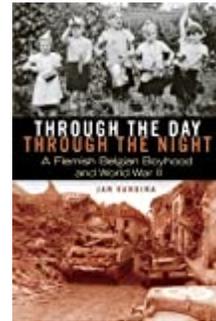


**Jan Vansina.** *Through the Day, Through the Night: A Flemish Belgian Boyhood and World War II.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014. Illustrations, maps. 320 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-29994-1.



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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Memoirs of childhood during the Second World War have become increasingly common in recent decades. As the generations that experienced the war firsthand decrease in size, these memoirs have become important sources of information. Unfortunately, these autobiographical accounts are often riddled with inherent problems: questions of reliability of memory; embellishment of stories, either on an authorial or publisher's level; and their importance beyond documenting the experiences of one individual. Jan Vansina, perhaps fittingly for a historian who has dedicated much of his career to oral history and who recognizes the potential pitfalls of that methodology, is quick to acknowledge that his book is as susceptible as any to the mentioned dangers. Vansina skillfully does this in a manner that is designed not to undermine the book before it begins, but to present a cautionary note at the outset.

Vansina's book offers readers a chance to understand the everyday traumas and upheavals of growing up during wartime. His memoir explores growing up in Belgium, a state often overshadowed by France and the Netherlands, the country that has spawned undoubtedly the most famous childhood diary—Anne Frank's. The author successfully places his childhood within the contextual framework of Belgian politics and culture, without

allowing the context to eclipse his story. Vansina has a slightly more unusual situation as a Flemish Belgian, already a minority in the country. His memoir is set against the backdrop of not only the increasing prewar radicalization of Belgian politics but also the Flemish-Walloon cultural and linguistic divide and its effects on his life. He depicts his experiences within the context of Antwerp and the surrounding villages and towns in which he moved around during the war, blending them into a seamless narrative.

Perhaps the most laudatory aspect of the book is that Vansina makes clear that his memoir does not have more intrinsic value than any other autobiographical account. He recognizes that his experiences during these years are not unique. Vansina sees his story as one example of a child growing up in wartime Belgium. Where other authors of memoirs try to emphasize the unique aspects of their childhood—and in this sense seek to justify their very creation—Vansina attempts merely to imprint his life onto the backdrop of time and place.

Just as important, he tackles childhood as a stage in his life. Too often, wartime childhood memoirs treat the war as a parenthesis, where every day and every experience is presented as almost incomprehensibly unique.

He discusses the constant movement of the his family from town to town, and from school to school, to show the everyday experiences of children in wartime Belgium. Vansina writes about the experiences of handling food shortages, dealing with occupied soldiers, and confronting the death camps in the postwar world with skill. These experiences, though undoubtedly important, are never removed from their context of childhood. In this sense, Vansina does not claim to have understood more at the time than he actually did, allowing him to create a reliable picture of his childhood.

For some, the very strengths of the book may be its weaknesses, since the the author's childhood perspective of limits his portrayals of the wartime politics and events

that are most likely to attract military history readers. No full discussion of Belgian politics is ever given, nor will the reader find anything new on German occupation policies. The scope of the work relates to childhood memories and, on this level, Vansina undoubtedly succeeds. Context is never wholly absent, and more than enough information is given to fully comprehend the memoir, even for those unfamiliar with Belgian history or the Second World War. While it will undoubtedly appeal to those with research interests related to Belgium, World War II, childhood in wartime, and the reliability of memory, the book has equal appeal for the general reader and will hopefully find praise from across the spectrum of readership.

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