

Tension of Confrontation

NATO Talks Attract World's Press

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Washington Post Foreign Service

BRUSSELS, June 7 — The NATO meeting here, with all its overtones of crisis, is attracting intense world press interest but only an anemic popular response in Belgium, where even anti-American demonstrations are of flea-bite size.

Of press interest, there can be no doubt. A record of some 540 correspondents are accredited to the NATO Ministerial Conference, including five from Russia and nine from Eastern Europe.

The total contrasts impressively with the 60 or so correspondents who turned up for a similar NATO meeting in Paris in the pre-television, pre-de Gaulle era of 1950.

NATO: What Next?

The lure for journalists is obvious—the tension of confrontation between France and her 14 partners, and the mood of uncertainty pithily summed up in the cover headline on a Dutch news magazine: "NATO: Wat Nu?" ("NATO: What Next?")

But if the Belgians feel honored to provide the stage for this drama, the local audience

has conspicuously disguised its emotions.

This morning, for example, all 15 Allied foreign ministers attended the formal opening of the conference at the Hotel de Ville, Brussel's graceful and sumptuous City Hall.

A military band played "When the Saints Come Marching In" as America's Dean Rusk and other dignitaries filed ceremoniously into a hall built before Columbus discovered America.

Yet only a scattering of people lined the city's main square to see the show and not a placard was visible to exclaim, "a Bas l' Imperialisme Americain." In sidewalk cafes, the very stolid burghers of Brussels gazed at it all over a glass of beer.

This apathy extends even to the Communist Party, which like so much else in Belgium is split in two factions, in this case each bearing the same name but described locally as the party of the "Peking tendency" or of the Moscow tendency.

On Sunday, the "Peking tendency" Communists littered the city with leaflets expressing revolutionary outrage

in two languages and calling on Belgians to demonstrate against both Yankees and "de Kroestsjovieken," as those following the line of Nikita Khrushchev and his successors are known in Flemish.

All of this has become familiar to foreign correspondents who have been gathering tidbits about Belhian politics in between the whirl of briefings given by various delegations meeting in the Palais des Congres.

Murals Draw Comment

But what has attracted the most comment are the murals that cover the walls on the lower floor. Painted by Paul del Vaux, the murals seem to depict a very decorous orgy involving women in classical gowns—a mixture of Kinsey and Sappho, with just a touch of Marquis de Sade.

Embarrassed Belgian officials explain that M. del Vaux is a very distinguished artist and note with poker-faced solemnity that the murals are flaking away anyway.

Otherwise, the art in the Palais — which may become meeting-place for NATO Ambassadors — is standard international-building style: ornate

fountains and flag pavilions outside, and buxom sculpture in the Paul Manship manner within.

If some of the art elicits ribald comments from the press some of the official utterances prompts withering sarcasm.

The sense of occasion, the mood of watershed, in NATO history, has perhaps understandably enhanced the inclination to overdramatic statements about the deliberations. Practical compromises become, for example, an "extraordinary day of decision," as one American spokesman felt moved to comment.

In these circumstances, it can be practical therapy to talk with the humble cab drivers who shuttle participants around town. One was asked how he felt about the prospect of NATO moving military headquarters to Belgium.

The response was an eloquent shrug and a recollection of Belgium's historic role as a battleground: "Chaque guerre toujours passe ici." (Every war always comes through here.) But then a reflective afterthought: "the atomic bomb is a weapon of peace. Everybody is afraid to use it. We may be safer with NATO here."