



Source: Spaak, 4 November 1946,
UN General Assembly New York,
Photo UN7557650

SPAAK, Paul-Henri Charles

Belgian politician and second Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) 1957-1961

By **Michael G. Schechter** · Version 19 January 2015

Was born 25 January 1899 in Schaerbeek, Belgium, and passed away on 31 July 1972 in Brussels, Belgium. He was the son of Paul Spaak, a lawyer who turned to poetry and drama and became director of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, and Marie-Ann Janson, a socialist who in 1921 became the first woman member of the Belgian parliament. On 31 August 1922 he married Marguerite Malevez. They had two daughters and one son. After Malevez's death on 14 August 1964 he married Simonne Rikkers Hottlet Dear on 23 April 1965.

Biography

Spaak was fifteen when the Germans invaded Belgium in 1914. Two years later he was caught trying to cross the Dutch border in order to rejoin the Belgian army and was interned in Turnhout and Paderborn, Germany, until the end of the war. One of his prison companions was Paul van Zeeland, who later became Prime Minister. After the war Spaak studied law at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, where he earned his Doctor of Laws in the abbreviated time period allowed for veterans. While there he got involved in politics, earning a reputation as a Socialist agitator. He practiced law for about a decade, interrupting his practice in July 1925, when for nine months he served as the deputy *Chef de Cabinet* to the Socialist Minister of Labor and Industry, Joseph Wauters. Spaak returned to his legal practice after he realized that he was serving 'under a man who was the embodiment of the Right' (Zinn 1967: 51). He became an outstanding tennis player and an eloquent speaker. Later in life he enjoyed playing bridge and table tennis, combined with a fondness for good food and wine, of which he was an excellent judge. In December 1926 he founded, and then edited, for two years a four-page fortnightly, *Bastille Socialiste*. In 1931 he discussed revolutionary tactics in Paris with the exiled Leon Trotsky and then took a month-long trip to Stalin's Russia, although he was

‘as firmly opposed to the suppression of freedom of thought as his Liberal forebearers had been’ (Huizinga 1961: 53).

In November 1932 Spaak was elected as the Brussels’ Socialist Deputy to the Chamber of Representatives of the Belgian Parliament. He became leader of the party’s left wing and acquired the reputation of being a Socialist ‘firebrand’ (Current Biography 1958: 404). In February 1934 he led a group of militants in a raid on the office of the conservative newspaper, *Nation Belge*, earning him the title of ‘Bolshevik in the dinner jacket’. Also in 1934 he joined the staff of a revolutionary weekly, *l’Action civique*, where he became co-editor. With the rise of fascism and communism, Spaak denounced the class struggle and urged all socialists to abandon their traditional fight against the Catholic Church (Zinn 1967: 36). He attributed his loss of faith to the influence of Henri de Man, the Belgian Socialist leader who developed a plan to reform the economy. De Man made him ‘realize that in sticking to the socialism of 1848 I was not exactly ahead of my time’ (Huizinga 1961: 56-57).

In March 1935 Spaak accepted the post of Minister of Transportation, Posts and Telegraph in the Cabinet of progressive Paul van Zeeland in a coalition government, which lasted until June 1935. On 13 June 1936 Spaak became Foreign Minister, ‘somewhat surprised and a little afraid of my new responsibilities. I knew the extent both of my task and my ignorance and I have to admit that I knew little about the problems with which I would have to deal. I had not met any of my foreign colleagues and even most of my own diplomats were strangers to me’ (Spaak 1971: 9). In October 1936, as the Axis link was formed, Belgium announced its determination to remain neutral. In April 1937 Spaak and King Leopold III concluded negotiations releasing Belgium from its mutual defense obligations under the 1925 Locarno Pact and the 1936 Anglo-Franco-Belgian Agreement. In the fall of 1937 Spaak secured the German government’s pledge to respect Belgium’s inviolability and territorial integrity. On 4 November he was named President of the Nine-Power Conference on Far Eastern questions in Brussels. The Van Zeeland government was succeeded by that of Spaak’s uncle, the Liberal Paul-Émile Janson, who was seen as an isolationist on foreign policy. When that government fell in May 1938, Spaak became Prime Minister, Belgium’s first Socialist prime minister, the youngest prime minister his country had ever had and the youngest in all of Europe at the time. However, his government only lasted until February 1939.

On 3 September 1939, when Great Britain and France declared war on Germany, Spaak was again appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, in a government headed by a Catholic Conservative, Hubert Pierlot. In spite of rumors of an imminent German attack, Spaak continued to pursue a policy of neutrality. Eight days after the German invasion of Belgium had begun (18 May 1940) the Belgian forces were pushed back only forty miles from the sea. On 25 May Spaak broke relations with King Leopold, after pleading with him to flee to London to carry on the fight against the Germans. The next day Leopold announced the surrender of his army and country to Hitler. After an escape through Spain and Portugal Pierlot and Spaak joined their colleagues, Finance Minister Camille Gutt and Colonial Minister Albert de Vleeschauwer, in London. On 24 October they established a government-in-exile, pledging support for Britain in the war, and began broadcasting to the resistance movement back in Belgium. In June 1942 Spaak and British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden signed two treaties formalizing agreements by which Belgian forces in Africa were to operate under the Supreme Command of the United Nations and by which the British were to purchase all the gold, copper and rubber produced in the Belgian Congo. In November 1943 Spaak headed the Belgian delegation to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration Conference at Atlantic City, New Jersey. During his four years in exile Spaak visited the United States (US) four times and ‘learned to think in global terms’ (Zinn 1967: 76). In September 1944 he spoke with Eden about the benefits of a postwar West European power bloc, one that would be chiefly political, but also had economic and military aspects to it. While the British were cool to the idea, Belgium worked together with the Netherlands and Luxemburg to form the Benelux, initially as a customs union. Upon his return to liberated Belgium on 18 November Spaak ‘officially renounced forever Belgium’s traditional policies of neutrality and

independence' and indicated that Belgium 'stood on the threshold of a new regional security pact inside the framework of a massive global peace plan' (Zinn 1967: 79).

In the postwar years Spaak devoted himself to a campaign for international cooperation, especially European unity. From February 1945 to March 1946 he served as Deputy Prime Minister in Achille van Acker's cabinet. In April 1945 he headed the Belgian delegation to the United Nations (UN) Conference on International Organization at San Francisco, where he chaired the commission on general provisions. In November he went to London as the Belgian delegate to the UN's preparation commission and was elected second vice-chairman. He turned down being chair because he could not manage to be in London continuously (Zinn 1967: 85), but others suggest that he was not chosen because the British were working behind the scenes to get him elected as head of the UN General Assembly (Current Biography 1945: 568). On 10 January 1946 he was elected as the first President of the General Assembly, over the objections of the Soviet Union. Although an enthusiastic supporter of the UN, whose headquarters he hoped would be in Europe (Current Biography 1945: 568), Spaak quickly came to realize how severely constrained it was during the early years of the Cold War; this, in spite of the fact that he was praised for contributing 'more than any other person to the success of the Assembly' (Hamilton 1946: 18). UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie 'was so kind to ask me if I would be prepared to serve as chairman yet again. He thought that if I agreed my candidacy might well receive unanimous support'. Spaak had different expectations and turned down the offer. In March 1946 he also had become Prime Minister again and thus could not be available for the entire Assembly session (Spaak 1971: 114). As it turned out, he served in the dual capacity as Belgium's Prime and Foreign Minister from March 1947 to August 1949.

In 1948, as his dream of 'one world' had collapsed, Spaak 'became the foremost exponent of European union, throwing himself into the service of the new cause with all of his usual impulsive and emotional vigor' (Zinn 1967: 145). Starting with an idea begun by British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, he became an enthusiastic supporter of the 1948 collective defense treaty that in 1954 became the Western European Union (WEU). This period contributed to Spaak's reputation as 'Mr. Europe' (Barker 1972: C6). On 16 April 1948, at the first meeting of the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), established to collectively handle the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan) and to get European countries strong enough not to need foreign aid, Spaak, nominated by Bevin, became chairman. On 31 January 1950, however, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer informed other members of the Marshall Plan Council that his government would veto Spaak's appointment as the Council's chief or ambassador. The British were opposed to the appointment of any OEEC 'superman' and feared that, given Spaak's international reputation and the support he would likely garner from the US, he would be a particularly powerful appointment. Moreover, Spaak had been quite outspoken in his criticism of the British government's limited support of European integration (Zinn 1967: 157-158).

After the first steps toward European unification taken by the Benelux customs union and the OEEC, the Council of Europe opened its first session on 10 August 1949. Spaak, as Belgium's Prime and Foreign Minister, represented his country at the Council's Committee of Ministers. Accordingly he was ineligible to preside over the Council's Assembly, but shortly thereafter a change in government resulted in him being absent from the Cabinet for the first time since 1939. As a consequence, when he returned to the Council of Europe, Winston Churchill nominated him to be President of the Consultative Assembly. Elected unanimously, Spaak hoped that the Assembly would be a truly supranational parliament, but soon found that his strongest opponent in achieving this aim was Churchill, who wanted it to be a forum of limited debate. Prior to the second Assembly session, Spaak played a domestic leadership role in the movement opposing King Leopold when he returned to Belgium from exile in Switzerland. Because only a minority of the population clearly opposed the King's return to office, Spaak's role was controversial. This contributed to considerable opposition to his re-election as President of the Council of Europe's Assembly for a third time, but still he was re-elected on 5 May 1951. By this time the Council had extended its power and prestige considerably,

but that was not enough for Spaak, who was especially concerned about national security issues. In December 1951, during heated debates over a European Army plan, Spaak suddenly resigned his post, proclaiming that he was 'tired of presiding over the solemn charades of an Assembly voting all kinds of grandiose schemes which anyone knew had no chance of being implemented' (Zinn 1967: 206). The Assembly was a purely consultative body that could only discuss matters within its competence and convey its recommendations to the Ministerial Council, a body which Spaak (1971: 206) described as 'undoubtedly the most timorous and ineffectual' organization of 'all the international bodies I have known'.

Being out of office, Spaak had no formal part in the drawing up of either the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) or the European Defense Community (EDC) treaties. But on 11 September 1952 he was chosen as the first President of the Schuman Plan Assembly, whose responsibility it was to frame a draft constitution for consideration by the six ECSC governments (France, Italy, West Germany and the Benelux countries). He was soon seen as the 'moving spirit' behind the EDC and its successor, the WEU, as well as the defender of the Western alliance at the 1954 Geneva Convention (meant to restore peace in Indochina) and a crusader for European federation (deemed necessary to ensure that West Germany was not drawn into the Soviet orbit). Spaak came to be called the architect of 'Spaakistan', as the Europe of the Six was often then called. Moreover, he headed the select ECSC committee, which at a special session in January 1953 presented its European draft constitution to the Council of Europe's Consultative Assembly. After defeating an amendment championed by Spaak that would have removed the requirement that the new political authority consult other members of the Council of Europe on all major decisions, a draft charter was finally approved on 10 March 1953. While it allowed for supranational powers (a distinguishing characteristic of the ECSC), it was limited in terms of scope. Spaak was not satisfied with just a six-member organization focused on coal and steel production, even though he hailed it as a 'decisive step toward unity' (Zinn 1967: 232).

Re-elected as President of the Schuman Plan Assembly in May 1953, Spaak retired from the position in 1954. He regained his former position as Belgium's Foreign Minister and Vice Prime Minister when the Socialists returned to power on 22 April 1954. Shortly thereafter, he attended the Conference of Foreign Ministers of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the importance of which was multiplied by the defeat of the EDC by the French Assembly. But before Spaak took up the reigns of NATO, he worked with colleagues in the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) and on 21 October 1955 urged the members of the Council on Europe's Consultative Assembly to form a European pool of nuclear energy, the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM), an idea of Jean Monnet. Spaak headed a committee of experts that worked out detailed plans for both projects and was named Chairman of the June 1955 Brussels Conference, whose permanent delegations were expected to draft treaties to be submitted to their respective parliaments. Thus, Spaak was not simply the leading spokesman for the Benelux countries but was also a constant ally of Monnet, who headed up an Action Committee to build support for the European Movement in general and the EEC and EURATOM in particular. Significantly, Spaak also worked hard to try and bind Great Britain to the developments on the Continent. On 25 March 1957 Spaak, as Belgian Foreign Minister and Chairman of the Intergovernmental Conference, was the first to sign both the EEC and EURATOM treaties. Indeed, he had been given considerable credit for getting the six governments to agree to those two historic treaties (Coughlan 1957: 147).

But prior to signing the treaties, Spaak had been chosen to become NATO's second Secretary General, a position he held from 16 May 1957 until 31 January 1961, when he resigned to return to Belgian Socialist party politics, but also because of his problems in dealing with Charles de Gaulle, frustrations over countries not meeting their NATO commitments and insufficient attention to the non-military side of NATO (Spaak 1971: 346-353). At the time of his appointment, Spaak was widely praised. In addition to being awarded honorary degrees by several US and European universities, he was given the *Prix Charlemagne* 'by virtue of which he was raised to equal ranks as a Great European with such men as Churchill, Adenauer, de Gasperi and Jean Monnet' (Huizinga 1961: 243). His

involvement with the Congo overlapped these positions at NATO and in Belgian politics. In September 1960, while NATO Secretary General, he asserted that 'Belgium was wrong not to have discussed its colonial policy with its NATO allies prior to 30 June': 'had it consulted properly with its allies about its African policy, matters might have been quite different' (Vanthemsche 2012: 212). A few months later, as Belgian Foreign Minister and Vice Prime Minister, having been sworn in on 25 April 1961, he called for stabilizing the situation in the Congo, normalization of relations between Belgium and the Congo and an end to Belgium's international isolation. Normalization led to restoration of diplomatic relations on 27 December 1961.

Spaak had been under consideration to be NATO's first Secretary General, but was passed over because some governments preferred a civil servant to a politician. Others thought because NATO was being sited in Paris rather than London, a Briton should be appointed (Jordan 1967: 39). Support for Spaak's appointment in 1957 came in part from his reputation as a leader in the European integration movement and his positive role in NATO as Belgium's Foreign Minister. His appointment was also seen as an indication that the Council 'had come to a fuller recognition of the important place political issues occupied in preserving the harmony of the Alliance and the unity of the Western Powers' (Jordan 1967: 81-82). Spaak accepted the position to succeed Lord Ismay only after the NATO Council had agreed to give its Secretary General more authority and prestige than Lord Ismay possessed (Barker 1972: C6). Spaak wanted NATO to broaden its scope, especially into areas of economic concerns, even though he had little knowledge or interest in economics himself (Waggoner 1957: 78). Believing that the 'destiny of the free world' would be decided in Africa and Asia, he wanted NATO to help economically less developed countries that were resisting Soviet domination (Jordan 1979: 72). But while his goal of increasing NATO's economic role was praised initially, it never got very far, in large part because of US opposition and its preference for development assistance coordination to operate through the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Jordan 1979: 72-76; Gruson 1960: 8).

Spaak, however, was more successful in getting NATO to adopt his suggestion to lessen secrecy and provide more information to the media, with a goal of reviving public interest in the organization (Jordan 1979: 74-75). More generally, he 'sought to exercise political, policy-making and public leadership of the alliance' (Hendrickson 2006: 20). He worked hard, but ultimately unsuccessfully, to prevent the Icelandic government from taking unilateral action against the British in asserting what they understood to be their coastal fishing rights. While he did not succeed in resolving the crisis over Cyprus, he took credit for preventing 'it from resulting in serious trouble for the Alliance' (Spaak 1971: 304). Moreover, he never shied away from asserting his views in meetings of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), but Spaak was frustrated. When he sought to identify himself as NATO's principal spokesperson, most of the NAC did not support him. General Lauris Norstad, who served as the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) during the entire period of Spaak's term, also ignored him. Norstad spoke on behalf of NATO when he desired. In retrospect, Spaak (1971: 263) tried to put the best face on it: 'Norstad was fascinated by politics – perhaps more than I am by the art of war. However, I gladly turned a blind eye to his interference in matters I considered to be within my own sphere of competence rather than his'. At times, Spaak also found himself at odds with the US ambassador to NATO, W. Randolph Burgess (Hendrickson 2006: 21).

However, in many ways Spaak's real nemesis was French President de Gaulle. Spaak openly opposed de Gaulle's call for a 'triumvirate' of NATO nuclear countries, and it essentially led to a political divorce between the two men. De Gaulle had made France's continued participation in NATO contingent upon the triumvirate arrangement, contending that it no longer made sense for France to have decisions central to its defense decided a continent away (i.e. by the US government). As France became more independent in its foreign policy, Spaak's already limited influence weakened. Being an activist Secretary General who was not supported by most in the NAC, coupled with the hyper nationalism of de Gaulle's France and the dominating presence of General Norstad, made for an especially difficult era for Spaak as he struggled to find ways to improve alliance consultation. Jordan (1979: 76-77)

speaks of Spaak's term as being in two periods, with de Gaulle's ascension to power as marking the turning point: 'If Spaak's role in the Cyprus crisis typified his diplomatic method, and if his concept of an Atlantic community with a global economic outreach represented his political aspirations for NATO, then de Gaulle's directorate proposal and *force de frappe* symbolized respectively the obverse of these concepts'.

Late January 1961 Spaak informed the permanent representatives of his decision to resign. He did this with much personal disappointment about his leadership tenure and about NATO more generally (Hendrickson 2006: 21). While he left in part because he no longer believed that he could reverse the direction in which NATO was heading, he also left under pressure from members of his Belgian Socialist party (Doty 1961: 16). They felt that he was needed to help heal the party's division and to participate in the upcoming elections. After his resignation, it was rumored that Spaak lobbied quietly for an American successor, working on the assumption that only an American could 'reaffirm NATO's leadership role in transatlantic security' (Hendrickson 2006: 21-22), but Dirk Stikker of the Netherlands succeeded him.

On 25 April 1961 Spaak again became Belgium's Foreign Minister, a position he held until 19 March 1966, four months before his retirement from political life on 27 July, when the Socialist party went into opposition. He then became a member of the board of Bell Telephone Manufacturing Company, the personal counselor to the president of International Telephone and Telegraph and chairman of the Atlantic Treaty Association. He enjoyed his retirement years, traveling, and giving public addresses about international institutions, including a particularly well-publicized and controversial one in October 1968 when he voiced his doubts that the US would use nuclear weapons to defend Europe. He also worked on his memoirs, *Combats inachevés* (1969). Late in life, he got actively engaged in Belgian domestic politics again, promoting federalism in Belgium (a reversal of his earlier political support of a unitary state) and supporting the Francophone Democratic Front in the 1971 electoral campaign. After becoming ill while on vacation in the Azores, Spaak was flown back to Brussels, where he died of kidney failure in 1972.

Archives

Spaak's papers are available at the Fondation Paul-Henri Spaak in Brussels, Belgium (www.fondationspaak.org). Some of the archives have been digitalized and made available to various institutions, including the European University Institute in Florence, Italy (www.eui.eu/HAEU/EN/PHS.asp)

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