



Left: The headquarters of the Gestapo (or, more correctly, of the Befehlshaber der Sipo-SD) in occupied Belgium was housed at No. 453 Avenue Louise in Brussels. Designed by Belgian architect Stanislas Jasinski, the apartment block had



been built in 1936-37 so it was relatively new when the Sipo-SD moved in. Right: Known as the Résidence Belvédère, it remains unchanged but since the war similar tall apartment blocks have been built on either side.

ATB

GESTAPO HEADQUARTERS IN BRUSSELS

By Karel Margry

On May 10, 1940, Nazi Germany invaded Belgium without warning and on May 28, on the order of King Leopold III, the Belgian Army capitulated. The Royal family remained in residence but the Belgian Cabinet formed a government-in-exile in London and continued to wage war against Germany.

Whereas in other occupied countries, Germany set up a Zivilverwaltung (civilian administration) under a civilian governor (called Reichsprotektor in Czechoslovakia, Generalgouverneur in Poland and Reichskommissar in Norway and Holland) to rule the territory, in Belgium and France they established a Militärverwaltung (military government) to administer the land.

This came about mainly through the efforts of Generalfeldmarschall Walther von Brauchitsch, the Commander-in-Chief of the Heer (Army), who during the planning phase of the German invasion of Western Europe had set up a special staff within Heeresgruppe B to prepare plans for a military administration of Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. His prime motive for advocating a military government was the wish to keep out the SS, the powerful and ever-growing empire of Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler. Von Brauchitsch wanted to prevent the type of conflicts and tensions that had developed between the Wehrmacht and SS during the Polish campaign of 1939 due to the murderous activities of the Sonderkommandos, the SS murder squads that had arrived in the wake of the front-line troops and carried out brutal mass executions of Jews and other Polish civilians. Although Hitler preferred civil administrations, he needed the armed forces for his future plans and therefore grudgingly accepted von Brauchitsch's advice, but only for Belgium and France.

The military governor of Belgium was General der Infanterie Alexander von Falkenhausen, who was appointed by Hitler on June 1 and would remain in this position for most of the occupation. His territory was wider than Belgium proper, two departments

of northern France — Nord and Pas-de-Calais — being added to his fief. However, the German-speaking Belgian cantons of Eupen and Malmedy and several other smaller border communities fell outside his jurisdiction, being annexed by the German Reich.

Von Falkenhausen's administration consisted of a Kommando-Stab (Command Staff), led by Major Bodo von Harbou, for military matters, and a much-larger Verwaltungs-Stab (Administrative Staff) for civilian administrative matters, led by Militärverwaltungschef Eggert Reeder.

Military government meant that police and secret police activities were the responsibility of the Wehrmacht. For this, von Falkenhausen had two organisations, both supervised by his Kommando-Stab: the uniformed Feldgendarmerie for normal military police duties and the plain-clothes Geheime Feldpolizei (GFP) for counter-espionage and security. However, counter-espionage and security were also the responsibility of the Abwehr, the Wehrmacht's central counter-intelligence service, which was part of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW, German Armed Forces High Command) in Berlin. It controlled a small staff in Belgium, known as the Abwehrstelle Belgien and responsible for espionage, counter-espionage and the security of Wehrmacht troops stationed in the region. Working in close collaboration with von Harbou's Kommando-Stab, the Abwehr stations in Belgium in effect used the Geheime Feldpolizei as their executive organ.

With these agencies, the Germany military hoped to keep the SS out of Belgium. However, it very soon became clear that the Abwehr and GFP were not sufficiently manned and qualified to carry out their manifold duties, and within two months the Militärverwaltung was forced to ask the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA, Reich Security Main Office) for reinforcement. Formed in September 1939 and led by SS-

Gruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, the RSHA combined the Sicherheitspolizei (Sipo, security police), a state organisation encompassing the Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo, secret state police) and the Kriminalpolizei (Kripo, criminal police), with the Sicherheitsdienst (SD, security service), a Nazi party organisation, into one big establishment. Colloquially referred to within the Reich as the Gestapo, in the occupied countries it was known as the Sipo-SD.

The Sipo-SD had initially been forbidden to set up offices in Belgium. However, with the Abwehr and GFP being flooded with work, the situation changed and the SS shrewdly used the opportunity to gain a foothold in Belgium. Already in early June, Himmler came to Brussels to confer with officials of the Militärverwaltung. Then on July 2, Kriminaldirektor (and SS-Sturmbannführer) Franz Straub and 20 collaborators from the RSHA arrived in Brussels from Berlin. They belonged to the Sipo-SD but appeared in the Belgian capital wearing uniforms of the GFP. During July, there were further talks between Heydrich and Reeder, the head of the Verwaltungs-Stab. The outcome was that the RSHA was allowed to set up a Sipo-SD office in Belgium.

On July 27, the office was officially established with the installation of SS-Obersturmbannführer Dr Karl Haselbacher as Beauftragter des Chefs der Sipo und des SD in Belgien und Nordfrankreich (BdS, Representative of the Chief of the Sipo and SD in Belgium and Northern France), the official ceremony in Brussels being attended by Heydrich. (Haselbacher's designation as 'Beauftragter des Chefs der Sipo-SD' was perhaps indicative of Himmler's careful treading in these early days, avoiding the normal title of 'Befehlshaber der Sipo-SD', but it was no coincidence that both functions abbreviated as BdS).



The front entrance of the headquarters. These pictures were taken by an official Royal Canadian Air Force photographer in early September 1944, immediately after the Allied liberation



of the Belgian capital. By that time the building had been taken under guard by the Belgian resistance, which explains the 'off limits' graffiti beside the door.

The BdS set up its headquarters at No. 453 Avenue Louise (Louizalaan in Flemish), a tall 12-storey apartment building located along one of the most-prestigious and fashionable avenues of the capital. Later, the agency occupied three more buildings along the same street, Nos. 347, 418 and 510.

The Brussels headquarters was the main establishment but SD-Aussenstellen (regional satellite offices) were quickly established alongside the Wehrmacht's Oberfeldkommandanturen (regional military commands) in Antwerp, Ghent, Liège, Charleroi and Lille (the latter in northern France), with smaller sub-offices (Nebenstellen or Aussenposten) being later set up in Leuven, Hasselt, Brugge, Dinant, Arlon and Douai.

Initially, the Sipo-SD was forbidden to carry out arrests on its own but this changed on February 4, 1941, when they were officially authorised to do so. From then onwards Sipo agents could arrest and detain people independent from the Militärverwaltung, the Feldgendarmerie or the GFP.

For the first 15 months of its existence, the BdS in Brussels was subordinated to what was called the Beauftragter des Chefs der Sipo und des SD in Belgien und Frankreich (Representative of the Chief of the Sipo and SD in Belgium and France), a position also created in July 1940 and held by SS-Brigadeführer Max Thomas, whose office was in Paris, but this changed in December 1941, when the BdS was made directly answerable to the RSHA in Berlin.

Karl Haselbacher was in function for only three months, being killed in a car accident at Cambrai as he returned from a conference with Thomas in Paris on September 13. His successor, appointed on October 31, was SS-Obersturmbannführer Constantin Canaris (a full cousin of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the chief of the Abwehr). He remained for a year, until October 1941 when he was promoted to become Inspektor der Sipo und des SD (IdS) in Königsberg in East Prussia and replaced by SS-Obersturmbannführer Ernst Ehlers. The latter's tenure lasted for two and a half years, until February 1944. His departure saw the return of Canaris, by now an SS-Standartenführer, who held the office until the end of the German occupation in September 1944.



On January 20, 1943, the Gestapo building at No. 453 — by then an address feared throughout Belgium — was attacked by a lone Typhoon flown by a Belgian pilot, Flight Lieutenant Jean de Selys Longchamps of No. 609 Squadron, RAF, who carried



out the raid on his own account and without official orders. His famous action is commemorated by a plaque on the building and a golden bust of Selys (see also rear cover), but today residents in the apartment block shun publicity.



Left: Across the road from No. 453, at No. 510 Avenue Louise, the Gestapo had an annex, housing further offices, a canteen,

garages and cellars used to detain arrested Jews. Right: The rear entrance to the garages, pictured after liberation.

Like all BdS offices, its organigram mirrored that of the RSHA in Berlin. There were six departments:

- Abteilung I: Personal (Personnel)
- Abteilung II: Haushalt und Wirtschaft (Household and Finances)
- Abteilung III: Sicherheitsdienst (SD)
- Abteilung IV: Sicherheitspolizei (Sipo)
- Abteilung V: Kriminalpolizei (Kripo)
- Abteilung VI: SD-Ausland (Foreign Intelligence).

Of these six, Abteilung IV, or what might be called the actual Gestapo, was the most important. Led by SS-Sturmbannführer Franz Straub, it subdivided in five sections, each named after the ideologies, religions or groups under its respective surveillance:

- IVa: Communists, Marxists
- IVb: Religions, Sects, Freemasons, Jews
- IVc: Immigrants and Foreign Nationals
- IVd: Resistance Groups
- IVe: Espionage.

Each target group within an Abteilung had its own Referat (desk or sub-section). Referat IVb4, for example, was responsible for all matters concerning the Jews. It was this desk that instigated the anti-Jewish measures in occupied Belgium, supervised the registration of all Jews resident there, ordered the creation of a Jewish Council (the Association of Jews in Belgium, AJB) that served as an instrument to pass on directives to the Jewish community, and organised the subsequent round-ups and deportation of these Jews to the death camps in eastern Europe.

The chief of Referat IVb4, normally referred to as the Judenreferent (specialist in charge of Jewish matters), held a power unprecedented for an official in such a relatively minor position. Holding the post in Brussels respectively were Oberinspektor Victor Humpert (July 1940-Spring 1941), who had previously held the same position in

Düsseldorf; SS-Obersturmführer Kurt Asche (Spring 1941-November 1942), SS-Hauptsturmführer Fritz Erdmann (November 1942-October 1943), SS-Oberscharführer Felix Weidmann (October 1943-March 1944) and finally SS-Obersturmführer Werner Borchardt (March-September 1944). Together they were responsible for sending over 25,000

Jews and 352 Gypsies in 28 train transports to Auschwitz. The majority of the deportees — 17,000 — left between July and October 1942, that is during the tenure of Ehlers as BdS, Straub as chief of Abteilung IV and Asche as leader of IVb4, making them the three Gestapo officers mostly responsible for the holocaust in Belgium.



Inspecting a shed in the yard, the Resistance found numerous vehicles. Judging by the bullet holes in the windows, and the damage to the front bumper, this one appears to have been engaged in some sort of shooting incident.



Left: After the Typhoon attack, the Sipo-SD moved their main office to No. 347, a similar tall apartment block some distance



Right: The same entrance today.

To carry out its tasks, the BdS set up two facilities that would become synonymous with Nazi terror in Belgium. One was the Gestapo prison at Fort Breendonk, located 20 kilometres north of Brussels, where between August 1940 and September 1944 an estimated 3,500 arrested people were incarcerated under brutal conditions. The German commanders of Breendonk — first SS-Sturmbannführer Philipp Schmitt from August 1940 to December 1943, and then SS-Sturmbannführer Karl Schönewetter until late August 1944 — were directly subordinate to the BdS. (See *After the Battle* No. 51).

The other facility was the Kaserne Dossin, the old military barracks at Mechelen (Malines), 20 kilometres north-east of Brussels, which from 1942 to 1944 functioned as the assembly point and transit camp for 25,000 Belgian Jews on their way to the death camps. Like with Breendonk, the commandants of Kaserne Dossin were directly answerable to the BdS in Brussels. Philipp Schmitt, the commander of Breendonk, combined both functions from July 1942 to March 1943; SS-Sturmscharführer Johannes Frank thereafter held the position until September 1944. (See *Nazi Death Camps Then and Now*).

Apart from organising and supervising the 'final solution' in Belgium, the Brussels Gestapo first and foremost concentrated on identifying and hunting down anyone seen as actively opposed to the regime: underground workers of the clandestine press, of escape lines, of spy networks; saboteurs; members of armed resistance groups or of clandestine camps made up of young men in hiding from forced work; Allied secret agents; public figures who spoke out against the Nazi regime; members of the forbidden Communist Party, etc. In their detective work, the Sipo-SD made use of an extensive network of V-Männer (Vertrauensmänner — literally: trusted representatives), i.e. informers and infiltrators. Mostly of Belgian or German nationality, they included men and women of all walks of life; many belonged to collaborationist organisations, Flemish or Walloon; the damage they did was widespread.

Anyone caught and arrested by the Brussels Sipo-SD — their number totalled several thousand between 1940 and 1944 — was brought to the headquarters on Avenue Louise and subjected to long interrogations, usually with torture. Down in the basement were a number of small prison cells where detainees could be kept for as long as needed before being sent on to Breendonk, Kaserne Dossin or a prison or concentration camp in Germany. It did not take long for No. 453 Avenue Louise to gain a notorious reputation, not only in Brussels but throughout Belgium, as place of violence and torture, an address to be feared, a small patch of Hell on Earth.

The headquarters on Avenue Louise was never the target of a formally planned attack by the Allied air force, such as was undertaken against the Gestapo headquarters in Amsterdam in the Netherlands on November 26, 1944, or against the Shell House in Copenhagen in Denmark on March 21, 1945 (see *After the Battle* No. 54). However, it was the target of an unauthorised solo attack by a lone Typhoon fighter-bomber. Flight Lieutenant Baron Jean de Séllys Longchamps was a Belgian pilot serving in No. 609 Squadron, RAF. Having heard stories of the brutal questionings and torture taking place in the building at No. 453 (reputedly his own father had been interrogated there), he repeatedly asked authorities for permission to carry out an attack but this request always fell on deaf ears. He continued planning his action in secret, however, and knowing Brussels well, he decided to undertake his own private vengeance.

On the morning of January 20, 1943, de Séllys took off from RAF Manston together with a fellow Belgian pilot, Flight Sergeant André Blanco, their official orders being to bomb railway junctions south-east of Brugge. However, after completing this mission, de Séllys ordered his wingman home and himself

set course for Brussels. Benefiting from the wide avenues, and the large height of the apartment block relative to the neighbouring buildings, he flew his Typhoon at a low altitude straight towards the building, firing his 20mm cannons. Then, as he flew low over the roofs, he opened his cockpit and dropped first a British flag, then the flag of Belgium. Finally, as he sped for home, he distributed a bag full of miniature Belgian flags over several villages.

On his return to base, de Séllys received a warm welcome from his comrades but his superiors were not pleased and he was demoted to Pilot Officer and transferred to No. 3 Squadron on March 13 in punishment for disobeying orders. Despite his degradation, he was awarded the DFC on May 31.

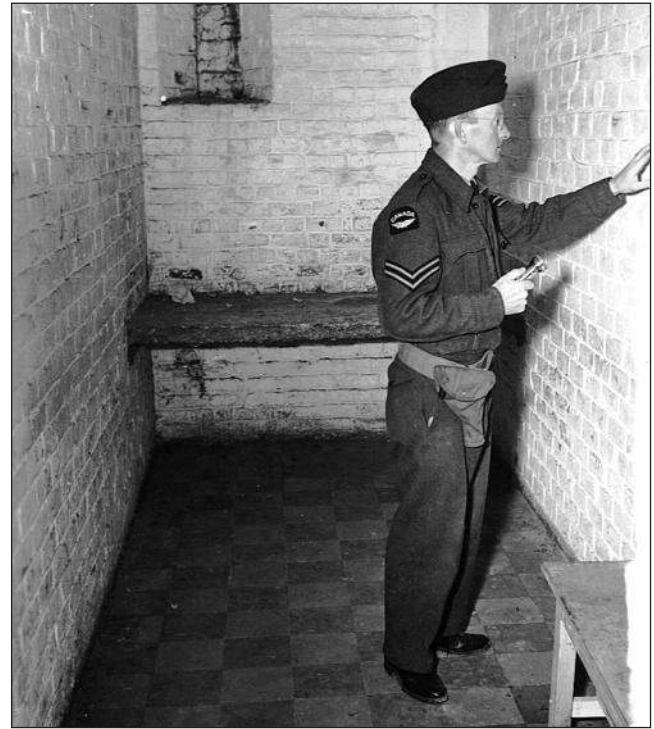
The Typhoon attack killed or fatally wounded four of the Gestapo personnel, including SS-Sturmbannführer Alfred Thomas, the chief of Abteilung III (Sicherheitsdienst), and SS-Obersturmführer Werner Vogt of Abteilung IV (Sicherheitspolizei), and seriously wounded several others. The following day, hundreds of Brussels citizens came to see the damaged building, silently rejoicing over the shattered windows and bullet marks in the façade while angry German



Left: An RCAF corporal inspecting the accoutrements found in No. 347 after liberation. The folder at bottom right is labelled 'Abteilung IVc', suggesting that this was the working space of the Gestapo's Immigrants and Foreign Nationals section. This is supported by the book *Hitler m'a dit* (Hitler Speaks) on the desk. The author, Hermann Rauschning, fled from Germany in 1936 and published this critical portrait of Hitler in 1940, by which time he had moved from France to Britain. Right: François Dorsaghers, a member of the Mouvement National Belge resistance organisation (his armband reads 'MNB') and former prisoner of the Gestapo, inspecting a truncheon used in the interrogation of prisoners. Note the portrait of Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler on the wall.



Dorsaghers illustrating how the prisoners were crowded into the storage spaces in the cellars of No. 347.



The RCAF corporal inspecting one of the prison cells in the basement. Note how the only window has been bricked up.

sentries tried to drive them away. Following the attack, the Sipo-SD moved their headquarters to a building further down the street, No. 347. The cellars here were also used to detain and interrogate arrestees.

On July 18, 1944, Hitler being dissatisfied with von Falkenhausen, the Militärverwaltung was replaced by a civil administration, Gauleiter Josef Grohé of Cologne taking over as Reichskommissar of Belgium and Northern France. With the change came the introduction of SS-Gruppenführer Richard Jungclauss as Höhere SS- und Polizei-Führer (HSSPF, Higher SS and Police Leader) for the same region and, as was the case in other occupied countries, the BdS now became subordinated to the HSSPF, who reported directly to Himmler.

It made little difference in practice. The Brussels Gestapo continued its rule of terror right until the end of the occupation. It was only on September 3, 1944, a few hours before the rapturous entry of the British Guards Armoured Division into the capital, that the last Sipo-SD men evacuated the buildings on Avenue Louise.

After the war, only a handful of the Brussels Gestapo officers were ever called to

account for their deeds. Constantin Canaris was put before a Belgian court in August 1951 and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment but released eight months later, reputedly through the intervention of Resistance heroine and Gestapo victim Hélène Jeanty. Franz Straub, the former commander of Abteilung IV, was put before a Belgian military court in 1950 and sentenced to 15 years but he was extradited to Germany in 1951. After being reinstated into the police, he served as a border police official in Bavaria until his retirement, and he died in 1977.

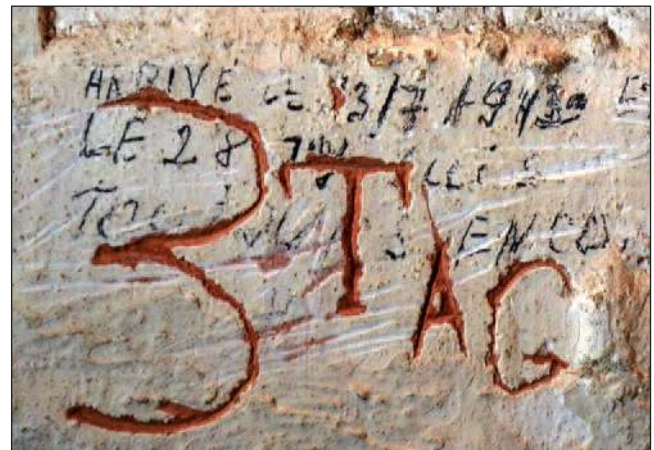
In 1975, the German authorities, prompted by investigative work by the French researchers Serge and Beate Klarsfeld and others, and after much legal deferral, brought action against Canaris, Ernst Ehlers, Kurt Asche and Karl Fielitz (the former chief of the Antwerp Aussenstelle), the accusation centring on their role in the persecution of the Belgian Jews. The trial finally began in Kiel in November 1980, but by then the charge against Fielitz had already been dropped. Ehlers (who had lived undisturbed since the war and had even become a court judge in the province of Schleswig-Holstein) had committed suicide shortly before; Canaris was

dropped from the proceedings because of ill health (he died in 1983), and only Asche was convicted, being sentenced to seven years in prison. Released in 1990, he died in 1998.

The buildings that had served as Gestapo HQ were returned to their rightful owners after the war and reverted to their old use. The one at No. 453 became a luxury apartment block known as the Résidence Belvédère and No. 347 became Résidence Queen. In 1994 journalist André Dartevelle of the Belgian RTBF television discovered that there were numerous inscriptions left by prisoners on the walls of what had been the cell blocks in the basement of No. 347. Similar inscriptions were found in the cellars of No. 453. In 2007, a campaign was started to make these historic spaces accessible to the general public but the present-day apartment owners proved decidedly unwilling to open up their properties. Nonetheless, after a scholarly symposium on the subject organised by the Belgian Auschwitz Foundation in 2011 and much civic petitioning, the Brussels government in January 2016 formally put the basements of Nos. 453 and 347 on the protected list. The cellars are still not open to the public but the inscriptions must be preserved.



The walls of the cells were covered with countless inscriptions.



Rediscovered in 1994, the inscriptions are today protected by law.

DANIEL WEYSSOW/FONDATION AUSCHWITZ