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"Brave little Belgium" as it became known in Europe and the United States after enduring devastating invasions during the twentieth century's two world wars, has been an independent nation only since 1830. Although very small in land area, Belgium is a densely populated nation with deep linguistic and cultural divisions. However, the work of progressive political activists, along with a strong queer community, has resulted in many legal protections for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people. In 2003, Belgium became the second country in the world (after the Netherlands) to legalize same-sex marriage.

Only 30,510 square kilometers in size (about the size of the United Kingdom or the state of Maryland), Belgium has a population of 10.3 million. The population is divided into three distinct areas, Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels, which have had some degree of autonomy since 1993. About 58 percent of Belgians are Flemish; 31 percent are Walloons, and 11 percent are of other ethnicity. In Flanders, the official language is Dutch, while in Wallonia, French is spoken by the majority, with a minority of about 70,000 German speakers. In Brussels, the nation's capital, both French and Flemish are spoken. This linguistic division creates a certain social segregation, as each language group has its own schools, media, political parties, and even hospitals.

There are other divisions as well between the residents of Flanders and Wallonia. Once a center of coal mining and steel production, Wallonia was the more affluent area. However, in recent decades, Flanders has developed thriving high-tech industries and has overtaken the French-speaking portion of the country in wealth. Although the country overall is 75 percent Roman Catholic, Wallonia remains by far the more conservative segment, while the Flemish population tends to be more progressive. However, it is difficult to make generalizations about a society as complex as Belgium, since Flanders also contains one of the country's most reactionary elements, the extreme right Vlaams Blok party, while conservative Wallonia has long been governed by the Socialist Party.

Flanders is home to more than 100 gay and lesbian organizations, many of which belong to the HOLEBIFEDERATIE (homosexual, lesbian, bisexual federation). These include such groups as Roze Leeuwen ("Pink Lions"), the gay-lesbian group of the Socialist Party, and the gay and lesbian Greens. Flemish queer youth gather in groups such as Wel Jong Niet Hetero (Young But Not Straight) and in Enig Verschil, a youth-oriented community center in Antwerp. "Pink Houses," or gay community centers, have been established in Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels, and Hasselt.

Flemish lesbians have also formed many groups, including Labyrint in Leuven, Artemis in Brussels, and Atthis in Antwerp. The Lesbisch Doefront, or Lesbian Action Front, has organized an annual Lesbian Day for over 12 years.

There are many French-speaking queer organizations as well, including le Cercle Homosexuel Étudiant at the University of Brussels and ECOLO for gays and lesbians concerned about the environment. Some of the most successful bridge building between the divided states of Flanders and Wallonia has been done by lesbian and gay activists. In particular, the HOLEBIFEDERATIE has done much to coordinate the political work of many local groups to bring about real improvement in the status of Belgian gay men and lesbians.

Belgian law has, in general, been fairly tolerant of homosexuals. A law forbidding homosexuality was repealed in 1762, and since that time the nation had only one specifically anti-gay law, which forbade homosexual sex for individuals under the age of 18, when the age of consent for heterosexuals was 16. Gay

activists worked to change the inequality, and the anti-gay age restriction was repealed in 1985.

In 1978, as gay issues were becoming politicized around the world, the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) was founded and headquartered in Brussels. Since then, ILGA has worked against glbtq discrimination, calling attention to glbtq human rights violations in many nations and holding world conferences every two years. In 2001, Belgium called for ILGA to be given observer status at the United Nations-sponsored World Conference Against Racism in South Africa, but the motion did not gain enough votes to pass.

During the 1990s, as the Green Party became stronger in Belgian politics, lesbian and gay Greens began to include gay issues in the party platform. In the 1999 elections, the Greens won real governmental power for the first time. Forging a coalition with the Liberal Party on the right and the Socialist Party on the left, representatives of the Green Party worked hard to bring lesbian and gay issues to the forefront. With little help from their coalition partners, they managed such achievements as including glbtq information in public school health programs, the passage of anti-discrimination laws, and introducing the idea of conferring legal status on same-sex relationships.

It was not until January of 2003 that the law legalizing same-sex marriage actually passed, spearheaded by a former minister of public health, Magda Aelvoet. Aelvoet suggested the marriage law as a simple and practical way of ensuring the equality of homosexual and heterosexual partnerships without having to create an entirely new law for gay men and lesbians. Gay activists throughout Belgium and around the world applauded the law, though it did include several compromises in order to gain approval from conservatives.

For one thing, the 2003 law legalized marriage only between Belgian citizens, or between a Belgian citizen and a citizen of a country in which gay marriage is legal. Since only two countries in the world, the Netherlands and Belgium, have legalized same-sex marriage, this placed severe limits on the scope of the law. In addition, the marriage law does not include adoption rights for gay and lesbian couples, or second-parent adoption if one partner already has children. Therefore, while single people in Belgium can legally adopt, married gay men and lesbians cannot.

However, progress continues to be made. In January 2004, a new law was passed allowing Belgian gay men and lesbians to marry citizens of any other country. Gay activists plan to press for adoption rights in 2004.

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