

BELGIUM

The Kingdom of Belgium

The Kingdom of Belgium, bordering the southern part of the North Sea, is situated in the middle of Western Europe and is surrounded by the Netherlands (in the north), by Germany (in the east), by France (in the south) and by the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg (in the south east).

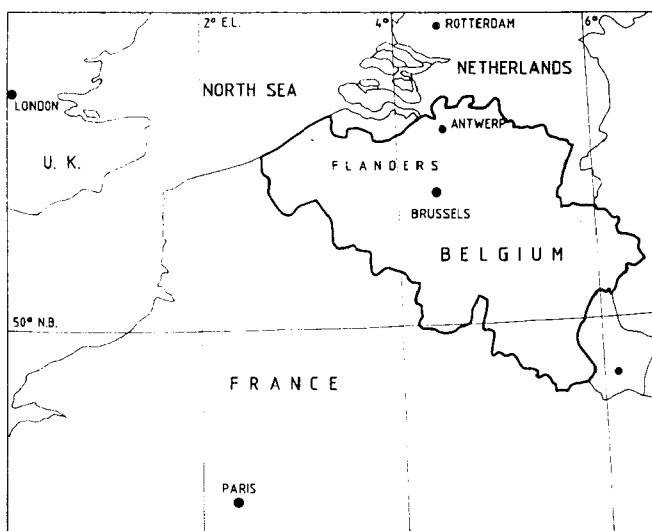


FIG. 1.- Belgium.

The land area is about 30,500 km² and the population is about 10 million people. The capital city is Brussels, seat of the Federal Government and also of the European Community.

Three other big cities in Belgium are: Antwerp, Liège and Ghent; the first being also the second largest port in Europe; Zeebrugge (belonging to the city of Bruges), Ghent and Brussels are important harbours as well.

Historically the so-called Low Countries were torn by religious wars in the 16th century; the Netherlands, including Belgium, were a part of the Spanish Kingdom (excluding Liège) at that time. The catholic Spanish armies defeated the protestant rebellion in the southern Low Countries. The northern Low Countries were able to resist the Spaniards and could establish an independent state. Since the Spanish period, the region endured occupation by other foreign countries as well, like Austria, France and The Netherlands. Belgium has been the battlefield of many European wars (Waterloo, where Napoleon was defeated in 1815, the "Flanders Fields" near Ypres in the 1914-1918 World War and Bastogne or the offensive of the Ardennes in the second World War). In 1830, the independent state of Belgium has been created as a constitutional and hereditary monarchy, after which Belgium has had famous Kings; the actual King is ALBERT II and his wife is Queen PAOLA. Politically, the Kingdom of Belgium was gradually converted into a Federal state by 3 successive reforms of the Constitution (1970, 1980 and 1988). Three Communities (Flemish, Dutch speaking, French and German) and three Regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) have been created in addition to the Central State; Brussels, being a bilingual island between the 2 main Communities, is situated in the centre of the country.

The Communities are empowered to deal with matters relating to persons, such as culture and education, welfare, health. The Regions are empowered in matters, relating to regional and territorial considerations environment, land use, nature conservation economy, energy, infrastructure, etc.

In Flanders (northern part and Dutch speaking), the Community and the Region are politically unified; the Flemish Community deals also with respective matters, as mentioned before for the Dutch speaking part of Brussels.

The situation is more complicated in Wallonia (southern part) and in Brussels for its French-speaking part; the French Community deals with matters, as mentioned before, for the French-speaking side of Wallonia and for Brussels as well; the German speaking part of Belgium is situated geographically under the Walloon Region, which deals with matters, as mentioned before. The Region of Brussels has his own autonomy as well.

Geographically, the Belgian coast has a length of 65 km and represents nearly a straight line, having an WSW-ENE direction. Dikes and dunes are bordering the coastline, while coastal areas on land consist of an alluvial plain. The nearshore areas have generally a sandy seafloor on the sand banks at the west- and the middle coast and a more muddy and silty sea bottom at the east coast and the mouth of the Scheldt river.

Economically, Belgium is one of the most dynamic regions in Europe; it was and it is still a magnetic pole for foreign investors, interested in the whole of the European market. In Flanders, industrial production was, at the end of the 80's, already more than 30% higher than at the beginning of the decade.

Belgium, at the confluence of Europe's greatest rivers, has an exceptionally rich heritage; the old Flemish painters are known worldwide and also smaller towns like Bruges, Leuven, Lier, Oudenaarde, Doornik, Durbuy, etc. are worth seeing; Bruges is one of Europe's loveliest cities.

Hydrographic Service

Many of the world's famous cartographers like ORTELIUS, MERCATOR, HONDIUS, are Flemish; MERCATOR remains the most important, due to his projection method, which is still always in use on our hydrographic maps.

In the Austrian period, the land maps of FERRARIS from 1771 till 1778 were unique for that time. Also in the 19th century the set of charts of Belgium on 1:20,000, made by VANDERMAELEN, forced the admiration of the cartographers all over the world.

The real hydrographic charting of the actual Belgian coast goes back to the time of the French occupation (1799) just before and under NAPOLEON I, during which the French hydrographer, BEAUTemps-BEAUPRÉ mapped the whole of the Flemish coast, part of the Dutch borders (Batavian Republic) and the whole of the Scheldt as well.

Afterwards the Netherlands Hydrographic Service surveyed the entrance of the river Scheldt and the river as well. From about 1860, hydrographic surveys on the river Scheldt were carried out by Belgian hydrographers in Antwerp. In 1866 the same hydrographers in Antwerp composed the first Belgian chart of the Flemish coast as well. Till the earlier 30's, the coastal areas were only surveyed in the summer periods under the supervision and direction of the same Antwerp-office.

Only since 1931, local coastal hydrographic office, allowed to work more autonomously alongside the coast. Historically spoken, this development explains the existence of the 2 smaller hydrographic services, depending on the same Ministry of the Flemish Community. For the time being the Coastal Hydrographic Office produces 3 nautical charts, covering the Belgian waters (two of those are INT-charts); this office has the modern hydrographic vessel TER STREEP at his disposal. The Scheldt Hydrographic Office produces a set of 12 smaller maps, covering the river Scheldt and further also one INT-chart; this office uses 4 launches, named DE SCHELDEWACHT, PAREL, VEREMANS and the PROSPER. All these hydrographic vessels and launches are using the most actual hydrographic devices; 2 of these are equipped with multi-beam echo sounders.

Since 1981, Belgium is a member state of the International Hydrographic Organisation.