagers -- as the ones for the cure-all powder "La Croix Blanche." Although the number of ads in Le Pays réel increased from barely three per issue in 1936 to about sixteen or more in 1939, they remained ads for small businesses or self-employed artisans. Only the 1939 issues varied slightly from the norm, in that they suddenly began carrying a multiplicity of travel advertisements. Rexist had their own travel agency which organized trips within Belgium. "1, 2 ou 3 jours à L'EXPOSITION INTERNATIONALE DE L'EAU. LIEGE. 1939. organisation de visites et voyages individuels ou par groupes. Pour renseignements, écrivez sans tarder à: REX-LIEGE-TOURISME rue

<sup>25</sup>"Avis important," in Rex, Dec. 9, 1933, no. 30, p. 11. (See also example on plate 9)

<sup>26</sup>Le Pays réel, Ap. 28, 1939, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup>Le Pays réel, Ju. 6, 1936, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup>e.g. Rex, Dec. 9, 1933, no. 30, p. 13; and Le Pays réel, Jan. 5, 1939, p. 5.

Lambert-le-Bègue, 4, à Liège."<sup>29</sup> In 1939, Rex favored travel within Belgium, or to Germany and Spain.<sup>30</sup> They even seemed to have relations with Germany's and Spain's official tourist offices. This points to the fact that, while advocating strict neutrality, they nevertheless favored the Nazi and fascist powers. Interesting, too, is the fact that Le Pays réel carried ads for "La Société nationale des Chemins de fer belges," if not a government organization, certainly one greatly supported by it.<sup>31</sup> Yet, in 1939, Rex was finding more and more pretexts to attack the government. One might conclude that there were some top officials of the "Société" who were Rexist sympathizers, and/or that Rex had secret dealings with big businesses, while openly denouncing their hyper-capitalisme.

Advertisements in Rex, too, were limited to the usual small businesses (with one noted exception, the Swiss tourist office). The same names often returned year after year, such as "Les Chocolats G. Lechien." Typical ads ran like this, "SPONTIN CITRON limonade parfaite,"<sup>32</sup> "Employez ELVEA Tomates,"<sup>33</sup> or "Un bon cigare! Après avoir goûté différentes marques plus recommandées les unes que les autres, j'en suis toujours revenu à mon... 'CARAIBE'."<sup>34</sup> Very common were ads for miracle cures, such as "Bague galvanique: Guérir radicalement Rhumatismes musculaires et articulaires, Arthrite,..."<sup>35</sup> or the Daury tea "Qui vous évitera toute maladie,"<sup>36</sup> or the faithful powder "La Croix Blanche," advertised continually. The number of advertisements in Rex averaged between twelve and fifteen per issue before 1936, with a slight increase

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<sup>29</sup>Le Pays réel, Ju. 8, 1939, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup>Germany: Le Pays réel, Ju. 20, 1939, p. 3; Spain: Le Pays réel, Jy. 1, 1939, p. 3. It is unclear to me why Le Pays réel did not mention travel to Italy, since the movement did have ties with that country.

<sup>31</sup>Le Pays réel, Jan. 5, 1939, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup>Rex, Sept. 9, 1933, no. 22, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup>Rex, Mr. 3, 1934, no. 9, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup>Rex, Dec. 4, 1934, no. 49, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup>Rex, Sept. 9, 1933, no. 22, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup>Rex, Mr. 3, 1934, no. 9, p. 3.

(sometimes as many as twenty) after the merger with Vlan. After the elections, however, the number of ads quadrupled, ranging between fifty and sixty per issue before falling again to an average of twenty by June 1937. The leap in advertising goes along with Rexist success. Right after the elections, when Rex looked like the new, up-and-coming group to belong to, many businesses might have decided to actually join the Rexist themselves or, at least, to advertise in its paper, which obviously reached lots of people. After the total failure of Degrelle in the 1937 elections, and after the general loss of popularity of the movement, businesses pulled out their ads, either because they were no longer Rexist themselves, or because they were looking for a more profitable newspaper.

The advertisements in the Rexist newspapers reveal a virtually self-sufficient Rexist community. Rex manufactured its own products, was supported by many friendly businesses, had its own press and even provided its own entertainment for its members.<sup>37</sup> Rex was a cult of sorts. Its ups and downs were, therefore, as with most cults, quite drastic. People would throw themselves wholeheartedly into every aspect of the movement, only to become completely disillusioned when one aspect of it suddenly didn't please them. Before 1937, scandal- and joke-making seemed all part of the fun, and part of the great spring-cleaning of Parliament and its old, worn-out parties. After the 1937 election loss, and even already before it, Rexist began getting sick of the constant name-calling and character-attacks, especially since these had yet to bring any significant changes. What had started out as necessary and valuable soon turned sour. These kinds of tactics simply did not work in politics as it now functioned. This was one of the reasons why, by Spring 1937, the cult-movement suddenly dropped in popularity. And the quantitative factor of advertising in the Rexist papers is a good

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<sup>37</sup>Besides Degrelle's orations, Rex organized evenings with performances by the Rex drama group. In March 1934, for instance, this group put on Erckmann Chatrian's L'ami Fritz. And, since Degrelle was ever-present and, apparently, multi-skilled, audiences at this particular performance would be treated between acts to a "causerie" by their leader. [Rex, Mr. 3, 1934, no. 9, p. 7].

measure of this failure. The decreasing number of advertisements after 1937 reflects loss of movement popularity, as more and more Rexists left the cult fold in disillusionment.

#### Other Publications:

As a publishing house, Rex of course also published books and pamphlets. When Degrelle started expanding Les Editions Rex, he initiated a Collection nationale under the direction of Edouard Coppens. The purpose of the collection was to publish great books on great subjects -- books by known Belgian authors on patriotic Belgian subjects. Rexist newspapers always carried ads for the most recent Collection nationale book.

#### Radio-Rex:

Rex was also on the radio. Starting in early 1933, Degrelle was allotted a slot of the Action Catholique's air-time. He was supposed to narrate a "chronique du mouvement littéraire,"<sup>38</sup> but it soon became apparent that the only books he talked about were those published by Les Editions Rex. Once the Action Catholique took note of this, Degrelle's career as a radioman was cut off short. Never giving up, the Rexist chef tried for radio-time again in late summer, 1936. His program would be non-political, he wrote in an article, and would only try to answer some of the accusations thrown at the movement during the recent elections.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Rex wanted politics out of radio in general. Radio, it said, must return to its original purpose, "le DIVERTISSEMENT et le DELASSEMENT des auditeurs [sic]."<sup>40</sup> When Degrelle was refused air-time on Belgian radio at the end of 1936, he simply turned to his friend Mussolini. Beginning on

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<sup>38</sup>Charlier, p. 68; and Etienne, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup>"Rex et la Radio," in Rex, Jy. 17, 1936, p. 29.

<sup>40</sup>"Rex et la Radio," in Rex, Jy. 17, 1936, p. 29.



January 6, 1937, half-hour broadcasts from Turin radioed Degrelle's and other Rexist voices into Belgium.<sup>41</sup>

Rex on the radio was not very different from Rex in the press. It continued the usual attacks through joke-making, for instance. Daye tells of one Rexist meeting where the Turin program was broadcast over the loudspeakers. The audience listened with amusement as a voice imitating Van Zeeland delivered a mock speech on Degrelle: "Et le public de s'amuser... [sic]."<sup>42</sup>

It is unclear how long Rexist radio survived, though one can assume that it declined as the movement did.

#### From Propaganda to Organization:

Besides the press, Rex had other forces dispensing propaganda for the movement. In the summer of 1935, young Rexist in Liège formed loose organizations called Cadres actifs de propagande (CAP).<sup>43</sup> Shortly thereafter, an official Front Populaire (FP) was formed, comprising Rexist of all ages and all ranks of life. Degrelle was, naturally, director of the FP. CAPs were the more active of the bunch. They were the ones whom Degrelle sent out at all hours of day and night to put up posters, sell Rex insignia or newspapers outside churches or at busy crossings, sell tickets and advertise Rexist events, and create general fervor among their young school friends. Others met regularly at Rex houses or sometimes on month-long retreats to discuss Rexist principles, Rexist politics and Rexist corporative organizations.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Étienne, p. 113. Daye claims that Degrelle's presence in Italy caused the Van Zeeland government to make political ovations towards Mussolini, who, in his defiant way, simply ignored them. And when Foreign Minister Spaak called in the Italian ambassador to complain about Italian favoritism towards Degrelle, the ambassador retorted, "Et les sanctions à propos de la guerre d'Éthiopie n'étaient-elle pas regrettables et inamicales?" [Pierre Daye, Léon Degrelle et le rexisme (Paris, A. Fayard et Cie., 1937), p. 205].

<sup>42</sup>Daye, p. 205-06.

<sup>43</sup>Usnard Legros, Un homme, un chef, Léon Degrelle (Brux, Editions Rex, 1938), p. 119.

<sup>44</sup>Étienne, p. 43; and Legros, p. 129.



It was out of these groups that Rexist political cadres first developed. The Rexist FP for all of Belgium was first organized into fourteen separate geographical divisions. Each was headed by a propaganda chief, whose pay depended on how many newspapers he sold, and who was aided in his task by a number of volunteers -- many from the CAPs.<sup>45</sup> In August, 1935 Degrelle transformed these groups into decidedly political organizations. The country was sectioned off into permanences d'arrondissement and sections locales.<sup>46</sup> Each section, in turn, had separate services for propaganda, women and security. For the latter purpose, a service d'ordre et de protection (SOP) was founded, consisting of unarmed, uniformed men whose main task was to keep everybody in line at Rexist meetings; they were disbanded in January, 1937, under a State order banning militias of any kind.<sup>47</sup> The political sections remained relatively autonomous from May, 1936 to May, 1937, after which they were gradually taken over by the propaganda groups, CAPs in particular, who became more and more militant. If not part of a CAP, or probably even if they were part of such a group, Rexist youths were, by 1936, also organized into Jeunesses rexistes. Since they too were uniformed, however, they were disbanded along with the SOP in early 1937. Rex defied the ban soon afterwards when it re-formed its youth into a non-political Association de campement et de tourisme (ACT).<sup>48</sup> Uniformed members organized outings, sporting events, rallies, camps, marches, etc. -- very reminiscent of the Hitler youth, of which the Rexist had certainly heard.

Over all of this activity, Degrelle ruled with a firm and strict hand. He insisted on strict morality permeating all divisions and would strike down at any one that seemed to step out of bounds. One occasion for such sharp scolding came up in January, 1939, it seems. In an angry article in Le Pays réel on January 15, 1939, Degrelle

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<sup>45</sup>Etienne, p. 43.

<sup>46</sup>Etienne, p. 76.

<sup>47</sup>Etienne, p. 76.

<sup>48</sup>Etienne, p. 78.

rebuked local Rex groups for spending too much time organizing parties and too little doing their duties. He therefore forbade all festivities until Easter, or until the section had sold its allotted amount of newspapers and subscriptions.

Vous étiez venus pour vous amuser? tant pis! Ce n'est pas ça Rex! Travaillez ou allez ailleurs.... Il est tout de même autrement intéressant de vivre en propageant nos journaux et notre doctrine qu'en dansant le Lambeth Walk et en contant fleurette à de braves jeunes filles qui ont plus besoin d'un mari idéaliste et travailleur que d'un spécialiste en tangos.<sup>49</sup>

Otherwise, movement organization represented the ideal Rexist State. It was authoritative and decentralized, with chefs appointed according to expertise (e.g. all matters dealing with Flanders were relegated to Rex-Flanders chief, Paul de Mont, housed in a separate building). Strict hierarchical order was based on deference to one's superior at all times.<sup>50</sup> Degrelle, at the top, was accommodated with a "vaste bureau d'une simplicité toute moderne," which did not prevent him from having a huge desk, emerald-colored velvet drapes and fresh flowers all over.<sup>51</sup> Under him and assisting him were a secretary general and a Cabinet du Chef (essentially the same), and, from November, 1936 until June 14, 1937, a Conseil politique de Rex, as well.<sup>52</sup> Members of this last body were already established Rexist leaders, Paul de Mont, Count Xavier de Grunne (also head of Rex in the Senate), Gustave Wyns, Usnard Legros, Prof. Mertens, Carlos Lérutte (who had organized the first Rex sections in Liège), Hubert d'Ydewalle, José Streel, Jean Denis, Pierre Daye (leader of Rexist députés) and, as presiding secretary, Alfred Olivier.<sup>53</sup> On June 21, 1937, this council was replaced by a five-member Bureau exécutif de Rex, with fewer powers. Degrelle appointed José Streel, Jean Denis, Jean de Lophem, Usnard Legros and Paul De Mont to the new body,

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<sup>49</sup>Quoted in Étienne, p. 79.

<sup>50</sup>Daye, p. 229.

<sup>51</sup>Daye, p. 230.

<sup>52</sup>Étienne, p. 80.

<sup>53</sup>Daye, p. 230.

and kept closely involved in all their proceedings.<sup>54</sup> The reduction was most probably part of Degrelle's whole scheme to gain more personal power, a scheme which started to develop shortly before the 1937 elections.<sup>55</sup>

### Rexist Leaders:

Who were these leaders? Those who had started out with Degrelle from the beginning were friends from Louvain university and/or from the ACJB. They were all good Catholics, good writers, and bright and well-educated. Thus, they could all look forward to a promising career within the Catholic Party, if they wanted it. And the very fact that they decided, in the end, to leave the Party is a mark of their courage and of their willingness to fight for what they believed; after all, departing from the path that one knew would lead to a sure and stable life is a rather daring feat. For this they must be credited. On the other hand, their enthusiasm and energy did not necessarily translate itself into maturity as the years went by. If a sense of fighting for their cause was a large part of the cohesiveness of the early Rexists, another factor was their wish to continue basking in the glories of gang play and the fun life in general. As a result, Rex never learned new ways and Rexist leaders never formed themselves into recognized and established leaders. (Non-Rexists thought of them more as big children than as mature political leaders.) As the 1936 elections rolled around, Rex was forced to find older Rexist candidates, older not only in age, but also in character. The outcome was both a generational split after 1936, but also a philosophical split. Later adherents to Rex had not evolved within the prank-making atmosphere and therefore were not part of the gang. Some wouldn't last long; others would stay on for the ride, trying to get whatever they could out of it for themselves. Degrelle would try to straddle the two, becoming a patriarch in every sense of the word: reprimanding like a father the

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<sup>54</sup>Etienne, p. 80-81.

<sup>55</sup>See chapter on Degrelle.

sometimes too unserious younger Rexists, but, essentially, paying more and more attention to his own personal career. The closely-knit group would begin to disintegrate soon after its first successes.

The following short biographical histories of some of the most important of these leaders will help bring the movement into focus.<sup>56</sup>

JOSÉ STREEL is known among Rex historians as the movement's philosopher. Born in Jemeppe-Sur-Meuse in 1911, Strel went on to study for a doctorate in Thomist philosophy at Louvain University. He was active in the ACJB, where he met Degrelle. His writings for the movement were profuse and well thought out (not just a collection of vague ideas) Les Jeunes Gens et la Politique (Louvain, Rex eds., 1932), La Parole est aux Bourgeois: Lettre d'un Bourgeois Libéral à un Bourgeois Catholique (Brux., Rex eds., 1936), Positions Rexistes (Brux., Rex eds., 1936), and Ce Qu'il Faut Penser de Rex (Brux., Rex eds., 1936).<sup>57</sup> He was shot by the partisans after the Liberation.<sup>58</sup>

JEAN DENIS is usually twinned with Strel as Rex's other philosopher. True, he did write several Rex "little red books," Principes Rexistes (Brux., Rex eds., 1936); Bases Doctrinales de Rex (Brux., Rex eds., 1936), and La Ligne Générale (Brux., Rex eds., [1935-37 ?])<sup>59</sup>, but these were more repetitions of Strel than anything new. He apparently liked to write and was willing to publish on any subject. "C'était un polyvalent qui écrivait aussi bien sur une locomotive que sur le rexisme ou la philosophie hindoue."<sup>60</sup> Denis was born in Chastre-Villeroux-Blanmont on February 10, 1902 to a peasant

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<sup>56</sup>As usual, biographical information is sometimes scanty. I have tried to collect from as many appropriate sources as were available to me; unfortunately, much of this data is still confidential and not available to the public. Some of the biographies are therefore quite limited.

<sup>57</sup>Etienne, p. 187.

<sup>58</sup>Paul Legrain, Le Dictionnaire des Belges (Brux., Paul Legrain, ed., 1981) gives 1946 as his death date. (p. 473).

<sup>59</sup>Etienne, p. 185.

<sup>60</sup>Interview of M. Jean Vermeire by José Gotovitch 25.3.71 in the CREHSGM, Brussels, as quoted in a letter to me from Mr. Martin Conway, PhD candidate, Oxford, England.

family. He was educated by Jesuits and, after his father died, became head of the family. He studied at Louvain in the Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, yet had difficulty in settling into any one particular job. He became very involved in the ACJB and even ends up as Mgr. Picard's personal secretary for a while. He was also secretary of the Conseil général et Comité général of the association, and, starting in 1927, member of the editing committee of the Cahiers de la jeunesse catholique.<sup>61</sup> He was then editor of Soirées and, from there, followed Degrelle. His activities within the Rexist movement were limited and, though he has been called Degrelle's right hand man,<sup>62</sup> he actually had little intimate contact with the leader.<sup>63</sup> Even when he served his four years in Parliament as a député from Namur, he seems to have been rather inactive in that role. Among his main interests were the Spanish Phalangists and their definition of a new European order. He stayed with Rex during the war, though without any truly heroic deeds for the movement. Captured as he was trying to escape after the war, he was set free -- so to speak -- at the French border, on condition that he never return to Belgium. He apparently still lives in France.<sup>64</sup>

VICTOR MATTHYS came to Rex first as an office worker. He soon moved up through the ranks to become chief of propaganda for the movement, at which he seemed to have a real knack. Already before the war, he was an ardent admirer of everything Hitlerian. In 1941, Degrelle appointed him Chef de Rex ad interim while he was on the eastern front. He was shot in 1946.<sup>65</sup>

RAPHAEL SINDIC, unlike the others, was not part of the ACJB. He came to Rex in 1933 only after he had submitted a manuscript to be published and had been enticed by Degrelle into joining, leaving his job as a university professor. He changed posts fairly

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<sup>61</sup>Etienne, p. 72.

<sup>62</sup>Etienne, p. 72.

<sup>63</sup>Mr. Martin Conway.

<sup>64</sup>Mr. Martin Conway.

<sup>65</sup>Etienne, p. 72.

frequently within the movement, Degrelle having hired him without really knowing his qualifications. In 1936, he was elected a député for the movement and, as such, was the hero of the famous affaire Sindic. He seems to have been fairly clumsy, "le type même de l'hurluberlu, du fantaisiste intégral, du farfelu impétinent"<sup>66</sup> and, as such, contributed greatly to the view that Rex was but a bunch of irresponsible youths playing the game of politics.

USMARD LEGROS was drawn to Rex by Degrelle's writings. As a student in Liège, he had been editor of the Catholic paper Vaillant and thus had first-hand press experience. He became an official member in February, 1936 and soon headed Degrelle's Cabinet du Chef.<sup>67</sup>

PIERRE DAYE, according to his own description, had a Rexist revelation when he heard Degrelle speak in Brussels in 1935.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps. At any rate, he seems to have been an opportunist. Born in Schaerbeek in 1892, he had served in the Great War, had had a year's stint in Washington, D.C. in 1918-19 as military attaché, and had travelled all over the world as a journalist for Belgium's main paper, Le Soir. However, his loose morals fared him ill among Brussels circles. Through Rex, he hoped to regain face. Elected as a Rexist député for Brussels in 1936, he was given a minor post in the occupation government during the war. He was condemned to death in 1946, but escaped to Buenos Aires. He died there in 1960.<sup>69</sup>

COUNT XAVIER DE HENRICOURT DE GRUNNE also came to Rex just in time for its first elections. He was born on June 11, 1894, in Rixensart to a noble family, and was educated in the history of sociology at the Sorbonne. Well-known in Belgium, both as a confidant of King Albert I and as a great alpinist and explorer, he made a point of following the developments of the various youth movements arising around him

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<sup>66</sup>Etienne, p. 73.

<sup>67</sup>Legros, p. 16.

<sup>68</sup>Daye, introduction to his Léon Degrelle et le rexisme

<sup>69</sup>Etienne, p. 73.

(without necessarily getting involved himself), so that, when Degrelle asked him to run as Rexist senator, he accepted with enthusiasm. He carried the Rexist banner until December, 1937 and then continued as a Senator without party affiliation. He was not an avowed resistant during the war, but he hated the Nazis as much as he did the English. He even tried to form a secret resistance army during the war. Unfortunately, his scheme was found out by the Germans, and he was deported to a camp in Gross-Strehlitz, Silesia, where he died in 1944.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, PAUL DE MONT joined Rex as Rexist senator and director of Rex-Flanders in 1936. Like Daye, he was a WWI veteran (he lost both legs in the Battle of the Yser) and a recognized writer in Flanders. In Rex, he became chief editor of De Nieuwe Staat, as well. Otherwise, his input into the movement was limited to Flemish affairs.<sup>71</sup>

#### Conclusion:

These men were leaders of a Rexist community which acted as if it was self-sufficient and separate from the rest of Belgium, while at the same time trying to incorporate its ideals into all of Belgian society. The contradiction would bring the movement down, for without knowing how to incorporate their system into the rest of the country, they would never succeed. Rexist leaders believed so strongly in the power of their press, that they could not see past it to what was necessary for their survival. They did not realize that propaganda alone would not satisfy the very concrete needs of their adherents.

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<sup>70</sup>Etienne, p. 74; Paul Van Molle, Le Parlement Belge 1894-1969 (Ledegerg-Gent, Imprimerie Erasme S.A., 1969), p. 78-79; and Legrain, p. 129-30.

<sup>71</sup>Etienne, p. 74.

## CONCLUSION

Why did Rex fail? How is it possible that a movement be at the forefront of national and even international news one year and then suddenly disappear into oblivion the next? Because Rex was an impossibility in Belgium. The movement itself did not develop realistically, and the national climate was not suited to it as it did develop. Much of the trouble lay in Rex's background.

Degrelle was director first of a publishing house, then of a movement. There were advantages and disadvantages to having a political movement develop out of a publishing house: on the one hand, it taught Degrelle and other future Rexist leaders the indispensable techniques of propaganda; on the other hand, this concentration created the illusion that propaganda was all that was necessary. Once they actually entered traditional politics in the Parliamentary elections of 1936, the movement-party would be prepared neither for day-to-day nor for long-term political work: for propaganda was a short-term project, bringing immediate, if limited, results. The concept of planning ahead, of devising programs for realistic change, was unknown to Rexist; it was unknown not only to the Rexist Parliamentarians themselves, but to the movement which they represented as well. Propaganda had gotten them elected, but had not prepared them for political life in any way. The result was catastrophic. When the initial surge of enthusiasm quieted down, Rexist inside and outside of Parliament did not know how to change their tactics in order to keep a steady base of supporters. Instead, they resorted to what they knew best, making false accusations and generally continuing the games of Louvain days.

In essence, Rex's problem was that it never grew up. Those Rexist leaders de la première heure, who had started their careers with the movement while still university or lycée students, had gotten stuck in the rut of those first few years. They could not see beyond their initial successes and blindly hung on to the old means that



had brought those first triumphs. When 1937 and then 1939 rolled around, they were stunned -- though they certainly did not admit it. But the damage could not be reversed. By the late 30s, most Belgians who had flirted with the idealistic new world that Rex was offering had seen the light; they were sick of waiting around for Rex's attacks to bring about the changes they wanted.

Much of Rex's trouble lay with Degrelle and with his visionary plans for himself as the savior of morality in Belgium. Had he not tried in 1937 to immitate Hitler's tactic of staging a "legal" coup, Rex might have had a longer life as a movement of its own definition, and might not have felt compelled to copy Nazi and Italian Fascist propaganda strategies. If Degrelle became more traditionally fascist after 1937, as Etienne argues (p. 141), it was because he and his movement had lost their power base not only at home, but also abroad. Degrelle turned to a more traditional form of fascism after the 1937 elections not only because the Church broke entirely with the Rexist movement at this point, but because he thought that by emulating his two most powerfull allies -- Hitler and Mussolini -- he could win their favor again. They, of course, were politically more astute than he was, and understood that to support a movement which was losing popularity within its own country and which had no possibilities of even performing a putsch was pointless.<sup>1</sup> If Hitler and Mussolini remained on friendly terms with Degrelle after 1937, they did not offer his movement the financial support he had received from them between 1936 and 1937. Degrelle nevertheless continued his fascistization of Rex, and in the process alienated not only former Rexist but also, as an ironical consequence, the very allies he was trying to copy.

Although it was beyond the scope of this thesis to delve deeply into the specific character of Rex's fascism, to define the movement only as very traditionally Catholic would obscure the real nature of Rex. Rex was fascist. It may have begun as a simply

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<sup>1</sup>Degrelle never had the support of the military.

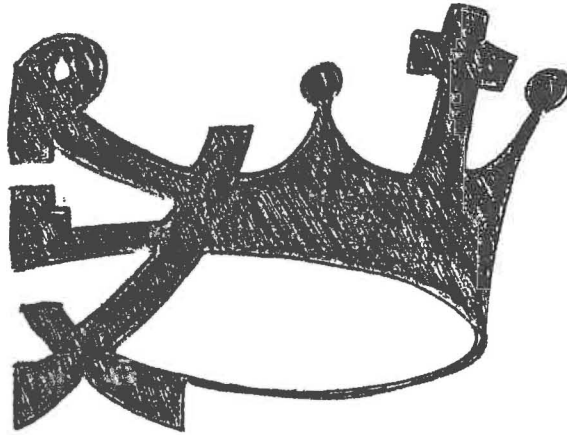
traditional Catholic movement working towards the establishment of an ideal Catholic State, as defined by Mgr. Picard (see chapter one), but by the end of its second phase, it had rejected the Catholic Party. By the end of its third phase, it had begun to attack the very concept of the party system, thereby confirming its movement away from traditional Catholic political methods in general.

Rex certainly was fascist after 1937 and, I would argue, even as early as November, 1935. But it was not the same as Hitlerian and Mussolinian fascism. Rex retained its own character, especially between 1935 and 1937 when it was confident in its power, and did not need to look outside itself for political strategies. Even after the 1937 electoral defeat, when it did look toward fascist Italy and Germany for inspiration, it still kept its narrow-minded political vision based solely in rhetoric. Rex was so caught up in the idea that words were enough to carry the movement and to bring about changes in society that it only borrowed what reaffirmed its own orientation: propaganda. Still convinced that this alone brought power, Rexist leaders once again did not put words into action. Nazi and Italian fascist theory not put into practice had no more success than Rexist rhetoric without program. Only the unusual circumstances of the German occupation during the Second World War would enable Rex to rise again.

So why study Rex before the war? Was it really that important if it never took over power and if its fascism was ineffective? Yes, for fascism of any kind is a threat, and the fascisms of the 1930s were a prelude to the "last good war," the war which must not be forgotten. The disasters of the Second World War and the doubts it raised about the existence of a basic goodness inherent in all human beings, impose upon present generations the duty to continue the study of its causes and of its actors. The threat of contemporary revisionist historians who deny the Holocaust must be fought down. For we, students of today, along with future generations, must not ignore our past. We must concentrate not, like the fascists themselves, solely on the times when history was

positive, but also on the times when it was negative. The 1920s and 30s were negative in the sense that they saw the rise of many fascist groups. We must learn from this history, because we must learn that fascism is not an answer and that the theory of fascism can not work in practice. It only leads to chaos and disaster.

(PLATE 1)



(PLATE 2)

 21 octobre

Journée nationale  
et Date historique

R POUR LA DEFENSE DE REX R  
E POUR L'EXALTATION DE REX E  
X POUR LE RAYONNEMENT DE REX X

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VAINCRA VAINCRA

NUMERO SPECIAL DE REX

TIRAGE:  
100.000

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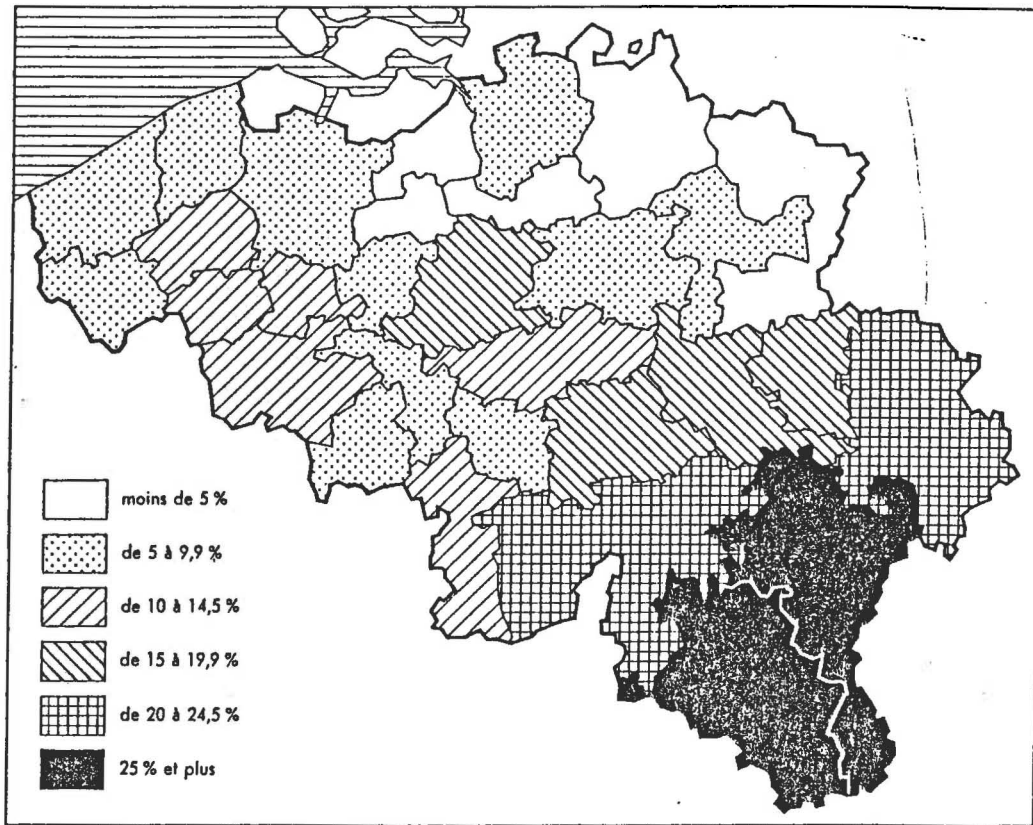
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(PLATE 3)



(PLATE 4)

**ELECTIONS DE 1936 : pourcentage, par rapport aux suffrages exprimés, obtenu par le mouvement Rex.**



**CARTE DES ARRONDISSEMENTS**



(PLATE 5)  
ELECTION RESULTS FOR REX IN 1936 AND 1939<sup>1</sup>

	1936		1939	
	Number of votes	Percentages	Number of Votes	Percentages
<b>ANTWERP</b>	19,213	5.86	6,414	1.95
Antwerp	6,531	7.76	2,284	2.75
Malines	3,059	4.45	1,044	1.53
Turnhout	2,343	4.24	459	.83
<b>BRABANT</b>	68,685	14.22	30,501	6.32
Bruxelles	53,582	15.77	24,823	7.26
Louvain	6,959	8.15	2,060	2.44
Nivelles	8,144	14.09	3,618	6.46
<b>WESTERN</b>				
<b>FLANDERS</b>	24,891	9.59	7,757	2.99
Brugge	4,695	9.46	1,361	2.73
Furnes, Dixmude,				
Ostende	3,413	6.73	1,375	2.69
Roulers, Tielt	5,687	11.08	947	1.88
Courtrai	8,146	10.99	3,402	4.59
Ypres	2,950	8.72	672	1.99
<b>EASTERN</b>				
<b>FLANDERS</b>	22,288	6.49	4,870	1.42
Alost	4,243	6.42	1,830	2.75
Audenarde	3,969	11.75	—	—
Ghent, Eecklo	10,051	6.83	2,156	1.47
Saint-Nicolas	2,495	4.87	341	.67
Termonde	1,530	3.38	543	1.22
<b>HAINAUT</b>	33,961	8.72	14,830	3.95
Charleroi	11,746	8.60	4,155	3.17
Mons	6,215	7.45	2,850	3.55
Soignies	3,166	5.89	1,591	3.05
Thuin	5,070	12.18	2,517	6.31
Tournai, Ath	7,764	10.43	3,317	5.15
<b>LIEGE</b>	55,582	19.36	21,796	7.58
Liège	33,145	19.42	13,971	8.39
Huy,				
Wareme	8,688	15.85	3,019	5.71
Verviers	13,749	22.29	4,806	7.05
<b>LIMBOURG</b>	5,738	5.89	3,015	3.14
Hasselt	3,386	7.71	1,106	2.56
Tongres,				
Maaseik	2,352	4.39	1,909	3.60
<b>LUXEMBOURG</b>	19,146	29.06	8,026	12.74
Arlon, Marche,				
Bastogne	10,457	28.60	4,899	13.99
Neufchâteau,				
Virton	8,689	29.65	3,127	11.19
<b>NAMUR</b>	21,987	20.35	6,612	6.38
Dinant,				
Philippeville	9,556	21.89	3,186	7.66
Namur	12,431	19.29	3,426	5.53

<sup>1</sup>Taken from Étienne, p. 179.



(PLATE 6)

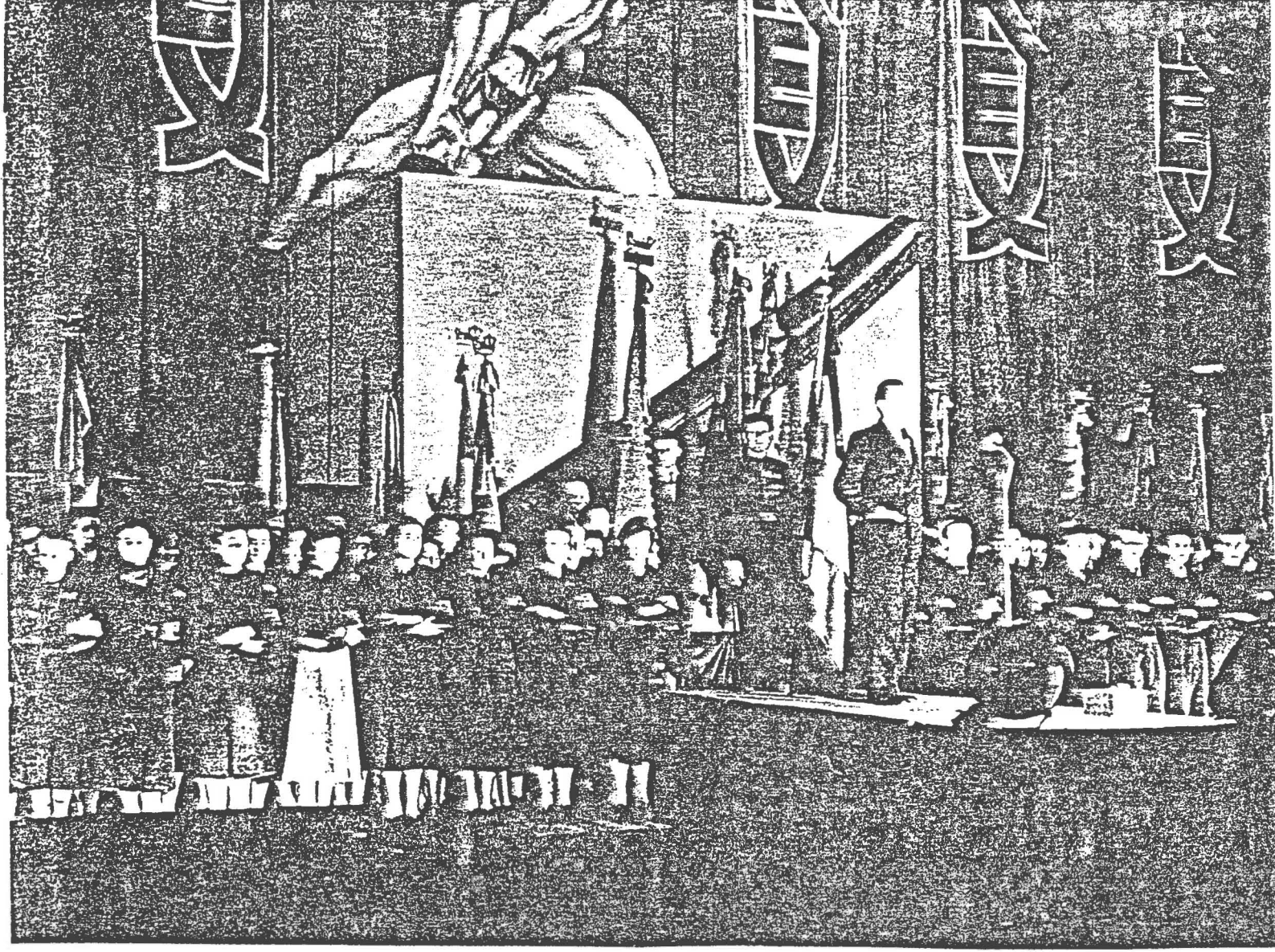
BELGIAN ECONOMY 1928 TO 1939<sup>2</sup>

	Number of Unemployed	Industrial Production (100=1924)
1928	6,000	—
1929	8,000	136
1930	22,000	121
1931	79,000	110
1932	161,000	94
1933	167,000	97
1934	183,000	99
1935	165,000	112
1936	121,000	118
1937	105,000	132
1938	132,000	107
1939	160,000	113

<sup>2</sup>Taken from Étienne, p. 58-59.



(PLATE 7)



From Léon Degrelle, *Rex. Renaissance de la Patrie* (Brux., Editions Rex, 1940), n.p.n.

(PLATE 8A)

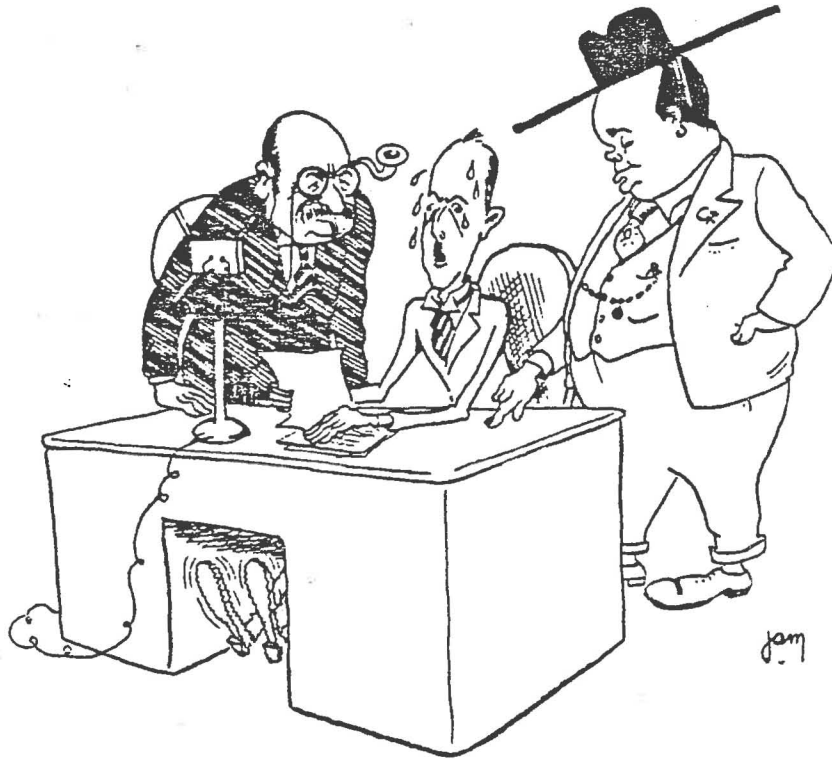
A Courtrai, le 2 novembre 1935, Rex entrain en scène...



« Plus jeune que jamais, la Fédération tend les bras aux Jeunes ! » (M. Segers)

COMPTONS SUR LUI !

(PLATE 8B)



Le gouvernement est en mesure de s'opposer efficacement à toute velléité de dictature de gauche... vous pouvez compter sur moi.  
(Discours de M. Van Zeeland)

HARO SUR LE BAUDET !



LE COMPTABLE — Je me permets de signaler à M. le Directeur qu'il n'y a plus un sou dans la caisse...

LE BANQUIER — Filez ! je vous chasse pour avoir porté atteinte au crédit de notre établissement !

ABONNEMENTS : Belgique  
Congo belge  
Grand-Duché  
de Luxembourg

1 an : quinze francs belges.

Autres Pays

1 an : six belgas.

ON S'ABONNE :

au bureau du journal, C. C. P. 1521.61, REX.  
chez nos propagandistes.  
à l'Agence Dechenna, 16, rue du Perall, Bruxelles.  
dans toutes les librairies.

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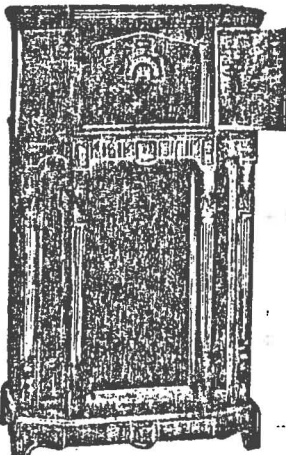
*Tout est dans l'assurance,  
l'assurance est dans Tout*

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demandez les conditions pour toute assurance à

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