History of Belgium

Belgium has known heavy conflict as well as great achievement in art and commerce. Modern Belgians are descendants of a Celtic tribe whose courage was admired by Julius Caesar. In the fifth century, Germanic Franks took control and established the Merovingian Dynasty, later followed by Charlemagne’s empire. Fragmentation after Charlemagne’s death eventually split Belgium into four regions, which were ruled by dukes and counts. As the 15th century approached, the French dukes of Burgundy began to consolidate territory and eventually gained all of what is now Belgium, reigning over several decades of prosperity and progress.

From the 1600s to 1830, the Belgium area was a battleground for the Protestant-Catholic wars and for battles fought by neighboring countries, including Napoleonic France (Waterloo is just south of Brussels). The territories of Belgium gained independence from the Netherlands in 1830 and united in a constitutional monarchy. However, divisions based on language continued: French speakers lived in the south while Dutch (Flemish) speakers settled in the north. The two groups developed separate cultural and linguistic traditions but remained linked politically.

Belgium became a battleground again in the 20th century. Despite its claims to neutrality during both world wars, Belgium was overrun by conquering German armies in 1914 and again in 1940. Some of World War I’s fiercest battles were fought in Flanders (northern Belgium). In World War II, the famous Battle of the Bulge was fought in Bastogne and in central Belgium, where U.S. divisions held off massive assaults by German troops who were attempting to reach the Allied port at Antwerpen. This pivotal battle helped to secure an Allied victory in the war.

Belgium remained a constitutional monarchy after World War II. From 1951 to 1993, King Baudouin I ruled as head of state. In 1960, Belgium granted independence to the Belgian Congo in Africa. Soon after, Rwanda and Burundi also gained independence from Belgium. Belgium’s constitution was changed in 1993 to recognize the division of the country into three administrative regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. In that same year, King Baudouin I was succeeded by his brother, Albert II.

Because of its vulnerability and small size, Belgium has favored European cooperation and integration since the 1940s. It was a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and serves as that alliance’s headquarters. Brussels is home to the European Union (EU) headquarters and other European and
international groups as well, making it an important city for business and diplomacy. Belgium has devoted attention to resolving internal cultural conflicts and has created a system to negotiate the needs of both major linguistic groups as well as various minorities.

References: