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## Liberty of Thought: An Historical Study of Crises in the Free University of Brussels<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Utilizing a fluid and dynamic conceptualization of crisis, this paper discusses a variant of academic freedom, *libre examen*, or liberty of thought — the freedom to examine without the influence of dogma. The concept is the enduring philosophical cornerstone of *l'Université Libre de Bruxelles* (Free University of Brussels or ULB). Four crises, two internal and two external, demonstrate how *libre examen* was a crucial social-cultural factor in ULB history. In each crisis, *libre examen* is tested, refined, or defended, and constituents produce a resolution. The external threats consist of the establishment of the university in 1834 by Belgian Freemasons in response to Roman Catholic political dominance and the German occupation of Belgium and ULB during the First World War. The two internal challenges include a rupture between progressives and conservatives and the subsequent secession and creation of a parallel university by faculty and students in the 1890s. A 1968 revolt focused on limited participation in university governance started by students but quickly absorbed faculty and staff. The concept of crisis is explored in the conclusion, identifying the elements of trauma, risk, and resolution for each crisis.

*Libre examen* is the cornerstone concept upon which *l'Université Libre de Bruxelles* (Free University of Brussels or ULB) was established and continues to flourish after 177 years. The simple translation of *libre examen* is liberty of thought or the freedom to examine without the influence of dogma.<sup>2</sup> The roots of this concept and its subsequent impact on the life of the university in past times are less simple. Four crises, two external and two internal, demonstrate how *libre examen* has been a crucial socio-cultural factor in ULB history. Specifically, *libre examen* served as the value around which university founders and subsequent portions of constituents united in response to two external threats and two internal challenges to their existing social order.

The coalescence, however, is only half the story. The depth of the collective attachment of ULB's constituents to the core value has, in each crisis, empowered them to overcome the threat or resolve the challenge. Thus, the four events provide instruction about patterns of both inter-organizational and intra-organizational reactions to crises based in ideology, as well as the methods of resolution.

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<sup>2</sup> René Hilaire, "Brussels University Strangled," *Belgium*, II, 19 (January 1942): 3-4. In order to simplify the text, I have translated the quotations from the resources written in French into English. As with the citations, I am solely responsible for any mistakes in non-English format and translation.

## The Concept of Crisis

In an extensive entry on the concept of crisis in his historiographic lexicon, Koselleck noted that crisis can be defined from four diverse perspectives. His first category of possible interpretations posits that a crisis “. . . can mean that chain of events leading to a culminating, decisive point at which action is required.”<sup>3</sup> However, a crisis is not merely the sum of connected occurrences leading to a decision, but rather as Vigh argues, “the result of slow processes of deterioration, erosion, and negative change — of multiple traumas and friction. . . . Crisis is not rupture, it is fragmentation . . . . This fragmentation “entails a loss of coherence and unity . . . [yet] does not necessarily lead to passivity.”<sup>4</sup> Agency begs action to resolve the fragmentation. Vigh’s conceptualization enables the discussion of the first vignette to explore the condition of socio-political instability that compelled the founders of ULB to act and then within the subsequent three vignettes to explicate the erosion, deterioration, and fragmentation of institutional coherence and unity, all revolving around the concept of *libre examen*. The four stories highlight constituent actions within the unfolding of the crises and their *dénouements*. Interestingly, the ULB ideological crises occurred both within the organization and between organizations at the national level, shifting the constituents as well as organizational interplay within each crisis.

## The Four Crises of l’Université de Bruxelles

The establishment of the university in 1834 serves as the starting point. The motivation of the founding fathers in establishing a university was to check the perceived limitations on scholarship within the new country of Belgium. The second crisis occurred in the 1890s when a dissident group of faculty and students seceded in order to refine the concept of *libre examen*. The third crisis occurred during the Second World War when the German occupiers controlled the university and threatened to eliminate the core concept. Finally, caught up in the rebellions of 1968, ULB students voiced their frustration with their disenfranchisement by the university administration.

## The Foundation of the University in the 1830s

Belgium emerged as a nation-state in 1830-31 when its people revolted against what they assumed to be their last oppressors. The unique mixture of ethnic peoples had been under the domination of the Hapsburg regime in the eighteenth century, then under France until Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo in 1815, and finally the Netherlands from 1815-1830 as a result of the Congress of Vienna. Breaking from the Protestant and centralizing Dutch rule of William of Orange, Belgian Revolutionaries managed to construct and ratify their own constitution to prevent annexation by either France or the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup> Neither the Revolution nor the formation of Belgium’s Constitution of 1831 was an easy task. The population that united to form the new nation was neither homogeneous nor amicable. Comprising various socio-cultural veins, the conglomeration generated multiple and complex layers of conflict and controversy.

On the eve of the Revolution, at least three “sleeping traditional divisions” existed: the *Wallonie/Flandre* (Francophonic versus Flemish speakers), *le paysannerie/villes* (the country people versus

<sup>3</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” trans. Michaela W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67, 2 (April 2006): 371.

<sup>4</sup> Henrik Vigh, “Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline,” *Ethnos*, 73 (March 2008): 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> René Hilaire, “The Twenty-First of July,” *Belgium*, III, 6 (July 1942): 231-232; Carl Strikwerda, *A House Divided: Catholics, Socialists, and Flemish Nationalists in Nineteenth-century Belgium* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1997).

city people), and the *bourgeoisie/monde du travail* (professional middle-class versus the working class). Politically speaking, the country divided between ultramontane conservative Roman Catholics and anticlerical liberals. Ninety-nine percent of the country was Catholic, and conservative Catholics supported the church having extensive powers over education and social welfare. The liberals opposed the church's power. These two groups, however, aligned just enough to break from Dutch rule in 1830. The Catholics opposed the royal Protestant meddling in clerical matters.<sup>6</sup> At stake also were the freedoms of press and education accorded the Belgians in the Dutch-Belgian Constitution of 1815. When King William began to prosecute journalists, whom he considered too liberal, his actions "hastened the creation of Unionism which for the first time in Belgium united in a common program the liberals and the Catholics, hitherto separated by philosophical principles that were diametrically opposed."<sup>7</sup>

The tenuous compact enabling unification rested on an enduring disdain for further domination by former subjugators. Philosophical differences especially between conservative Catholics and reform-minded liberals were suppressed just enough to forge a radical Constitution that guaranteed secularization of the society and produced a model of parliamentary governance.<sup>8</sup>

The liberals aspired to create new forms of social and political organization in the new country. "This professionally heterogeneous group, economically dependent for the most part but socially very mobile [and consisting] of middle class people, of intellectuals, of university teachers, of prosperous artisans, of journalists, of bureaucrats, of merchants, etc., had given to the 1830 Revolution its more combative elements."<sup>9</sup> Although many of the liberals were practicing Catholics, a high proportion belonged to the Free Masons or free-thinkers. Both liberal subgroups were opposed to domination of their new country by any one particular dogmatic group, but especially the Catholic hierarchy.

The Belgian Ultramontane Catholics possessed a zealous allegiance to the Vatican; thus they were never tied to a divine-right monarchy. To them, an alliance of church and state was not required. Rather, their motivation was to ensure a prominent and lasting socio-political role for themselves in the new nation. They compromised with the liberals to forge a new Constitution that secularized the society; nothing like it existed in Europe at the time. The liberals secured not only the separation of church and state, but championed the rights of meeting, association, and liberty for the press within the Constitution of 1831.<sup>10</sup>

Article 17 of the Constitution guaranteed freedom of education which "was meant to eliminate any monopoly in education."<sup>11</sup> As the leaders of the Roman Catholics in the new Belgium, the clergy protected their cultural position by ensuring that financial support for schools would be defined at the local level. Hence, public schools in predominantly Catholic towns were virtually directed by local clergy.<sup>12</sup>

Maintaining a tertiary educational system was an imperative for the new nation. Until the turn of the eighteenth century, the University of Louvain, granted a papal charter in 1425, was Belgium's only

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bolle, "Origines de la libre pensée en Belgique constantes et originalités," in *1789-1989, 200 ans de libre pensée en Belgique*, ed. Marcel Voisin (Charleroi, Belgique: Centre d'Action Laïque, 1989), 11; Strikwerda, *A House Divided*; Belgian Federal Government, "Belgium's independence (1830-present time)," (2009). Retrieved from [http://www.belgium.be/en/about\\_belgium/country/history/belgium\\_from\\_1830/](http://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/country/history/belgium_from_1830/)

<sup>7</sup> Hislaire, "The Twenty-First of July," 232.

<sup>8</sup> Bolle, "Origines de la libre pensée en Belgique constantes et originalités"; Boris Mirkin-Guetzévitch, "The Belgian Constitution," *Belgium*, II, 16 (November 1941): 4-5; Strikwerda, *A House Divided*.

<sup>9</sup> Els Witte and Jan Craeybeckx, *La Belgique Politique de 1830 à nos jours: Les tensions d'une démocratie bourgeoise* (Bruxelles: Éditions Labor, 1987), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Bolle, "Origines de la libre pensée en Belgique constantes et originalités"; Strikwerda, *A House Divided*; Witte and Craeybeckx, *La Belgique Politique de 1830 à nos jours*.

<sup>11</sup> Léon Vanderkindere, *L'Université de Bruxelles, 1834-1884* (Bruxelles: L'Université de Bruxelles, 1884), 45.

<sup>12</sup> Witte and Craeybeckx, *La Belgique Politique de 1830 à nos jours*.

university. Having been closed in 1797 by the French Republic, Louvain was partially reopened in Brussels as part of Napoleon's establishment of an Imperial University in Belgium in 1806. Twelve additional academies, including a Faculty of Arts and Sciences in Liège, dotted the land as part of the Imperial University. Four years later, Faculties of Letters and Science were added to the Imperial law school in Brussels. After Napoleon's defeat, William I reorganized Belgian higher education, returning the Brussels' faculties to Louvain in 1817 and establishing state-controlled universities at Liège and Ghent.<sup>13</sup>

As the ancient, once Catholic, University of Louvain was controlled by the state, the Belgian bishops announced the opening of a Catholic university in Malines just north of Brussels.<sup>14</sup> The new University at Malines would be an ultramontane venture to support Rome's recent campaign. "Engaged in combating the libertarian movements of current European thought," Pope Gregory XVI issued the encyclical *Mirari vos* in 1832, denouncing liberty of the press and of conscience. The encyclical "condemned . . . many of the moral and social doctrines that were then put forth by most of the revolutionary schools."<sup>15</sup> The new university opened its doors on 4 November 1834; a year later, Belgium closed its university in Louvain and the Catholic university was reinstated in that city in December.<sup>16</sup>

The announcement of the new Catholic university produced the crisis. To the free-thinking Masons, the potential theological and social domination by the Catholic Church was antagonistic to their organization's rational philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Belgian liberals, including the Free-Masons, were not anti-Catholic; in fact, many of ULB's founding fathers practiced Catholicism. However, a Catholic university located just north of the capital that supported Rome's denunciation of the "modern ideas of liberty diffused by the French Revolution and the new Belgian Constitution"<sup>18</sup> would erode the equitable political status gained from the negotiated constitution. As well, it would deteriorate the liberals' future social position by limiting their children's access to the two state universities, one of which was primarily Flemish. At the Brussels Masonic Lodge (*Les Amis Philanthropes*), in an 1834 summer solstice holiday dinner speech, Pierre-Theodore Verhaegen became the champion who ignited the spark to establish ULB.<sup>19</sup>

A free university, in Verhaegen's words, "viennent servir de contrepoids à l'université dite catholique" (would serve as a counter-balance to the so-called Catholic university). He called on his lodge brothers ". . . réunir tous nos efforts pour la propagation des Lumières et pour arrêter les progrès toujours croissants du fanatisme. . ." (to bring together our efforts for the propagation of the enlightened [in other words, Masonic philosophy] and to stop also the growing progress of fanaticism).<sup>20</sup> With sponsorship from the Brussels Lodge, Verhaegen gained support from Masons across the country for the creation of a dogma-

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<sup>13</sup> Pierre F. Daled, *Le libre examen: La vie d'un principe Université de Bruxelles, 1834-1964* (Bruxelles: Espace de Liberté, 2009); Andre Uyttebrouck, "L'Université Libre de Bruxelles de 1834 à 1934," in *Les cent cinquante ans de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (1834-1984)*, eds. Andre Uyttebrouck and Andrée Despy-Meyer (Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1984), 11-32.

<sup>14</sup> Daled, *Le libre examen*; Andre Uyttebrouck, "L'université du libre examen," in *1789-1989, 200 ans de libre pensée en Belgique*, ed. Marcel Voisin (Charleroi, Belgique: Centre d'Action Laïque, 1989), 49-52.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie Toke, "Pope Gregory XVI." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. Retrieved from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07006a.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Daled, *Le libre examen*.

<sup>17</sup> M. Hervé Hasquin, "L'anticléricisme économique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle à propos du monachisme et de la dîme," in *Aspects de l'anticléricisme du moyen âge à nos jours. Problèmes d'histoire du christianisme*, ed. Jacques Marx (Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1988), 87-102.

<sup>18</sup> Uyttebrouck, "L'Université Libre de Bruxelles de 1834 à 1934," 15.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Jacques Hoebanx, "La fondation de l'Université libre de Belgique," in *Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen, l'homme, sa vie, sa légende. Bicentenaire d'une naissance* (Bruxelles: l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1996), 61-73.

<sup>20</sup> As quoted in *ibid.*, 67.

free university.<sup>21</sup>

On 20 November 1834 — sixteen days after the new Catholic university opened — ULB was launched. Most of its 38 professors had been hired to the four faculties (Philosophy and Arts, Science, Law and Medicine) and 96 students matriculated.<sup>22</sup> ULB thus engaged the culture of the capital city by challenging what its teaching staff considered to be the intolerance and prejudice that emanated from the Catholic hierarchy and university.<sup>23</sup> As the Free University gained strength through continued support of Belgian Masonic brothers, the animosity from its religious competitor also grew. “Virulent attacks” were published in Roman Catholic clerical newspapers, pastoral letters from the bishops were sent to parishes around the country, and one priest reportedly “frightened families by presenting [ULB] as a place of perdition for the young people.”<sup>24</sup>

So began the university dedicated to thought without bias. Its rationale resembled the academic concept of intellectual freedom or free inquiry of the nineteenth-century German university system with roots in the early eighteenth-century rationalist philosophy of Christian Wolff at the University of Halle.<sup>25</sup> The Belgian concept emerged from frustration with the pervasive, dominant, and conservative dogma of the Belgian Catholic Church of the mid-nineteenth century but was adopted from the rationalist free-thinking movement of Masonry.

### Secession in the Face of Conservatism

For 60 years, the enduring principle of *libre examen* served as the cornerstone of ULB.<sup>26</sup> In spite of the loyal adherence to the principle, its operational definition gradually became a matter of contention among various constituents within the university. Part of the contention related to the mixture of political orientations among members of the Administrative Council (AC)<sup>27</sup> and part reflected the evolving nature

<sup>21</sup> Els Witte, “Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen et la franc-maçonnerie,” in *Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen, l’homme, sa vie, sa légende. Bicentenaire d’une naissance*, (Bruxelles: l’Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1996), 47-60.

<sup>22</sup> Daled, *Le libre examen*; Andre Uyttebrouck, “L’Organisation de l’Université,” in *Les cent cinquante ans de l’Université Libre de Bruxelles (1834-1984)*, eds. Andre Uyttebrouck et Andrée Despy-Meyer (Bruxelles: Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1984), 75-108; Vanderkindere, *1834-1884. L’Université de Bruxelles*.

<sup>23</sup> Hoebanx, “La fondation de l’Université libre de Belgique.”

<sup>24</sup> Andrée Despy-Meyer, “Un homme au service d’une cause: Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen et l’Université Libre de Bruxelles,” in *Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen, l’homme, sa vie, sa légende. Bicentenaire d’une naissance* (Bruxelles: l’Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1996), 85; Jean Stengers, “L’apparition du libre examen a l’Université de Bruxelles,” *Revue de l’Université de Bruxelles*, 1-2-3 (octobre 1963–avril 1964). Retrieved from [http://digistore.bib.ulb.ac.be/2009/a21419\\_000\\_f.pdf](http://digistore.bib.ulb.ac.be/2009/a21419_000_f.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Rosalind M. O. Pritchard, *The End of Elitism? The Democratisation of the West German University System* (New York: Berg, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> In a fascinating discussion of the philosophical evolution of the concept, Stengers (1963-1964) demonstrates that Verhaegen (and ULB professors) did not employ the words *libre examen* until 1854. His earlier statements on the *raison d’être* of the university fixed on freedom of teaching. Thus, during the first 20 years of the life of ULB, teaching free from dogma, either religious or political, served as the primary value.

<sup>27</sup> The Administrative Council (AC) has always served as the primary policy-creating and administrative body of the university. During this period, it was composed of 20 members: the Bourgmestre of Brussels, the administrator-inspector, the Rector, the Pro-Rector (former), seven permanent members chosen by the Council from benefactors, two members of the Brussels City Council, a member of the Brabant (geographic region) Council, a member of the Brussels Hospitals Committee, a representative from alumni Union, and four peer members elected annually from the professoriate by the professeurs ordinaire and extraordinaires. Of the 20, only 6 were professors. During this crisis, the composition of the AC was changed to 21 members with a minimum of 10 professors and a reduction of external members. In 1914, the right to elect faculty to the AC was limited to professeurs ordinaire (Uyttebrouck, “L’Organisation de l’Université,” 75-77).

of academe. The storm that rocked the university during the early years of the 1890s enabled the scholarly community to further delineate the concept of *libre examen* both in definition and administrative practice. However, a final resolution to the crisis was not reached until 1918.

The crisis began in 1890 as a result of a clash in disciplinary epistemology. A respected senior professor of psychology and moral philosophy, Guillaume Tiberghien, believed that he had found a young ULB student who would eventually replace him upon retirement. Before finishing his thesis, Georges Dwelshauvers went to Leipzig to work under the experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt for two years. When Dwelshauvers returned to ULB having completed his doctoral research, he submitted his thesis, *La psychologie de l'aperception et recherches expérimentales sur l'attention*, to Tiberghien. The senior scholar was outraged. The thesis employed Comtean methodology that contradicted the older man's paradigm which he had taught successfully during his 40-year career at ULB. Further, Tiberghien reportedly accused his student of violating the values of the university: "Le libre examen est un acte de conscience qui ne peut avoir aucune autorité à vos yeux, attendu qu'il n'accepte aucune vérification extérieure" (*Libre examen* is an act of conscience that may not have any authority in your eyes, considering that it does not accept any external verification).<sup>28</sup> Dwelshauvers rebutted that his thesis considered conceptualizations that had been accepted in Germany for 20 years.

Whether Tiberghien was alone in his vehement rejection of the positivist perspective or one among many like-minded older and more conservative professors in the institution<sup>29</sup> is beyond this discussion. Certainly, tensions existed among the professors. Nonetheless, the Faculty of Philosophy rejected Dwelshauvers' thesis for a variety of reasons including a lack of rigour. Only one professor proposed to accept the thesis on the grounds that *libre examen* "de permettre à l'auteur d'une thèse de philosophie d'exposer dans une discussion publique ses opinions sincères" ([would] allow the author of a thesis of philosophy to explain his sincere opinions in a public discussion).<sup>30</sup> Dwelshauvers appealed to the AC, but it upheld the negative vote.

Outraged at the decision, ULB students believed the thesis to have been rejected solely because it clashed with the teachings of a senior professor. Further, they perceived the decision to have been a violation of *libre examen*. They booed the Rector and disrupted the opening ceremonies for the 1890 academic year; their protests caused his resignation. Dwelshauvers wrote a second thesis – *Les principes de l'idéalisme scientifique* – that not only was accepted by the Faculty of Philosophy, but secured for him a faculty position in experimental psychology and allowed him to succeed Tiberghien in 1897.<sup>31</sup>

Following the Dwelshauvers incident and its aftermath, the AC could not regain the confidence of the students. Its conservative nature curtailed the evolving meaning of the University's core value. In response, Charles Graux, the Administrative Inspector,<sup>32</sup> produced a new definition of *libre examen*. His effort resulted in the first democratization of the structure of ULB and inclusion of the principle of *libre examen* in the Organic Statutes of ULB (1892). He wrote that the original concept upon which the university had been founded had meant ". . . above all the truth was drawn from sources of reason, that dogma was excluded from the domain of science." However, he continued, ". . . *Libre examen* in its actual application has taken a less precise and large meaning. It is no longer only the refusal of accepting dogma

<sup>28</sup> As quoted in Francine Noël, *1894: L'Université Libre de Bruxelles en crise* (Bruxelles: Éditions de L'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1988), 38-39.

<sup>29</sup> Uyttebrouck, "L'université du libre examen."

<sup>30</sup> As quoted in Noël, *1894: L'Université Libre de Bruxelles en crise*, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Noël, *1894: L'Université Libre de Bruxelles en crise*; Uyttebrouck, "L'université du libre examen."

<sup>32</sup> This person held the authority to supervise all of the examinations that led to diplomas and licensure and was a permanent member of the AC.

as the source of scientific truth, it is equally a liberty to assert divergent systems. . .”<sup>33</sup> Within a year, Charles Saroléa’s doctoral thesis that upheld the spiritualist perspective and attacked positivism was accepted by the Faculty of Philosophy. When Saroléa’s name was presented as a replacement for the retiring Tiberghien, the students protested once again. After being isolated, Saroléa joined the faculty at Edinburgh instead.

The imbroglio subsided and seemed to usher in a new liberal atmosphere, but not for long.<sup>34</sup> In 1894, the conservative nature of the AC and the progressive character of many of the students and professors clashed again over the definition and application of *libre examen*. The AC was composed of both moderates and progressives, but the former clearly held the majority. The crisis finally erupted during the negotiations to hire the French geographer and anarchist, Élisée Reclus, as professor of comparative geography.<sup>35</sup> The Faculty of Sciences, in its rush to recruit the eminent Reclus, offered the position prior to submitting its request to the AC. Graux, the moderate Administrative Inspector, balked at giving Reclus the title of *agrégé* which bestowed permanency of position. Hector Denis, the progressive Rector, argued that a scholar of Reclus’ standing deserved the appointment. In the end, Reclus was offered the position.<sup>36</sup>

Trying to finish a manuscript for his 19 volume masterpiece, *La nouvelle géographie universelle* (1894), Reclus postponed his arrival at the university until March, 1894. However, in December, 1893, the French National Assembly was bombed by anarchist Auguste Vaillant. When the French police investigated, Reclus, his brother, and son were implicated at first in the destruction. Promptly though, Vaillant was deemed to have worked alone.<sup>37</sup>

Three weeks after the bombing, the AC canceled the comparative geography course. Pro-Rector (immediate past rector) Vanderkindere felt that the timing was not good to offer a course to an anarchist. Graux exhibited an anarchist proclamation signed by Reclus that had been circulating in the halls of the university for some time. Another moderate member, Charles Buls, the Bourgmestre of Brussels, wanted the offer rescinded as a course given by an anarchist would injure the reputation of the university. Although Rector Denis pleaded that the man’s political views were irrelevant to his teaching, the AC voted 11 to 4 to nullify the contract. Graux wrote to Reclus with the news, explaining that the geographer’s renown might attract crowds with sympathetic or hostile activities.<sup>38</sup>

Within four days, student clubs officially protested, condemning the cancellation on the basis of *libre examen*;<sup>39</sup> they informed the AC that they would engage Reclus for instruction outside of the university. The Council threatened disciplinary measures. Addressed to the authorities, delegates from 17 student clubs authored a stinging reminder of their right to defend their own thoughts under the newest conceptualization of *libre examen*. Within a few days, a group of alumni also protested the cancellation, distributing a broadside strongly supporting the student position. Professors joined at this point by signing the manifesto.

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<sup>33</sup> As quoted in Noël, 1894: *L’Université Libre de Bruxelles en crise*, 42; Hector Denis, “La philosophie positive et le libre examen,” *Bulletin Technique*, 2<sup>me</sup> Série, 2, (Décembre 1912): 49-57. <http://digitheque.ulb.ac.be/fr/digitheque-libre-examen/ouvrages-de-la-digitheque-libre-examen/classement-alphabetique-des-titres-digitheque-libre-examen/index.html>

<sup>34</sup> Uyttebrouck, “L’université du libre examen.”

<sup>35</sup> To understand what this self-proclaimed adjective of “anarchist” meant to Reclus, see Élisée Reclus, “An Anarchist on Anarchy,” *Contemporary Review*, 45 (May 1884): 627-641. Retrieved from [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist\\_archives/bright/reclus/onanarchy.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bright/reclus/onanarchy.html).

Today, even with a socialist perspective, Reclus would probably self-identify as a libertarian as well as a social justice adherent.

<sup>36</sup> Noël, 1894: *L’Université Libre de Bruxelles en crise*.

<sup>37</sup> Uyttebrouck, “L’université du libre examen”; Noël, 1894: *L’Université Libre de Bruxelles en crise*.

<sup>38</sup> Noël, 1894: *L’Université Libre de Bruxelles en crise*.

<sup>39</sup> Daled, *Le libre examen*.

In response to the protests, the AC expelled 19 student leaders.<sup>40</sup> This action led to the secession of faculty, students, and alumni and to the establishment of l'Université à Bruxelles (UB). The new university opened on 25 October 1894 with only Faculties of Philosophy and Letters and of Law.<sup>41</sup> Faculties of Science and of Medicine and a Polytechnic were formed a year later. The Polytechnic gained the support of the Belgian Workers' Party and taught second-level trade apprentices for years. In an effort to modernize not only thought but also methods of instruction, the professors determined that courses would be delivered through lectures based on syllabi, eschewing the old dictation-recitation methods. In fact, professors were encouraged to create summaries of their lectures as memory aides for students.<sup>42</sup>

The professors and the students who seceded to form UB clearly considered themselves to be progressives. The new university attracted professors and students alike from diverse political and geographic backgrounds. Among the professors were several socialists and a few anarchists. In addition to Belgians, many of the new teachers hailed from France with a sprinkling of Italians and a Russian historian of law.<sup>43</sup>

As the new university was not chartered to confer legally-recognized degrees, Belgians never held the majority among the student body. However, UB adhered to *libre examen*, promoting socialist and Comtean positivist perspectives. This political orientation attracted students of a similar philosophy from all over Europe and even Cuba and China. At one point, UB was affectionately called "l'Université Bulgare Bruxelles," so numerous were the students from Bulgaria.<sup>44</sup> Dedicated to teaching the latest concepts of science and to overcoming the conservatism at ULB, the new institution projected its socialist bent by welcoming non-university auditors to its evening lectures at modest cost.<sup>45</sup>

UB was the only university in Belgium to remain open during the First World War. The country was invaded by German soldiers in August, 1914. The University of Louvain was destroyed during the sacking of its town. Students by the thousands stole across Belgium's borders to join various military units. The call to arms was so successful that enrollments plummeted in the four other universities (Liège, Ghent, Louvain, and ULB), forcing them to close their doors for the duration of the War. Given the events in Russia in 1917, at the end of the War, UB suffered due to its socialist leanings. The recruitment of international students evaporated and UB's finances diminished. The moderate liberals at ULB and the socialists at UB subsequently undertook a rapprochement.<sup>46</sup>

Although freedom from dogma had been the basis on which ULB was established, *libre examen* — along with the definitions of knowledge, research, and teaching — was evolving. As a foundational value that rejected politico-religious dogma influencing instruction and defined as "thought without bias," over the subsequent 60 years, various factions within the university approached the concept from their own dogmatic socio-political perspectives. The crisis of the early 1890s triggered the need for ULB to accept a more concrete definition that removed sanctions. In 1894, *libre examen* was adopted as part of the first article of ULB's statutes. In their teaching, instructional staff officially now possessed the right to their own opinions without limitations and consequences.<sup>47</sup> Yet, to what degree the statute actually reduced

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Élisée Reclus joined those who established the new UB and taught there until his death in 1905 (Uyttebrouck, "L'université du libre examen").

<sup>42</sup> Andrée Despy-Meyer, "Un laboratoire d'idées: l'Université nouvelle de Bruxelles (1894-1919)," in *Laboratoires et réseaux de diffusion des idées en Belgique*, ed. Ginette Kurgan-van Hentenryk (Bruxelles: Edition de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1994), 51-54.

<sup>43</sup> Noël, 1894: *L'Université Libre de Bruxelles en crise*.

<sup>44</sup> Despy-Meyer, "Un laboratoire d'idées: l'Université nouvelle de Bruxelles (1894-1919)," 52.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Uyttebrouck and Despy-Meyer, "L'Université Libre de Bruxelles de 1834 à 1934."

<sup>47</sup> Daled, *Le libre examen*; Uyttebrouck, "L'université du libre examen."



the cost of divergent thinking may be questioned. Over the years, many progressive professors of ULB defected to UB, hampering ULB in its efforts to modernize its orientation to scholarship. However, the crisis “would force the University to better adapt to the exigencies of the period.”<sup>48</sup> Reconciliation between the two “free” institutions came in late 1918. The UB faculties and most of the institutes were disbanded and “. . . the scientific collections and the library were ceded to ULB.”<sup>49</sup> Only the Institute of Higher Studies remained intact.

### Discontinuation rather than Submission, 1940s

The third crisis was provoked by the German occupation of Belgium during the Second World War. The German invasion of Belgium began on 10 May 1940 and the nation capitulated 18 days later. With a population of approximately 8.3 million and a total military force of 625,000 men, the short campaign inflicted 5,700 military and more than 13,000 civilian casualties, creating tremendous chaos.<sup>50</sup> Operating on the assumption that they were annexing the land and not merely invading it temporarily, the Germans prepared to convert the Belgian people and their national structures to their own definition and practice of *kultur*.<sup>51</sup> As one tactic in their strategy, the military administration installed its own commissioner within the four Belgian universities to execute their conversion to organs of the German state.<sup>52</sup>

The plan was devised by two historian collaborators, one each from the two public universities. According to the plan, Liège and Ghent, as public universities, would present no problem. Their assimilation would start with the installation of professors from Germany and from local sympathizers; gradually the universities would become appendages of the state. As regional universities, Ghent would serve the Flemish and Liège would educate the Walloons. The Louvain professoriate would be reduced to the theological faculty, thus permitting it to remain Catholic, but removing any secular scholarly threat.<sup>53</sup>

ULB, with its foundational value of free-thinking, presented a thorny problem to the Germans. Since the early 1930s, students and professors had been involved in anti-fascist and anti-totalitarian activism.<sup>54</sup> By the mid-1930s, ULB students had created a committee on anti-fascism, undertaken a campaign to educate themselves and others about fascist and Nazi distortions, and published articles about totalitarianism. In debating clubs, such as “The Black and the White,” speakers challenged each other on fascism, Germany, and international politics. The student club *le Cercle du Libre Examen* “concerned itself primarily with philosophical debates on the ethics of the university, freedom of expression, and antidogmatism.”<sup>55</sup> In 1939, prior to the German invasion of Belgium, Belgian intellectuals, including university faculty — several of whom were ULB professors — signed a manifesto condemning the German pogroms and the conflicts in Great Britain and France.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Noël, 1894: *L'Université Libre de Bruxelles en crise*, 101.

<sup>49</sup> Uyttebrouck and Despy-Meyer, “L'Université Libre de Bruxelles de 1834 à 1934,” 24.

<sup>50</sup> Fernand Baudhuin, “Economy under the Occupation,” in *Belgium under Occupation*, ed. and trans. Jan-Albert Goris (New York: The Moretus Press, 1947), 32.

<sup>51</sup> Dirk Martin, “Les universités belges pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale,” in *l'Occupation en France et en Belgique 1940-1944*, tome 1. *Revue du Nord*, #2 spécial hors-série-collection Histoire (Lille: Villeneuve d'Ascq, Université de Lille, 1987).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Uyttebrouck and Despy-Meyer, “L'Université Libre de Bruxelles de 1834 à 1934.”

<sup>55</sup> Herman Bodson, *Agent for the Resistance: A Belgian Saboteur in World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994), 8; Daled, *Le libre examen*.

<sup>56</sup> Marie-Rose Thielmans, “Un commissaire allemand pour l'Université,” in *25 Novembre 1941. L'Université Libre de Bruxelles ferme ses portes*, eds. Andrée Despy-Meyer, Alain Dierkens, and Frank Scheelings (Bruxelles: Archives de l'ULB, 1991), 26.

The Nazi plan designated ULB for a complete reform. The Germans “charge[d] the Free University with having been a hotbed of Jewish-Masonic-Bolshevist thought.”<sup>57</sup> *Libre examen* had to be dislodged and the university values reoriented to the German philosophy and mission. The reform would create “a bastion of the German New Order.”<sup>58</sup> ULB would become “a German ‘Frontier University’ (*Grenzlandsuniversität*), a Germanic bulwark against Latin Western Europe.”<sup>59</sup>

Courses were suspended at all four universities on the morning of the invasion of the Belgium. Within the first few days, some 300 professors (and as many as 1,000 professors and staff combined) from the four universities fled to France as part of a general exodus. A few found havens elsewhere; many ULB professors fled to the United States and secured academic positions. Among them, Marcel Barzin and Henri Gregoire both found a home in the University in Exile at the New School for Social Research in New York City, while George Sarton, founder and editor of the journal, *Isis*, relocated to Harvard.<sup>60</sup> In France, the Universities of Toulouse, Montpellier, Bordeaux, and Aix-en-Provence welcomed exiled professors who established an examination schedule for those ULB students ready to finish their degrees. Unlike the situation during the First World War, once the curtain fell in 1940, the Belgium universities were occupied; few students and professors were able to slip out of the country to enlist in the military or continue their academic work elsewhere. Rather than risk the probability of the students being forced into labour for the Germans, administrators in the four universities decided to reopen their doors for the following fall.<sup>61</sup>

By the time the universities reopened, the German Military Administration had installed a commissioner at three of the four universities.<sup>62</sup> A German Ordinance enacted on 23 October 1940 terminated the employment of Jewish public officials, lawyers, teachers, professors, and newspaper staff. Within the universities, administrators were forbidden to honor or create new contracts with Jewish suppliers.<sup>63</sup> Those professors who fled the country during the invasion had to obtain permission from the commissioner to be rehired; “[S]ome 90 members of the teaching staff of Belgian universities did not

<sup>57</sup> Hilaire, “Brussels University Strangled,” 4.

<sup>58</sup> Uyttebrouck and Despy-Meyer, “L’Université Libre de Bruxelles de 1834 à 1934,” 39.

<sup>59</sup> Werner Warmbrunn, *The German Occupation of Belgium, 1940-1944* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 183.

<sup>60</sup> Martin, “Les universités belges pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale”; Andrée Despy-Meyer and Georges Despy, “Le corps enseignant dans la tourmente,” in *25 Novembre 1941: L’université libre de Bruxelles ferme ses portes*, ed. Andrée Despy-Meyer, Alain Dierkens et Frank Scheelings (Bruxelles: Archives de L’ULB, 1991), 43-56; Claus-Dieter Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research*, trans. Rita and Robert Kimber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989); “Nos professeurs aux États-Unis,” *News Reel, Belgium*, III, 3, 130 (April 1942); Henri Gregoire, “George Sarton, the Scientist and Scholar,” *Belgium*, III, 8 (September 1942), 352-355.

<sup>61</sup> Marie-Rose Thielmans, “L’exode et les premiers temps de l’occupation,” in *25 Novembre 1941. L’Université Libre de Bruxelles ferme ses portes*, eds. Andrée Despy-Meyer, Alain Dierkens, and Frank Scheelings (Bruxelles: Archives de l’ULB, 1991), 103-117; Jean Timmermans, “Higher education in Belgium under Enemy Occupation,” *Belgium*, III, 9 (October 1942), 383-387; Hilaire, “The Twenty-First of July.”

<sup>62</sup> The University of Louvain escaped having a commissioner appointed as a result of pressure placed on the Germans by “. . . the Council of Belgian Bishops, which directs its teaching under the presidency of the Cardinal-Archbishop of Malines, succeeding in making weight of its responsibility toward the Pope” (Timmermans, “Higher education in Belgium under Enemy Occupation,” 383). Similar to administrative acts of resistance at Ghent and Liège, the Rector of Louvain, Monsignor Van Waeyenbergh, promoted all incoming first-year students to second-year status in 1943 to circumvent them having to register for labour service in Germany (June Hyer, “The Influence of the German Occupation on the Universities of Belgium and the Netherlands,” *The Educational Forum*, 17 (May 1953): 443-452.

<sup>63</sup> A. van den H-, “Antisemitic Legislation in Belgium,” *Belgium*, I, 4 (May 1941): 41; Andrée Despy-Meyer, “Une page importante de notre histoire,” in *Des hommes et des pierres: Un hommage à Groupe G et à la résistance*, eds. Andrée Despy-Meyer, José Gotovitch, Jean-Louis Vanherweghem, Hervé Hasquin (Bruxelles: Les Amis de la Liberté, 1997), 13-32; Hilaire, “Brussels University Strangled.”

return to occupied Belgium.”<sup>64</sup> Many were considered by the Germans to be traitors. Thus, an internal battle to control the hiring of teaching staff began.

The ULB students, professors, and the AC continued their academic lives throughout the 1940-41 year of occupation, but increasingly they were circumscribed by the coercive control of the Nazis. During this first year of the occupation, the Germans hired at least three *Gastprofessoren* (visiting professors) who taught without ULB authority.<sup>65</sup> Not knowing what future controls would be forced on them, the AC tried to protect itself from further intrusion to its authority. In April, forecasting the probability that the *Bourgmestre* of Brussels and the Alderman of Public Instruction would be replaced by Germans, the AC eliminated their *ex-officio* offices and elected both men to positions-at-large. The two men, in fact, were relieved of their public duties in June. ULB’s German Commissioner Walz was furious with the change in membership, considering it a political act. In a letter to the Rector, he declared that “all important measures in personnel matters, administrative or financial, will be subject to prior approval of the Commissioner or of the Curator depending upon the case.”<sup>66</sup> ULB now had even less control over its operations.

In May 1941, the second commissioner, Professor Hans Ipsen, assumed command of ULB for the Germans. In August, as part of the covert reorganization plan, Ipsen ordered vacant teaching positions to be filled permanently with appointments by a small German-selected committee of professors (rather than approved by the AC) but subject to approval by the Germans. Further, Ipsen directed the implementation of a complete course of instruction in the Flemish language and the replacement of the current ULB AC president. He threatened that if his directives were not obeyed, ULB would be closed and students would be forced into labor for the German effort.<sup>67</sup>

The AC agreed to allow the 70 or so vacant positions to be filled on a temporary basis but under its authority, not by a new committee. They agreed to permit a gradual continuation of implementing Flemish instruction since the university had begun to offer some law courses and philosophy service courses in Flemish beginning in the mid-1930s.<sup>68</sup> Finally, it refused to replace its president. The Nazis backed down and the fall term of 1941 began.

The final tipping point in the crisis occurred at the end of October. The Germans tried to appoint four candidates to teach some of the Flemish courses. The candidates were partisans of the “New Order.”<sup>69</sup> According to Commissioner Ipsen, the instructors for the Flemish courses did not merely need to speak Flemish, but had to be Flemish. His appointments, he noted, were Belgians and one was of indisputable scientific character. This latter nominee, Antoon Jacob, was the most controversial.<sup>70</sup> Jacob had been a professor at the German-created, Dutch-speaking University of Ghent during the First World War. After being convicted of high treason by a Belgian court after the war, he taught in exile at the University of Hamburg. Returning on the day of the German invasion of Belgium, Jacob was reappointed to Ghent by the Germans. Now, Ipsen wanted his appointment “to help to transform l’Université de Bruxelles into a hitlero-flamingant organism.”<sup>71</sup> The AC refused to honor these appointments and the Nazis drew the line:

<sup>64</sup> Timmermans, “Higher Education in Belgium under Enemy Occupation,” 386.

<sup>65</sup> Martin, “Les universités belges pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale.”

<sup>66</sup> Marcel Vauthier, *1940-1944: L’Université de Bruxelles sous l’occupation Allemande* (Bruxelles: Imprimeries Cock, 1944), 40.

<sup>67</sup> Henri E. A. M. Rolin, “The Free University of Brussels under the Nazi Revolution,” *Belgium*, III, 3 (April 1942): 92-94.

<sup>68</sup> Martin, “Les universités belges pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale”; Uyttebrouck and Despy-Meyer, “L’Université Libre de Bruxelles de 1834 à 1934.”

<sup>69</sup> Martin, “Les universités belges pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale,” 322.

<sup>70</sup> Despy-Meyer and Despy, “Le corps enseignant dans la tourmente,” 56.

<sup>71</sup> Vauthier, *1940-1944. L’Université de Bruxelles sous l’occupation Allemande*, 121.

appoint the candidates by 4 December or the University will be closed.<sup>72</sup>

On 24 November 1941, the AC itself voted to close the university rather than submit further to the Germans. In its declaration, the AC believed that ULB could no longer provide instruction without bowing to the German perspective and could no longer expose its teaching staff to its transformation into a German state institution. Although some confusion reigned among the students as they began to hear rumours of the cessation of lectures, the General Association of Students provided leadership and issued a statement of support for resistance to the Germans the next day. On 25 November, all but 20 of the 300 teachers and the student body walked out of the University in agreement with the Council's decision.<sup>73</sup>

Subsequently in December, eight members of the AC<sup>74</sup> were arrested and imprisoned in a concentration camp in Huy, southeast of Brussels; several other professors were confined to their homes. The student leaders who had publicly supported the AC's decision were also imprisoned either at Huy or in a standard prison.<sup>75</sup> During the year and a half of occupation, university members had witnessed the continual erosion of the university's value of *libre examen*. Refusing to allow their ideals to further decay, they dispersed.

Students had no idea if the occupation would end; many did not want to abandon their academic progress. Additionally, they faced forced labour — possibly in Germany — if they were not matriculating or employed.<sup>76</sup> Some students continued their studies at other Belgian universities. Many enrolled at Louvain due to its proximity to Brussels. However, after not being able to answer religious questions on exams, feeling the brunt of proselytizing efforts, or realizing that they could not express themselves as freely as they were accustomed, they joined peers who traveled daily by train to Liège. The influx of ULB students at Liège apparently served to “increase toleration of different creeds resulting from the mixture of religious and linguistic backgrounds.”<sup>77</sup>

Professors were forbidden by the Germans to teach as a result of the decision to close the university. Yet, at great risk, some faculty met students to supervise their work, moving the locations often to avoid capture and prosecution. Thus, surreptitiously, academic work continued underground. Clandestine study groups met on a regular basis around Brussels, some directed by professors, others without. A math professor engaged 1<sup>st</sup> candidate students within days of ULB's closure, teaching the course throughout the occupation. One participant remembered that: “It constituted a team that met every morning in the small dining room of Mademoiselle Laporte, rue de l'Elan in Boitsfort . . . In the months that followed the feeling of solidarity and the lines between us were such that the idea of our quitting did not come to us.”<sup>78</sup>

A second strategy involved camouflaged ULB courses. Public courses were arranged to begin on 9 March 1942 at various *lycées* and *athénées* around Brussels under the cover of the lower school teachers.

<sup>72</sup> Rolin, “The Free University of Brussels under the Nazi Revolution.”

<sup>73</sup> Vauthier, 1940-1944. *L'Université de Bruxelles sous l'occupation Allemande*; D. Devriese, “La suspension des cours à la surprise des étudiants,” in *25 Novembre 1941: L'université libre de Bruxelles ferme ses portes*, ed. Andrée Despy-Meyer, Alain Dierkens et Frank Scheelings (Bruxelles: Archives de L'ULB, 1991), 65-70; Martin, “Les universités belges pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale.”

<sup>74</sup> The eight included a law professor and honorary president, the counselor for education for the city of Brussels, and the presidents (the contemporary title for dean) of the Faculties of Arts, Medicine, and Science, the Polytechnic School, and the School of Political and Social Science (Timmermans, “Higher Education in Belgium under Enemy Occupation”).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*; “Nos professeurs aux États-Unis; Despy-Meyer, “Une page importante de notre histoire.”

<sup>76</sup> Vauthier, 1940-1944. *L'Université de Bruxelles sous l'occupation Allemande*.

<sup>77</sup> Hyer, “The Influence of the German Occupation on the Universities of Belgium and the Netherlands,” 446.

<sup>78</sup> As quoted in Eliane Gubin, “Très vite, des cours clandestins,” in *25 novembre 1941. L'Université Libre de Bruxelles ferme ses portes*, eds. Andrée Despy-Meyer, Alain Dierkens, and Frank Scheelings (Bruxelles: Archives de l'ULB, 1991), 103-117.

Some 400 students utilized the cloaked university during that spring. Finally, some students studied alone. One young man studied for his examinations in the Royal Library, daily copying and hiding his notes in the basement of the building. An estimated 12,000 intellectuals engaged in various forms of clandestine scholarship, including operating an underground press after ULB had closed its doors.<sup>79</sup> All of these activities realized a positive outcome for ULB. The covert partnership of students and faculty forged a close relationship that “. . . persisted in the post-war period, and [threatened] to replace the traditional aristocratic professorial respect with a more wholesome faculty-student spirit.”<sup>80</sup>

The underground studies would have been impossible, however, without another ruse. To conceal the students from the Nazi forced-labor program, Belgian resisters employed in manufacturing and industry invented fictitious positions and appointments for students; phantom jobs were created within the various levels of public service offices, permitting the issuance of work identity cards.<sup>81</sup>

Brussels was liberated on 3 September 1944. The administrators of ULB moved once again into the buildings of the university evacuated by the Germans and held licensure examinations for those students who had carried on their studies underground during the occupation. The university reopened on 8 January 1945.<sup>82</sup> Thus, ULB and *libre examen*, the rock on which the university had been established, continued.

### The “Contestation” of May 1968

International news during last years of the 1960s heralded student protests around the world. Complaints and grievances from students were not new; students had been grumbling about food and repressive faculty for centuries.<sup>83</sup> Starting in the nineteenth century, however, new voices, concerns, and alignments unevenly surfaced internationally. Lewis S. Feuer argues that “a student movement will not arise unless there is a sense that the older generation has discredited itself and lost its moral standing.”<sup>84</sup> And indeed, a sense of aggravation with the older generation’s governance fueled the escalating student reform movements. From the earliest days of the 1960s, students in France, Germany, England, and the United States coalesced in small, but growing pockets — at first alone, but quickly diffusing information and seeking guidance across national borders — that aimed to de-authorize the older generation in a variety of venues and societal and student-focused issues. What originally began chiefly as students questioning social, financial, and then academic concerns vital to their life in the university in 1966 expanded within two years into dissent against social repression and imperialism.<sup>85</sup>

The fourth ULB crisis erupted on 13 May 1968 and *libre examen* was once again at the center of the controversy. Influenced by the actions at the Free University of Berlin (established in 1948) in which

<sup>79</sup> Despy-Meyer, “Une page importante de notre histoire”; José Gotovitch, “L’engagement des intellectuels dans la résistance,” in *Des hommes et des pierres: Un hommage à Groupe G et à la résistance*, eds. Andrée Despy-Meyer, José Gotovitch, Jean-Louis Vanherweghem, Hervé Hasquin (Bruxelles: Les Amis de la Liberté, 1997), 33-40.

<sup>80</sup> Hyer, “The Influence of the German Occupation on the Universities of Belgium and the Netherlands,” 445.

<sup>81</sup> Jean Willem, “The Universities under the Occupation,” in *Belgium under Occupation*, ed. and trans. Jan-Albert Goris (New York: Moretus Press for the Belgian Government Information Center, 1947), 144.

<sup>82</sup> Despy-Meyer, “Une page importante de notre histoire.”

<sup>83</sup> Leon Jackson, “The Rights of Man and the Rights of Youth: Fraternity and Riot at Eighteenth-century Harvard,” in *The American College in the Nineteenth Century*, ed., Roger L. Geiger (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 46-79.

<sup>84</sup> Lewis S. Feuer, *The Conflict of Generations: The Character and Significance of Student Movements* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 11.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*; Christine Fauré, *Mai 68: Jour et nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); A. Belden Fields, “The Revolution Betrayed: The French Student Revolt of May-June 1968,” in *Students in Revolt*, eds. Seymour M. Lipset and Philip G. Altbach (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 127-166.

students protested their powerlessness within university governance and the heavy hand of the mandarin professors, ULB students confronted the administration concerning their lack of participation in and recourse to decisions made by the management of the university.<sup>86</sup> The confrontation gained both momentum and participants throughout the month of May. The movement engaged the teaching and research corps as well as the staff and simultaneously encouraged the silenced voice of the Flemish constituents at the francophonic-dominated ULB. It also set in motion a two-month period of consciousness-raising activity across the institution.

The student-instigated confrontation challenged the lack of constituent participation in the university's governance. At issue was the dominance of the AC that provided extraordinary power to its president and to his assistant. Further, the protests questioned the academic oligarchy of the senior professors (*professeurs ordinaires*) who alone elected the AC. Even the Rector had limited power within the operational structure of the university and appeared merely to rubber-stamp the decisions of the AC.<sup>87</sup>

The General Association of Students (AG) first notified the university community that an informational meeting would follow a 13 May concert in the premiere auditorium on campus. The AG claimed the need to defend students' elementary rights: to study, to work, and to defend themselves against arbitrary decisions. The AG sought democracy in decision making (in their words, "constituent representation") and openness in decision making ("explanations of policy and financial decisions"). The students also called for reform in the courses, teaching, and examinations, and better relations between professors and students. As the days proceeded, the list of demands and issues brought forth by the students grew longer. Political liberty for all students, including foreign students, and an interdiction prohibiting police from the campus were among the first issues to surface.<sup>88</sup> During the 13 May evening meeting, the Free Assembly of Students (ALE) was created by the 500 participants.

On 17 May, ALE, representing both the AG and the Flemish Student Association, published its first written declaration, reiterating the issues of liberty and a lack of confidence in the academic authorities, and calling for solidarity and pressure on the administration. On 21 May, professors, assistants (employees "making" their doctorates), and researchers organized their own Free Assembly (ALEC). Supporting the actions already taken by the students, ALEC voted to withdraw its recognition of the authority of the AC and called for a democratically-elected (students, professors, researchers, and all staff) replacement.<sup>89</sup>

The following day, the Rector and the Presidents (deans) of the faculties announced a "restrained counter-demonstration" for open discussion of concerns to be held symbolically in front of the statue of Verhaegen, the founder of the university. Designated by the AC to lead discussions, the Rector wanted to establish a negotiation team as the students and teachers wanted democratic discussions. In place of the meeting, ALE began a long occupation of the AC's chamber and eventually spread around the university.<sup>90</sup>

Three days later, a mass meeting of 2,000 students, teachers, and researchers voted on an agenda for change that included reforming teaching and exams, restructuring the AC, and creating an oversight committee to ensure the changes. The Free Assembly of Administrative, Technical, and Workers (ALPATO) approved the reform platform after three more days (May 27). Significantly with the exception of the Faculty of Law, each of the faculties formulated separate resolutions through the end of May and

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<sup>86</sup> Christian DeJean, "Introduction générale: La contestation étudiante," in *Mai 68, 20 ans déjà*, eds. Andrée Despy-Meyer and Marc D'Hoore (Bruxelles: Les Archives de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1988).

<sup>87</sup> Andrée Despy-Meyer and Marc D'Hoore, "La journée de la contestation 13 mai-10 juillet," in *Mai 68, 20 ans déjà*, eds. Andrée Despy-Meyer and Marc D'Hoore (Bruxelles: Les Archives de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1988).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Memorandum reprinted in *ibid.*, 33.

<sup>90</sup> Despy-Meyer and D'Hoore, "La journée de la contestation 13 mai-10 juillet."

early June. The resolutions emerged as reactions to an AC announcement on 28 May of a series of reforms that included reorganizing itself into a more constituent representative group, and establishing councils within each of the faculties that would be composed of teachers and students, and a commission on student social services. Further, the University would publish an annual report on the management of its finances.<sup>91</sup>

The AC appealed to the university community for calm, but indicated that it would no longer tolerate the occupation of the university. Immediately, each of the Free Assemblies rejected the Council's declaration. The plan was not only ambiguous and vague, but most importantly, was a unilateral effort by the AC. In addition, the students took offence to the statement about their occupation of the campus. The crisis continued through the month of June. ALE created action groups to solicit operational ideas and tactics, yet never delineated specific proposals related to its original complaints. The movement began to feel the brunt of the leadership vacuum. Seeking peace, ALPATO asked for the end of the occupation and for a specific proposal.

At mid-month, medical students provided the needed direction. They invited representatives from the faculties, students, and staff to meet to construct a plan of reform. On 18 June, "The Charter of the Democratic and *Libre Examen* University of Tomorrow" emerged from the assembly's meeting. The Charter declared that: all authority emanates from the members of the university community; the inseparable goals of teaching and research were based on the concept of *libre examen*; a charter imposed by the AC would be rejected; a new AC would assure the continued legal status and management of ULB and entrust the establishment of new statutes recasting the structure to a representative body of the constituents; and the new statutes be devised and approved by 1 February 1969. As the subordinate position of the Flemish students had been an underlying issue at the university for decades, the Charter also called for the university to be split into two autonomous institutions, one francophone and one Flemish. Not only had a proposal finally been placed on the table, but the effort lived up to its explicit values as the document was co-authored by professors and students.<sup>92</sup>

On 20 June, the AC pre-empted the triumph of the democratic Charter by announcing a plan that partially restructured the university. Contained in the announcement were the resignations of and replacements for the president of the AC, his secretary, and the Rector. Having not been involved, students and staff were disappointed. A week later, the *Assemblée Interfacultaire* noted the receipt of the AC's Declaration, indicating that the university had embarked on the road to the democratization of its structure.<sup>93</sup> Although a handful of students could not relinquish their protest which led to the burning of a *Deux Chevaux* (a Citroen) on the steps of the Faculty of Law, the contestation had ended.

The Declaration of 20 June 1968 eventually led to the adoption of new statutes two years later. The "Organic Statutes" of 10 July 1970 affirmed *libre examen* as the primary principle of ULB and guaranteed the fundamental right of all bodies within the university community to participate with deliberative power in the management and control of the university. Structurally, the Statutes created six permanent commissions that would serve as advisory boards to the AC on research, teaching, administration, student affairs, finances, and investments. Throughout, the Statutes were applications of the guarantee of internal democracy, autonomy, and independence.

In the end, the crisis of 1968 led to a profound reorganization of the institution through the creation of four constituencies: professors, researchers, students, and professional staff. Each corps secured representation within commissions that moderated various operations of the university. The second significant result of the reorganization was the secession of the Flemish community into their own

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>92</sup> This document is reprinted in *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>93</sup> The text of statement is reprinted in *ibid.*, 60.

separate institution, the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*.<sup>94</sup> The concept of *libre examen* thus was extended on one hand to include participatory management and on the other to recognize the deeply divided ethnic identities and empower the minority to control itself.

### **Analysis**

Clearly, in presenting the preceding crisis situations, I have implicitly taken a partisan perspective. Within each of the crises, two distinct parties grappled either for control of or for equal representation within the particular context. In each crisis, I may be accused of taking the side of the underdog. To a degree, I was limited by the material and documents that I could obtain; however, I am not sure that an equal treatment of both sides is ultimately possible. A crisis would be perceived by those in control only after being identified by those who feel unfairly dominated. Only then would those in control perceive a threat to their position and recognize the need to respond.

The four critical points in the history of one Belgian university enable the tracking of the perceptions of the crises, (no doubt with one side being represented more than the other), but also the analysis of the trauma or friction that arose, the risks to both parties, and the processes by which the participants within the organization resolved the crises. Further, however, the distinctive value of *libre examen* held by the university participants throughout its history has consistently distinguished the ethos of this organization. *Libre examen* has permitted various types of actors to perceive a crisis and then obligate other members to confront the issue. Consequently, the organization was altered each time and the value of the liberty of thought or freedom to examine dogma that drove the university was reified or reinterpreted.

Two of the crises occurred as a result of interactions with external threats: first, the founding of the university, and then the occupation and attempted assimilation of the university by the Germans. The other two situations — the secession of professors and students to establish the new university in the 1890s and the contestation of 1968 — transpired within the organization.

Within the two internal or intra-organizational cases, the legitimacy of the controlling bodies was certainly called into question. Ultimately, however, the question of legitimacy was only part of the issue. The vitality of the cornerstone ideology was at stake. In the external cases, the question of legitimacy emanated from the external force. Both external groups threatened the ideological sovereignty of the ULBistes (or of the future community). This dichotomy of crises resulting from the type of extant organizational dynamics led to different resolutions of the crises. Interestingly, in both types of crises, one of the steps taken toward resolution was the creation of a parallel organization.

### **The Crises by External Threats**

As some scholars have noted, a “precipitating event” or a “change in the internal or external environment” officially begins the crisis.<sup>95</sup> Robert Billings, Thomas Milburn, and Mary Lou Schaalman indicate that the triggering event is more complicated and the problem must be sensed and defined for

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<sup>94</sup> Michel Hanotiau, “Les Prolongements de Mai 1968,” in *Mai 68, 20 ans déjà*, eds. Andrée Despy-Meyer and Marc D’Hoore (Bruxelles: Les Archives de l’Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1988); Despy-Meyer and D’Hoore, “La journée de la contestation 13 mai-10 juillet.”

<sup>95</sup> Barry A. Turner, “The Organizational and Interorganizational Development of Disasters,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21 (September 1976): 378-391; Michael Brecher, “Toward a Theory of International Crisis,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 21 (March 1977): 39-75.



the crisis to be clearly perceived.<sup>96</sup> This perception takes place over time. The type of threat, however, is perhaps the most important element in the analysis of the external crisis. The two cases of crisis by external threat were caused by different types of inter-group relations and therefore play out in their consequences and resolutions very differently.

In the external crisis of 1834, the triggering event was the announcement by the Belgian Bishops of the organization of a new ultramontane university at Malines. The crisis predated and resulted in the establishment of ULB. Occurring during the formative years of the new Belgian federation, the crisis is located on the societal level and was not a refutation of the legitimacy of political leadership. Rather, the event involved two powerful groups that jockeyed for position to ensure future investments in social capital.<sup>97</sup> Political, social, and economic roles had to be distributed within the embryonic nation, not only at the outset, but on a continuing basis. The Catholic Church and the Free Masons were the two most powerful identifiable groups within Belgium at the time.<sup>98</sup> Once the nation was established, both groups had to engage in collective behavior to protect their social positions of power and influence.

The announcement of the forthcoming establishment of the Catholic university threatened not the immediate, but rather the future balance of power. By investing in higher education, the Church would assure that their successors had the proper ideological orientation. Without a parallel institution, the Free Masons (and the liberals) would have few means to protect their future voice in the operations of the government, in commerce, and in the general social life of the country. The consequence of this crisis was the establishment of a university. The first faculties established are instructive: law, medicine, science, and philosophy and letters. The resolution by the Free Masons was the creation of a parallel competitive resource.

In the second external crisis, the German occupation of ULB in particular, the threat took the form of the transformation of the university into an organ of the "New Order." Clearly, the consequence would be the loss of socio-economic and physical capital, but more importantly, through assimilation, the greater loss was the ideological sovereignty of the university community. On the public level, the AC with the consent of the rest of the constituents closed the institution rather than permit the continued erosion of independence. On the private level, clandestine courses, a different sort of parallel institution, enabled significant parts of the community to continue its life with little interference. Although we know today that the occupation would come to an end, those involved did not. They could not project a future, but they could reject participating in the apparent future.

### The Crises by Internal Threats

The two internal crises clearly contested the legitimacy of the current operations of ULB. In both instances, students and instructional staff challenged the definition of the core ideology of *libre examen* as it was operationalized by the contemporary administration. The triggering events in both cases demonstrated a need to refine the current application of the core concept to the institutional structure and operations. The triggers appear to have emerged from the intellectual and social *Zeitgeist* of the era that

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<sup>96</sup> Robert S. Billings, Thomas. W. Millburn, and Mary Lou Schaalman, "A Model of Crisis Perception: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 25 (June 1980): 300-316.

<sup>97</sup> Elinor Ostram and T.K. Ahn, "A Social Science Perspective on Social Capital: Social Capital and Collective Action" (paper presented to the European Research Conference on Social Capital: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Exeter, UK, September 15-20, 2001).

<sup>98</sup> Although the 1831 Constitution was forged by the concerted effort of the two opposing political groups of the Church and the liberals, the latter was more of a coalition of men who opposed clerical domination. Free Masons comprised a large proportion of the liberals. As a free-standing association, they were able to engage in collective action more readily than the amorphous category of "liberals."

enabled a significant group of professors and students to confront the conservative interpretation of the core ideology.

The definition of the problem as a crisis led to the establishment of the parallel university of Brussels during the 1890s. A series of academic decisions reflected a *passé* epistemology. Although ULB had been established out of the free-thinking movement, an underlying philosophical conceptualization was grounded in the spiritualism of Masonry and mid-nineteenth thought. Between 1863 and 1880, Free Thinkers divided into two wings: the Doctrinaires and the Progressives.<sup>99</sup> The Progressives considered the lack of social democracy (suffrage) and the social plight of the working class to be directly linked to the continued domination of the Catholic Church. The positivism of Augustus Comte, a secular orientation, provided the Progressives with not only rationalized scientific thinking, but a non-sectarian approach to scholarship. The Doctrinaires, on the other hand, tracing their philosophy to Verhaegen and his contemporaries, “honoraient publiquement ‘la religion of ses pères’” (honored publicly the religion of their fathers).<sup>100</sup>

Although the Progressives and the Doctrinaires were able to coalesce at various times through this period to oppose the Church from gaining too much control of the Belgian government, the epistemological battle raged within the university. Many of the members of the AC and the conservative professors within the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters were members of the Doctrinaire wing of the Free Thinkers. The Progressive wing was comprised of the professors who wanted to refine the academic meaning of *libre examen* and who disaffiliated to create the new UB.<sup>101</sup> Although the rejection of Dwelshauvers’ dissertation based on new disciplinary approaches arising from German scholarship may have been a false start, the nullification of Reclus’ teaching contract due to his political beliefs provided the push to create a parallel institution in which a more inclusive definition of *libre examen* would thrive.

Similarly, the second internal crisis was born out of the *Zeitgeist* of the student rebellions of the 1960s. Significantly, the students led the contestation. All around them, in Western Europe, the United States, and Canada, student protests abounded. At issue in many student protests was a voice in governance, protection from arbitrary decision making, and reforms in teaching methods and content. That the protest at ULB did not arise from within the ranks of the professoriate is not surprising. From 1914, teaching corps representatives on the AC were elected from and by the *professeurs ordinaire*, virtually enabling a system of Mandarins to control the academic system. Objections from within the disenfranchised sections of the teaching corps could have jeopardized their future employment. Researchers and assistants relied on their *professeurs ordinaire promoteurs* for continued support. Other instructional personnel below the “full” professors were merely silenced within the system. The challenge had to come from the students since they had the least at stake.

In both cases of the internal crises, the pattern of resolution appears to follow the same general trend. A revolt by a counter-culture challenged the operational definition of the core ideology. In the 1894 revolt, the coalition of professors and students enabled a mutiny to occur that disintegrated at least part if not the entirety of the normative structure — in other words, the creation of a separate institution. In the 1968 revolt, the students, at first acting alone, did not have the political capital to create a separate parallel institution on their own. Instead they chose to disrupt the normative system by holding mass meetings, displaying posters and paintings, and eventually occupying the campus. As their voice grew stronger, other non-represented members of the community joined the cause.

Although the 1968 protests did not last as long as the secession of 1894, both sets of dissenters pushed constituent members to evaluate and reinterpret the definition and application of the *libre examen*

<sup>99</sup> Jules Louis, “Libre pensée et politique,” in 1789-1989, *200 ans de libre pensée en Belgique*, ed. Marcel Voisin (Charleroi, Belgique: Centre d’Action Laïque, 1989), 35-41.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>101</sup> Louis, “Libre pensée et politique.”

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ideology. In the 1894 crisis, the events during the crisis challenged the prevailing epistemology, but more importantly they sought to widen the boundaries of the meaning of liberty of thought. The enduring early definition of freedom to examine without dogma assumed that examination occurred only through human reason and that dogma referred specifically to ideology imposed by the Church or the state. By the end of the century, students and faculty challenged this interpretation, seeking to broaden the definition to permit examination through diverse paradigms.

In the 1968 crisis, the challenge focused on the operational definition of *libre examen*. The interpretation or application of the concept was played out in the administration of the university. Only a quarter century before, the decision to close the university in the face of the German occupation and the efforts to keep *libre examen* alive involved the entire community. Yet by the mid-1960s, a closed hierarchy had evolved. To the students at first, joined by lower-ranked teaching staff and the staff, *libre examen* required transparency, constituent participation, and the recognition of diversity. The modification of *libre examen* led to the democratization of ULB's governance structure, and eventually to the creation of a new institution for the Flemish constituents.

Employed as the rallying cry to establish ULB in 1834, *libre examen* has persisted as a dynamic core value throughout the university's history. Constituents have clarified the freedom to examine in response to evolving social and academic perspectives. They have also sustained it in defiance of attempted imposition of dogma from external agencies. A living concept, *libre examen* continues to give purpose to its community.