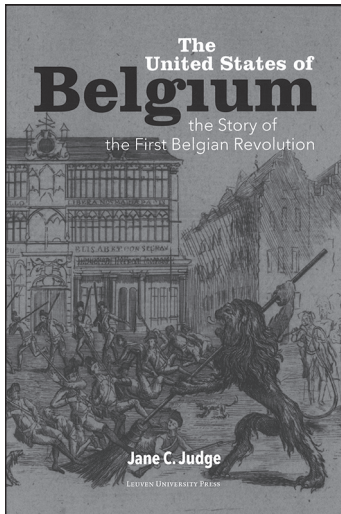


Jane C. Judge: The United States of Belgium



The emergence of national identity by Nathalie Dahn-Singh

In the wake of revolutions that led to the creation of the United States of America (1776) and the French National Assembly (1789), the ten Belgian provinces under Habsburgian rule took arms in 1789 to protest the recent enlightened reforms of Emperor Joseph II (1741-1790) and drive imperial forces out of what was then called “the Austrian Netherlands”. Patriots created the short-lived United States of Belgium that would endure for only a few months in 1790. However, although the first military successes were only temporary, and the attempted revolution failed, a lasting Belgian national identity was shaped. Based on Jane C. Judge’s doctoral dissertation, this book re-examines the unsuccessful 1789-1790 uprising in which the Belgian provinces rebelled against the Austrian Empire to piece together the inception of “Belgianness”.

This book’s contribution to existing historiography is two-fold. Firstly, most studies on the revolution of 1790 have described it

as the “Brabant Revolution” (after the name of one province only), distinguishing it from the Belgian Revolution in 1830-1831, when the provinces became independent. Jane Judge argues that the 1790 revolution had an impact on all the provinces that were becoming the United States of Belgium and not only Brabant – thereby advocating that it be renamed in the First Belgian Revolution. Studying a failed insurrection and seeking to reinstitute it as the First Belgian Revolution also provides the author with a fitting opportunity to discuss the challenges and consequences of historical nomenclature for our perception of historical events – though this interesting topic could have been more developed. Judge also draws on Atlantic history as conceived in the early 1950s by American historian Robert Palmer and used more recently by historian Janet Polasky (amongst others), with the aim of situating late 18th-century national revolutions within the broader Atlantic world and its economic exchanges and transfers of ideas. Secondly, while the revolutionary events themselves are well-known, Jane Judge provides a new perspective, using pamphlets and political writings as well as some correspondence to show that a supra-provincial, national identity emerged as Belgian elites were arguing against the Austrian monarch’s politics.

In ten chapters organized in chronological order (including an introduction and an “epilogue”), Judge’s dynamic writing offers a didactic unfolding of the revolutionary events for readers unfamiliar with Belgian history. The first chapters describe the nuances of the political, religious, economic and social contexts at the end of the 18th century in the Austrian Netherlands, as well as Joseph II’s reforms that sparked resistance especially after 1787. She starts by “setting the stage”, reminding the reader that the Belgian provinces became part of the Spanish realm (as the Spanish Low Countries) in 1482; in 1714, the multilingual territory became

Austrian, encompassing ten provinces under Joseph II's rule: Brabant, Luxembourg, Gelderland, Limbourg, Flanders, West Flanders, Namur, Hainaut, Mechelen and Tournai-Tournesis. While Brussels worked as the supra-provincial administrative capital, each of these provinces had its capital and functioned independently. The provinces formed an "indivisible entity" based on a "tradition of contractual government" since the *Joyeuse Entrée* treaty. This 1356 document established insurances for the Brabant residents from their sovereign in exchange for money or manpower in military endeavors (45ff.). Jane Judge shows that medieval charters such as the *Joyeuse entrée* treaty were often used by pamphleteers in their argument against Joseph II's unifying and centralizing reforms to emphasize the provinces' traditional independence.

The first protests started with Joseph II's ecclesiastical measures from 1783, aiming at the suppression of the contemplative religious orders, which created "an atmosphere of subtle unrest", favored by an "economic stagnation" in 1785-1786 and by the provinces' main economic partners (Britain and the United Provinces) being at war between 1780 and 1784 (57). More reforms followed, and in December 1786, students rioted against the creation of a general seminary in Leuven that would undermine the power of the provincial clergy regarding education. Judge goes into details of Bishop Franckenberg's (and other bishops') attempts at protesting the ecclesiastical reforms. In 1787, petitions and protests started against Joseph II's administrative reforms that aimed at centralizing justice and political power, as Belgian lawyers, nobles and officials saw the reforms as an attack of their traditions and privileges. Jane Judge also describes the role of revolutionaries such as Henri-Charles-Nicolas Van der Noot, whose 1787 *mémoire* constituted, amongst other complaint reports as the author emphasizes, a "guidon for resistance" (78), though it did

not aim at achieving Belgian independence, but only at conveying grievances. Judge regularly contextualizes Belgian events within the contemporary evolution of political thought in the Atlantic world, for example the idea often found in pamphlets that sovereignty was based on the constituents' consent (described by researchers in political thought such as Bernard Manin).

In her analysis, Jane Judge shows that pamphleteers rejected Joseph II's wish for uniformization also in the name of the "cultural collectivity" that the provinces formed. She situates tracts and pamphlets within the events of the revolution, describing the negotiations between the two parties that later escalated and led to armed conflicts. The vision of Belgium as a nation emerged in a 1787 letter from the Estates of Brabant to the other provinces, emphasizing the glorious past of the Belgian people. The United States of America in particular provided a parallel for revolutionaries addressing the Estates of Brabant in May 1787, such as Charles Lambert d'Outrepoint. The year 1788 was marked by arrests and violent unrest: the "populace" had lost its loyalty towards the emperor. Pamphlets were burned by the public executioner, as shown in one of the political cartoons that circulated at the time (109). It is indeed worth noting that Jane Judge included more than 50 images in her book, including political cartoons, caricatures, engravings depicting the revolts, or portraits of the Austrian royal family or of Belgian "patriots". This remarkably rich iconography, which is always explained in well-contextualized legends, illustrates the crucial role of visual material as a political tool – though it could have benefited from even more inclusion in her arguments. Joseph II's "own obstinacy brought the provinces together" (110), when he cancelled provincial privileges in June 1789, including the ones guaranteed by the *Joyeuse Entrée*, propelling the resistance into an armed revolution. The author also explains the revolutionaries'

diplomatic relations within Europe (van der Noot's "international manoeuvring"; 119), their reaction to the fall of the Bastille, and the creation of patriotic societies such as *Pro Aris and Focis*. In her chapter *Vive les patriotes*, the author describes the armed conflict and the first victories of the patriot forces, pushing imperial troops out of Ghent in November 1789. The violence of the imperial military was also exploited by pamphleteers. By December, writers included patriotic ideas in their pamphlets and letters, emphasizing the "popular support for the revolution alongside the growing political unity among the provincial governments" and "common happiness and well-being within the Belgian Netherlands" (155). Many refer to both provincial and supra-provincial identities. Each province declared its independence through *manifestes* that Jane Judge analyses in some detail, showing that they contained some of the previous grievances, but also "acknowledged the growing level of unity" in the provinces. The United States of Belgium were created, and the Treaty ratified in January 1790. The organization of the provinces did not really change, except for the common military defense and coin. However, conflicts between traditionalists and democrats arose in spring 1790, with both groups claiming to follow "popular will" as the author shows.

The most interesting chapter is probably Judge's nuanced analysis of the political debates in pamphlets about a "Belgian nation" (205-229), showing that despite many differences "Belgianness" went "beyond simple patriotic 'love of country'" and "acknowledged a national consciousness" **was** based on origin myths, which were not necessarily accurate. The precise definition of a Belgian nation was still "fluid" (228f.). The dissensions were too many, however, and revolutionaries pro-

gressively placed provincialism over a growing national sentiment. The last chapter describes the new state's negotiations with the new Emperor Leopold, with whom the United Provinces, Prussia and Britain sided, and the failure of the new Congress to maintain its state. Indeed, in December, the Austrians were back in Brussels. In her epilogue, the author argues – without falling into teleological pitfalls – that "the 1830 revolution owed much to the earlier revolt against Joseph II" (256), when a Belgian identity emerged.

Jane Judge's *United States of Belgium* certainly provides a good read and a very useful and factual entry point into a fascinating part of Belgian history. The author follows in the path of recent studies that challenge the traditional view that Belgium is a "fabricated state" and an "ahistorical ... people" (18f.) that hung together by a thread, thanks to more powerful nations. Though one might regret that the analysis of the pamphlets themselves sometimes disappears behind the description of revolutionary events, Judge convincingly sheds light on a piece of history hitherto little known in Anglophone or international historiographies, providing a useful synthesis of existing works on the topic as well. This book will also certainly be of particular interest to historians of education who work on the construction of national identity. Between these aspects and its detailed rendering of the Belgian revolutionary years, Jane Judge's book is a notable contribution to the history of revolutions in the Atlantic world.

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