The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock

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Chapter 2
Reminders and Remainers of Empire, 1960-1967

“The independence of the Congo is the crowning of the work conceived by the genius of King Leopold II undertaken by him with firm courage, and continued by Belgium with perseverance.”¹ — King Baudouin, 30 June 1960

“Nous ne sommes plus vos macaques!” (We are no longer your monkeys!)²
— Attributed to Patrice Lumumba, 30 June 1960

The Congo’s independence and the crisis that followed garnered much attention in Belgium through the mid-1960s and influenced people’s views of their country’s colonial history. As historian Guy Vanthemsche puts it, “the crisis in the Congo reverberated throughout Belgian society and shocked public opinion.” This is not to say that “colonial” issues predominated over all others. After all, for all the trauma of the end of empire, the total population of Belgians living in the Congo before 1960 never exceeded 90,000 in any given year, meaning that most of the country’s population was impacted by decolonization at a remove. Moreover, developments closer to home remained of paramount importance. The country continued to develop as a bi-lingual state at the center of West European post-war recovery efforts, with a multi-layered, centuries-old culture framing people’s everyday lives, be it the neatly-tended countryside, a deep heritage of both classical and cutting-edge painting and literature, Catholicism, the country’s culinary inheritance, or its declining but still crucial industrial backbone. One specific, dramatic event grabbed everyone’s attention beginning in December 1960, namely a massive industrial strike that essentially shut down Wallonia. It turned out to be one of the largest strikes, if not the largest, in the nation’s twentieth-century history. This harbinger of change to come—namely a decline in and then halt to coal production in the Borinage—created shockwaves. This connected to related shifts in the country’s economy as its center shifted northward to Flanders, and as the workforce transformed from one divided among farmers, industrial workers, service sector employees, and civil servants, to one where service sector employees predominated. As World War II collaboration receded in time, the language issue re-emerged, most dramatically in two Flemish
“marches on Brussels” in 1961 and 1963. In politics, this was an era in which Flemish-language parties were ascendant: from 1954 to 1973, all first ministers were to be Flemish-speaking except Pierre Harmel (1965-1966) and Vanden Boeynants (1966-1968).

Decolonization and the Congo Crisis

The Congo’s independence in 1960 came suddenly and revealed that despite much rhetoric to the contrary, Belgians had done little to prepare their colony (or themselves) for self-rule. As we have seen, paternalistic colonial displays like the one at the 1958 World’s Fair and its human zoo reflected confidence in the endurance of the mission civilisatrice, as did the continued unveiling of colonialisit memorials throughout the 1950s, for example a new statue to Leopold II erected in Mons in 1958. To all appearances, it seemed independence must be decades away. In 1957, “that is a little more than three years before the independence of the Congo,” one study says, “at that moment, no one in Belgium believed it to be so close.”

Thus, it is in retrospect no surprise that when riots broke out in January 1959 in the colony’s capital, Leopoldville, the colonial establishment was shocked, as it was again when shortly afterward Baudouin took to the radio airwaves to address the situation and actually pronounced the word “independence.” Few appreciated how quickly Congolese nationalism had developed in the previous years, and nationalist leaders now pushed for negotiations. At a roundtable conference in January-February 1960, Congolese delegates wrested independence from their Belgian counterparts, who acquiesced to a rapid timetable in hopes it would leave the Congo unprepared, and in need of indefinite Belgian tutelage. Elections took place, and an independence ceremony was held on 30 June. As the contrasting quotes in this chapter’s epigraph reveal, Belgian and Congolese leaders took decidedly different views on the past: Baudouin saw the colonial epoch as a glorious page in his kingdom’s history, while newly-elected prime minister Lumumba saw it as an era of humiliation and oppression.

Independence was almost immediately followed by what came to be called the Congo crisis: an army mutiny; the secession of the rich provinces of Katanga and Kasai; violence; and foreign interventions, including by the former colonial power. The president, Joseph Kasavubu, and the prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, each dismissed the other, and the Armée nationale congolaise seized power under its chief, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. In January 1961, Lumumba was assassinated by Katanga’s leaders, with encouragement from
Leopold II (1835-1909)
Location: Mons (Bergen), behind église Sainte-Élisabeth
Sculptor: Raoul Godfroid
Inauguration: ca. 14 September 1958
Funded/built by: Cercle royal congolais de Mons et de la région and the Ministry of Colonies

The bronze statue of Leopold II in Mons reveals both how the monarch had been fully rehabilitated by the 1950s, and how colonial monuments mobilized the public during and after the colonial era. The building of a large statue to the founder of the Belgian overseas empire entailed the creation of a board to do so; a committee membership list includes more than 150 names, showing how such efforts involved large numbers of people. What is more, much of the funding for the monument was raised through public subscription, another way in which such efforts mobilized a broader public, and not merely pro-colonial enthusiasts.

The statue itself, by sculptor Raoul Godfroid, was inaugurated in 1958 in the presence of a large crowd composed of people from “patriotic groups,” schools, the army, and the gendarmerie, as well as a representative of the king. According to one report, the statue rose seven meters above ground-level and dominated the entrance to Mons via the chaussée de Bruxelles at the city’s northern end. It was one Mr. Marquette, the president of the Vétérans coloniaux as well as president of the monument organizing committee, who presented the statue to the city. Godfroid’s towering creation perhaps more than any other statue to Leopold II captures the monarch’s great height. Leopold’s breast bears typical medals; a sword hangs in a scabbard by his side; one hand grips his gloves; and his other hand, hanging at his side, holds his hat. Over his shoulders he wears a large greatcoat, completing a regal picture.
The Mons memorial to Leopold II reveals the surprising degree to which Belgians remained confident in their colonial control in the Congo, right down to its sudden and largely unanticipated end. Within just four months of the statue’s inauguration, riots had broken out in the Congo’s capital, Leopoldville, a key moment that propelled events toward the colony’s independence a mere 18 months later.

The large bronze Leopold II in Mons is also suggestive of how colonial monuments retained their importance over time. Even though the statue suffered numerous contextual and literal displacements, it was never taken down. First, the colony came to an end within months of the statue’s inauguration. Second, road work forced the city to relocate the monument. It was moved from its original location at la place Régnier au Long Col, where it had been for several years; up until 1966, at least. The reason for the move seems to have been road construction, including the removal of the rond-point of place Régnier au Long Col in 1968-1969. The statue was then moved to its present location behind the église Sainte-Élisabeth at the juncture of rue des Fossés and rue Boulangé de La Hainière. The monument’s inscription also changed. When this author first visited the monument in 2002, the inscription on its base read, in French, “A sa Majesté Léopold II et aux Pionniers Coloniaux Hennuyers.” (To His Majesty Leopold II and to the colonial pioneers of Hainaut.) At some point that plaque was removed, leaving the monument with none. By 2018, the plaque had been replaced with another that read, more simply, “Léopold II. Roi des Belges,” making no reference to the colonial past.

Despite the removal of a reference to colonialism, the Mons statue of Leopold II has retained its colonialist association for many. As with other such markers honoring the king, the one in Mons has turned into a site for protest against the colonial past, in 2017, for instance, by the group Mémoire coloniale.
Belgian and U.S. authorities. Rebellions broke out elsewhere as the central government struggled to control the country. To outside observers, it seemed that a cascade of violent and disorderly events followed one after the other until army leader Mobutu seized power in a coup in 1965, with backing from the U.S. and Belgium. The Congo crisis and Mobutu’s power grab not only allowed Belgium to exercise some continuing influence in the Congo, it kept the newly-independent country in the headlines and on people’s minds.

Even if there were hints before 1960 that change was coming, attitudes had developed such that most Belgians were mentally incapable of envisioning independence, which meant it came as a shock. Such signs of impending change included tensions within the Congo itself, between Belgium and the Congo, and on the international scene. For example, the question scolaire of the 1950s and the language issue were increasingly “exported” to the colony, contributing to greater inter-linguistic and inter-cultural tensions. While the question scolaire was settled by 1958, the damage had been done, and there was a growing knowledge among colonizers and the colonized that Belgians did not represent one united group. There were tensions between whites and blacks, despite the aura of confidence Belgians maintained within the colony and the rosy picture they projected at home and abroad.

The mental limits within which Belgians operated included a generally racist outlook that denigrated black Africans and considered them incapable of ruling their own independent state absent Belgian overlordship. The colonial situation did not create racialist thinking in Belgium, but it provided an object for the expression and reinforcement of it. What is more, the colonial experience strengthened Belgian identity as being “white” as Europeans set themselves off and apart from the blacks of the Congo in innumerable ways, both on the ground in the colony and in the colonial imaginary in the metropole. This helped create what one scholar calls a “national identity framed in terms of white supremacy,” which joined the country’s two main language communities insofar as it made “whiteness (… ) a trope for (real) Belgian citizenship.”

Racist attitudes and episodes abounded, perhaps most famously in Tintin in the Congo, a creation of the colonial era that has remained in print, albeit in different forms, down to today. The creation of cartoon artist Hergé, Tintin in the Congo first appeared in serialized form over several months in 1930 in Le Petit Vingtième before being published together in book form in 1931. In Hergé’s story, Africans are in awe of the young Tintin, hailing him, and
even his dog Milou (Snowy) as a hero. In one scene, when Tintin decides to set up camp, he sends his “boy” off to put up the tent while he leaves to hunt for their dinner. This repeated the oft-depicted scenario of the in-command European leading the hunt with an African as a mere helper, even though we know that Europeans depended on African hunters for their success, and that it was colonial restrictions, for example on firearms possession, that curbed African hunting. In Hergé’s creation, Tintin’s true antagonist is another white man, leaving locals to fill the role of bit players, suggesting that central Africa was a place for whites to take action, and for Africans to act as background. Hergé, although not a particularly devout Catholic, depicts the missionary in *Tintin in the Congo* favorably, while Africans, in contrast, are portrayed not only as superstitious, but as not even being able to speak properly. And in one well-known Eurocentric scene, when Tintin steps in to substitute for the missionary at his school, he opens his lesson to a classroom full of black African children by saying, “My dear friends, today I’m going to talk to you about your country: Belgium!” Hergé later recognized and lamented the Eurocentric and colonialist spirit in which he had created the original *Tintin in the Congo*, and he toned down the racism and Eurocentrism in revised editions that appeared after World War II, but only slightly. These racist, Eurocentric depictions were consumed by readers young and old, for years.

The racist portrayal of Africans in *Tintin in the Congo* is but one example among many. Numerous depictions of Congolese in colonialist memorial sculpture depicted them as semi- or completely naked, signaling backwardness, often casting them as needy supplicants at the mercy of powerful white European figures. At least as late as the interwar years, school textbooks described Congolese as cannibals. African artisans on display in the *village indigène* at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair returned to the Congo early because of the abuse they had received, including members of the public throwing bananas and chocolates at them and asking if they could examine their teeth. Some Belgians openly portrayed Africans as lazy, or as monkey-like, or simply as monkeys. One political cartoon in *De Standaard* at the time of the 1960 *table rond* conference, for instance, depicted Africans as monkeys in suits. Many Belgians sustained the view that central Africa was utterly backward, that Africans lived in trees before the arrival of European colonists, or were still “jumping up in the trees.” Patrice Lumumba reported that a white woman had called him a *sale macaque* after he accidentally bumped into her on a Leopoldville street in the 1950s, surely not an isolated incident. As seen in this chapter’s epigraph, Lumumba turned the tables in his independence day speech, underscoring to the audience, which included King
Baudouin, “We are no longer your monkeys!” Racist views of Africans were not exclusive to Belgians, of course. After a 1959 trip to Africa that included a stop in Leopoldville, U.S. official Maurice Stans reported privately that many Africans “still belonged in the trees.” Naturally, such attitudes did not simply fade away upon the Congo’s political independence. A Belgian former colonial official told this author in 2001 that before the Belgians arrived, the Congolese “were like monkeys living in the trees.” Several years ago in Brussels, this author heard a white man insult a black man, in public, by shouting at him, “macaque!” Among other things, such mental views on race meant that many if not most Belgians before 1960, including many who knew the colonial situation best, presumed it would take decades for the Congolese to be ready for self-rule.

The former colony’s descent into chaos beginning in 1960 contrasted only too sharply with the stability and prosperity that seemed to have reigned there during the 1950s, producing Belgian resentment and disappointment. Although Belgium did not fight a war of decolonization, the advent of self-rule entailed violence nonetheless, especially after the new national army (the former Force Publique) mutinied just days after independence. Whereas Belgians expected to continue on as close advisors and experts to guide the newly self-governing state, Lumumba’s cutting of ties with Belgium and the drawing of the crisis into the Cold War conflict made clear this was not going to happen. The disappointment that resulted was tinged with melancholy resentment. Belgium had long guarded control over its massive colony: from foreign attacks against Leopoldian rule; from the post-World War I threat of German irredentism and Nazi expansionism; to supposed post-World War II U.S. designs on the Congo’s riches; to growing international criticism at the U.N. After navigating such hazards for decades, Belgium saw its domination in central Africa evaporate in a matter of days as decolonization morphed from a Belgian-Congolese affair to an international crisis between independence on June 30 and U.N. resolution 143 on July 14 authorizing U.N. intervention.

Belgian press reporting intensified as events spun out of control. Newspapers reported on whites who were killed, including French-speaking Belgian missionary Nicolas Hardy, and closely followed those who fled and returned home. That the public in the former metropole was above all focused on the fate of whites—either “refugees” returning home or those who remained behind after independence—was not unusual, as the same occurred elsewhere, for example in the British press when covering the end of empire in Kenya. Photojournalists and their editors filled front pages of newspapers with photographs of pathetic, white refugees, which contrasted sharply with the many official images that had been taken and disseminated by the colonial
Nicolas Hardy (1919-1964)
Location: Elsaute, Saint-Roch church
Funded/built by: parish of Elsaute

A plaque on the village church of Elsaute dedicated to Nicolas Hardy remembers him as a missionary and a martyr. Its simple inscription reads “Missionnaire au Congo, Martyr à Kilembe.” (Missionary in the Congo, Martyr at Kilembe.) The town also renamed a nearby street after this local son who was a member of the Oblats de Marie order, the first members of which arrived to the Congo beginning only in 1931, although Hardy himself arrived many years later. Hardy was murdered at the outset of the Kwilu rebellion that began in January 1964, along with fellow missionaries Pierre Laebens (1920-1964) and Gérard Defever (1920-1964), after a crowd attacked their missionary post at Kilembe. When Hardy’s body was found, it was in pieces, suggesting he had been hacked to death.

Perhaps Jef Geeraerts was making reference to the attack at the end of Het Verhaal van Matsombo (1966), in a post-1960 scene in which all Belgian priests and sisters at a mission post are attacked and murdered. The plaque in Elsaute is a rarity in Belgium: a memorial to the “civilizing mission” that was put up after 1960.
administration in the 1950s, which had created a picture of peace and prosperity. Now, in the nation’s newspapers one saw photographs of violence, refugees, fear, and corpses. Some action took place in the streets of Brussels as former colonials, some organized by associations like the Comité action et défense des Belges d’Afrique, took to the streets to protest the descent into violence in the former colony. \(^{37}\) Accounts of white Belgian soldiers who returned home in summer 1960, parading through the streets and welcomed as heroes, contrasted sharply with the anarchy that seemed to reign in Africa. Press accounts seeking to explain the former colony’s descent into chaos resorted to clichés of a Stone Age and uncivilized Africa, or of irrational Africans, for example when discussing prime minister Lumumba. \(^{38}\) The effect was greater than the cause, because, “While some Belgians clearly did suffer terribly at the hands of Congolese soldiers, and many were killed, scholars have suggested that actual instances of physical brutality were nowhere near as widespread as the media or official investigations implied.” \(^{39}\)

**A pivotal break**

The independence of the Congo was more of a decisive cultural break for Belgium than those of other colonies for other European powers because the country’s overseas imperialism was essentially directed toward only one overseas territory. \(^{40}\) Britain claimed a vast empire, and for Britons, twentieth-century decolonization stretched over decades, from India’s 1947 independence to multiple independences around 1960, to Rhodesia’s 1965 Unilateral Declaration of Independence, to the turnover of Hong Kong to China in 1997. France also possessed many colonies, and fought multiple wars to hang onto them, making decolonization develop, in a sense, in stages. Portugal also dealt with protracted anti-colonial wars, and the end of empire for the Netherlands stretched from a four-year war capped by the 1949 surrender of the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), to the negotiated handover of New Guinea in 1962, to Suriname’s independence in 1975. With the sudden loss of the Congo in 1960 and its quick absorption into the international Cold War conflict, Belgium experienced a perhaps uniquely sudden termination of its role as colonial master. \(^{41}\) This was certainly true politically, as Belgians, who believed they would be able to mold the new state, found themselves largely sidelined by Cold War competition as the crisis in the Congo became internationalized. \(^{42}\) Economically, Belgian authorities quickly passed laws on the eve of independence that allowed for the repatriation of much colonial capital. Although these might have been aimed at safeguarding economic
activity in the Congo, they put somewhat more distance between Belgium and the now-former colony. This was followed by the Congo government’s contentious nationalizations of major remaining investments in the 1960s. Another caesura was demographic as most Belgians living in the colony simply left in the weeks and months after June 1960, with few returning to replace them. Education about the colony for all intents and purposes ground to a halt, a break made all the more dramatic because of how it had actually intensified in the 1950s. “The more the moment of decolonization approached, the more did the provision [l’offre] of teaching and research grow richer and more diverse.” Also coming to an abrupt halt was production of pro-colonial material such as pro-empire exhibitions or colonial films. Colonial tourism, which had been on the rise, stopped.

Aside from the psychological shock of Congo’s independence there was the challenge of reincorporating former colonial functionaries, company employees, and their families back into Belgian society, something for which neither repatriates nor the country had prepared. Although leaving the (former) colony was traumatic, many had relocated to Africa only temporarily in the first place because the Congo was not a colony of settlement, unlike, say, Algeria, Australia, Kenya after World War I, or Angola from the 1950s. Still, whites both in Europe and in the colony expected that those living in the Congo before 30 June 1960 would remain on afterward to assist the newly-born nation. The number of Belgians who left the Congo beginning around June 1960, either for other colonies or to repatriate, was not massive in absolute terms—some 38,000 in the initial post-independence period—but it was significant for a country (Belgium) with a population of barely more than nine million at the time. Historian Guy Vanthemsche characterized the flight “a mass exodus.” Returnees nonetheless represented a much smaller proportion of the country’s population than the influx of pieds noirs into France in the early 1960s or the hundreds of thousands of retornados who left Africa for Portugal in the 1970s.

Similar to former colonists who returned to the U.K., France, and other countries during the decolonization era, Belgian returnees from the Congo believed themselves to be disadvantaged. In the months and years to follow, many were to be motivated by two things: upholding the “correct” version of colonial history and defending themselves and their interests in a difficult new situation. Many felt unwelcome upon their return, some even as victims. Former colonials organized, protested, and wrote letters to obtain compensation for their displacement, as none seemed to be forthcoming. That said, legislation was passed to ease the reincorporation of some former colonials. In March 1960, the Belgian parliament already had passed a law with an eye
toward the eventual integration of former colonial functionaries into the metropolitan administration. When the stream of returnees turned into a flood beginning in June 1960, however, parliament passed a law (27 July 1961) of broader scope but more modest accommodation, which was later modified by a 3 April 1964 law, all of which advanced “the integration of former colonial officials into the Belgian public service,” at least. Even so, for many the transition back home left a bitter taste in their mouths. They felt the sting of having achieved so much—in their own eyes, at least—only to suffer a traumatic ejection. There followed a lingering suspicion that their fellow citizens back home believed it was the former colonials’ failures that had somehow unleashed the chaos of 1960.

Other than the legislation of 1960, 1961, and 1964, the number of specific, organized efforts in Belgium to reintegrate returning colonials was vanishingly small. There was the “home des vétérans coloniaux” or “Gui Home” near Genval Lake, which the group les Vétérans coloniaux had opened on 28 May 1949. By 1961 it housed some thirty colonial veterans, more than half having served in the Congo before 1908. There was some housing built near the Tervuren Museum in a neighborhood where street names like Katangabinnenhof echoed a colonial connection. The case of returnees to Tervuren’s Congo museum illustrates the ad hoc process. The institution was surprised in 1960 by the “sudden return of a large number of scientific researchers from the Congo.” It could not have come at a worse time since the institution’s very existence was at risk. Its director, Lucien Cahen, created the Institut Belge pour l’Encouragement de la Recherche Scientifique Outre-Mer (IBERSOM) in order to place researchers from the Congo, returning in a flood back home, into workable positions in Belgium, including at the MRAC. In sum, coordinated efforts to reintegrate former colonial settlers were few, leaving many of them disoriented and some resentful, even if most landed on their feet before long.

It is important to pause for a moment to consider how former colonials acted through their own interest groups after the Congo’s independence, and thereby formed a kind of “pro-colonial lobby.” This meant oddly enough that these groups were advocating for “colonial” interests in a post-colony era. Former colonials became “imperialists without an empire” who crafted and sustained a positive narrative and image of Belgian overseas rule, which of course reflected positively on themselves. National and local pro-colonial groupings were nothing new post-1960; the first ones had formed as early as the late 1800s during the early years of the Leopoldian colonial endeavor. During the post-1908 Belgian state rule period, a whole slew of these groups sprang up, often called cercles coloniaux or koloniale verenigingen (colonial clubs or associations): the Koloniale en maritieme kring van Brugge; Cercle
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africain borain; Cercle colonial arlonais; Cercle colonial de Hal; Koloniale kring van Leuven; and the umbrella Royale Union coloniale belge, among many others. Membership tended to be drawn from those who had worked in the colony and then returned home, and people who wanted to promote colonialism, or network with fellow former colonials, or both. Promotion of colonialism included publishing periodicals with a focus on colonization in the Congo; the holding of concours colonials (colonial competitions) for schoolchildren, which tended to be imbued with colonialist ideas; arranging empire- or Congo-themed exhibits; and coordinating outings to the colonial sections of Belgium’s several World’s Fairs or to Tervuren’s museum of the Congo. A number of these groups received subsidies from the Ministry of Colonies or city or regional governments.56

Although the number of former colonials perforce declined over time after 1960, the number of associations of former colonials paradoxically grew. In 1912, the Royale Union coloniale belge brought together 11 associations, whereas its post-colonial successor the Union royale belge pour les pays d’outre-mer (UROME) grouped together 27 such associations in 2008, encompassing some 10,000 former colonials.57 They engaged in numerous actions and public relations endeavors that altogether conveyed a highly positive history of Belgian action in central Africa, including the colonial rule of Leopold II. Former colonials and even UROME itself published apologies of Leopoldian and Belgian rule in central Africa both on its website and in hard copy.58 By the 1980s, they were collectively producing some two dozens pro-colonial publications, even if such publications were largely geared toward former colonials and their families and therefore did not circulate in large numbers. Some former colonials did reach a broader public by publication of their letters to the editor in mainstream newspapers on occasions when issues of the colonial past or contemporary disputes with Congo’s Mobutu entered the news. Local colonials in Namur kept up the Musée Africain de Namur (discussed below), and many from colonialist associations across the country commemorated Leopold II and the Belgian empire each year at memorials in bronze and stone. Such associations also kept close tabs on the goings-on at the MRAC in Tervuren and exerted pressure behind the scenes to ensure it hewed to a pro-colonial line. Some have argued that the effects that former colonials had on public debates about the colonial past were negligible.59 But by means of their steady, stalwart, and oftentimes unseen defense of colonialism, they held the line to sustain a positive view of the colonial past, including that of the CFS era.

As the preceding discussion of returnees suggests, what one saw about the colony in Belgium immediately after 1960 was overwhelmingly focused
on the trauma of decolonization rather than events further back in the past. Instead of celebrating their former charges’ newfound independence, Belgians were much more concerned with “whites”: their own and their fellow citizens’ shock; the plight of refugees; and the fate of those who had remained in the former colony. Such focus was suggestive of how the “civilizing mission” had always been less about its purported target, namely Africans; it was more a motto justifying colonialism and a slogan to explain foreign, European domination in Africa. This could be seen elsewhere, such as the great interest in King Baudouin’s trip to the Congo in 1955, which revealed less about Belgians’ interest in Africa and Africans and more about their interest in their king.60 Similarly, earlier royal voyages to the Congo, such as that of Albert I and Queen Elisabeth in 1928, garnered press attention because of the monarchs themselves, less so because of anything they did in the colony, or because of the colonized themselves.61 During the 1950s, newspapers had regularly carried “interest” pieces on the Congo written by Europeans, such as the socialist Le Peuple’s “Chronique Coloniale.” Some of these were articles on pressing current affairs, for example a 1953 piece investigating the political future of the colony, which asked whether blacks or whites would be in power in the Congo in the future.62 But many other “colonial chronical” pieces in Le Peuple were mere informational pieces to inform Belgians about their Congo.63 When school history texts discussed the colony they carried illustrations of visits by the royals, which, of course, was a highly uncommon rather than everyday occurrence in the Congo.64

Congoles in Belgium

Although it was not unusual for the press in different European countries to focus on the fate of whites during the decolonization era, this was perhaps even more the case in this instance because there were so few Congolese living in the now-former metropole who might otherwise have driven greater coverage of Africans and their concerns. The contrast with Britain and France was especially striking; in the latter there was already by the interwar years a significant presence of subjects from across the colonial world, especially in Paris.65 The small community of colonial migrants in Belgium had been the case from the earliest days of the CFS, when authorities severely restricted Congolese immigration. Very early attempts at education of Africans in Belgium, for instance, were limited before being halted completely.66 It became illegal for colonials to bring Africans home, for example as servants. Unlike France, Britain, and to a lesser degree Italy, Belgium refused to mobilize its
Louis-Napoleon Chaltin (1857-1933) and the Corps des Volontaires Congolais

Location: Erpent (Namur)
Sculptor: Harry Elström (sometimes Elstrøm)
Inauguration: ca. 1937

Although white, European officers of the Force publique are commemorated dozens if not hundreds of times in Belgium, African soldiers of the Force publique are only remembered in the country on one public monument, that being the Force publique memorial in Schaerbeek, inaugurated after the colonial period, in 1970. But Schaerbeek is not the only monument in Belgium to Africans who fought for the country, for there is another: the monument to Colonel Chaltin and the Corps des Volontaires Congolais (CVC), today located in Erpent, an area of Namur.67 The monument reads, in French, Dutch, English, and German, “To the Belgian Colonial Volunteers who, under Colonel Chaltin, took part in the defence of Namur, August 1914.” The bas-relief shows six soldiers, apparently heading into battle, led by two bare-headed white soldiers, probably officers. Among the four other men being led, at least one face is recognizable as African. It seems likely that the four figures behind the two leading white men—all of whom are wearing military hats with a star on the front, evoking the colony—represent the four Congolese soldiers who joined Chaltin’s nearly all-white CVC, which was comprised of former colonials living in Belgium at the time of war’s outbreak in August 1914.68 Formed by royal decree in August 1914,
African subjects to serve in Europe during World War I, and those few who did fight on the Western Front were only those couple dozen or so Congolese who just happened to be living in the metropole in August 1914. The largest group of Congolese who traveled to and from Belgium were mariners, usually sailing from the port of Matadi to Antwerp and back. In Antwerp, they were required to remain on board ship, or were housed in Ndako Ya Biso—“Ons Huis” (Our House)—living quarters set up by the Compagnie Maritime Belge. Because some of the sailors started taking their salaries into town to buy goods to bring home with them, the missionary overseeing the home, Father Nuyens, decided to set up a store inside Ndako Ya Biso so that sailors would not have an excuse to go into the city, further isolating them.

Authorities could not completely quarantine the home country from its colonial subjects, but they tried, and before 1960 there were probably never more than perhaps a couple hundred Congolese living in Belgium at any one time.

Beginning in 1960 this changed, albeit gradually, as some Congolese relocated to Belgium, leading to a slowly growing African presence. In absolute terms, the number of Congolese immigrants remained small: from 2,585 by 1961 to 5,244 by 1970, not including 534 Rwandans and 339 Burundians. About a thousand of those Congolese who came to Belgium in the 1960s were students provided scholarships through an aid scheme, and who, presumably, returned to Africa once their course of studies was complete. Even if such small numbers created a situation atypical both of migrants to Belgium more generally and of African immigrants to other western European countries, Congolese immigration did increase. As a result, Monique Vanderstraeten-Wayez, whose brother was a missionary to Africa, established “La Maison...
The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock

The Congo crisis continues

Attention to whites was sustained in press coverage as the situation in the Congo deteriorated. Any stability in the early 1960s was short-lived, and by 1964 further rebellion threatened the Kinshasa government and led to attacks on whites (among other problems), which exacerbated trauma for many Belgian families. The Simba rebellion in the Congo’s eastern provinces included the taking of hostages in Paulis (Isiro) and Stanleyville, or “Stan” (Kisangani), leading to the rescue operations Dragon Rouge and Dragon Noir. Belgium, with U.S. assistance, sent paratroopers into Paulis and Stan in November to evacuate Europeans and Americans there, as well as some Congolese. The return of refugees in the days that followed filled front pages of newspapers as the country’s main French- and Flemish-language news outlets reported on the operations and their aftermath, or, as Het Laatste Nieuws put it, “Het Drama van Stan.” Photographs of refugees being met at the airport by royals once again tied the Congo to the Saxe-Coburg dynasty, as members of the royal family including Baudouin, Fabiola, and the Prince and Princess of Liège appeared on front pages across the country.

Whereas colonial rule had long been associated with manliness, the obverse—the disintegration of European rule—was gendered, too, and photographers and
editors focused heavily on the fate of women and children, casting them as the preeminent victims of the chaos in the Congo.\footnote{81}

Although the rebels killed hostages—the press reported they executed hundreds—the evacuation at the end of 1964 brought the crisis in the eastern Congo to an end for the white captives. Yet some had died, and many suffered, as illustrated by the story of Didier Welvaert and Lucien Welvaert. Didier Welvaert, a soldier, had been reported killed in action in or around Stanleyville during operation Dragon Rouge. Lucien Welvaert was reported to be returning alive and well. Lucien’s family, including his father, mother, wife, daughter, and six month-old son, turned up at Melsbroek air base northeast of Brussels alongside other families welcoming men back, ecstatic to see Lucien return safely home. When Lucien did not come off the plane, his family started asking his buddies if they had “seen Lucien,” leading to strange looks and awkward, fumbling answers. It turned out there had been a mix-up. It was true that a soldier named Welvaert had survived, but it was Didier, not Lucien. The accounts and photos in Le Soir of the reactions of Lucien’s family upon hearing the news were heartrending.\footnote{82}

Dragon Rouge and Dragon Noir did not lead to any soul-searching. They were quick operations that ended when the captives were freed and returned home. What were the underlying grievances stoking rebellion in the former colony? What role had Belgians played in contributing to the ongoing violence there? The focus in the press was not on such questions, rather on developing a narrative of a heroic rescue carried out in the face of violence perpetrated by rebels and bandits.\footnote{83} The paras who executed Dragon Rouge in late November returned to a hero’s welcome at the beginning of December. Again the dynasty was associated with the colony as news photographs showed Baudouin greeting returnees and decorating officers.\footnote{84} Press photos showed the crowds that turned out in Brussels for a ticker tape parade as the return dominated front pages; “A Nation feels her heart beat,” read one. There was “a veritable tide of human beings,” a “sea of men, women, and children” present to welcome troops as they paraded through central Brussels, from porte de Schaerbeek down rue Royale to place Poelaert.\footnote{85} “The crowd, breaking the roadblocks, carry the paras in triumph,” read another headline.\footnote{86} Although it had been a controversial operation that did nothing to alleviate international condemnation of Belgian meddling, politicians and the country rallied around the action. As Le Soir put it, “This responsibility, our government had to take it. It took it. Parliament, the emanation of the country, approved it without ambiguity, the opposition joining the majority in a unanimous movement.”\footnote{87} Many Congolese, by contrast, sought to be evacuated, but without success, bringing to mind today film footage from the later U.S. evacuation of its
South Vietnamese embassy in 1975, or of how, even later, Rwandans were left to their fate during the 1994 genocide while European troops evacuated white people. By 1965, there had already been a steep decline in the number of Belgians living in the Congo, and henceforth it was to be much more rare to see news about the former colony or Belgian-Zairian relations make the front page of newspapers. Exceptions to this trend, such as they were, may have stood out to readers as much for the subject being reported as for their infrequency.

The importance of the 1950s

The decade of the 1950s, which was bookended by Baudouin’s accession to the throne and an ignominious end to colonial rule, had a disproportionately large impact on memories and perceptions of the colonial past. Many commentators and scholars have over the years criticized Belgians for their supposed amnesia about colonial history, arguing that if they knew anything about it, it was only about two episodes: of the alternately heroic or atrocious Leopoldian years (1885-1908), and of the Congo crisis (1960-1965), the latter with its own attendant traumas and atrocities. Hein Vanhee and Geert Castryck write that, “The period of the actual Belgian Congo (1908-1960) is largely terra incognita for the wider public.” This misses a major truth, which is that Belgians for long knew quite a bit about the colony of the 1950s, even if much of what they had taken in about those years was absorbed subconsciously. The abundant images, stories, propaganda, and memories of the 1950s formed much of the basis for post-1960 Belgian views of colonialism and the nation’s actions in central Africa, fundamentally influencing Belgians and their culture.

There are reasons why this particular decade was so important in framing views of the colonial past, the first being its economic successes. In short, the Belgian Congo’s economy boomed in the 1950s, including raw materials production, especially the mining, transport, and refining of tin, copper, and uranium ores, and diamonds. After World War II, Belgium instituted the plan décennal, or ten-year plan (starting 1949), to coordinate infrastructure investments, one version of several development plans put in motion by Europe’s colonial powers after the war. Infrastructure was synonymous with the civilizing mission in the Belgian colonial imaginary. This association dated back to at least the 1890-1898 building of the Matadi-Leopoldville railway. That project had been spearheaded by Albert Thys, for whom a monument was unveiled in 1948 in his native home of Dalhem to mark the railway’s half-centenary, which coincidentally fell on the eve of the plan
décennal’s implementation. That scheme led to planned investments into health facilities, roads, airfields, electricity, agriculture, schooling, and housing, among other areas, making the 1950s the apex of colonial state investment into infrastructure. World War II had proved the importance of the colonies, especially their raw materials resources, and, as noted earlier, Belgium’s sovereignty during the war had depended on monies from the Congo that helped fund the government in exile in London. The Korean War that followed jacked up primary materials prices, only further stimulating interest and investment in overseas territories across the European colonial empires. Compared to the Great Depression era, defeat, Nazi occupation, and tough World War II years in the colony, the post-war era in the Congo seemed marvelous.

Former colonists who returned home beginning in the second half of 1960, and their children whom they brought with them—some to step foot on Belgian soil for the first time—carried the golden age of the 1950s fresh in their minds. This contrasted sharply with the shock and atrocities of independence. After 1960, most former colonials—that is, Belgians who had lived and worked in the colony and then returned to Europe—were necessarily people who had lived in central Africa during the 1945-1960 boom years because the white population there had grown so rapidly after World War II: from 23,643 in 1945 to 39,006 in 1950, to 88,913 by 1959, a 276 percent increase in fewer than fifteen years. What is more, their initial departures for the Congo between 1945-1960 had been preceded by years of pro-colonial propaganda designed to instill pride in empire, meaning they arrived to Africa with all they had learned beforehand about the positive effects of Belgian activity, how it was intimately linked with Leopoldian rule, how whites were superior to blacks, and so forth. All other things being equal, returnees brought with them this positive vision of their country’s colonial action, which they then by and large carried forward with them into the post-1960 era. Those who were youngsters from 1945-1960 generally held an even stronger positive view, and because of their young age, they typically sustained this view far into the future. “As sociological studies demonstrate, people tend to remember the events that were salient during their adolescence and early adulthood.” This meant that decades later, as late as the Congo’s fiftieth anniversary of independence, an older generation preserved positive memories of the colonial era. As one study put it, it was no surprise that decades later, in 2010, “older Belgians [expressed] more positive representations of the colonial past than young adults,” the latter of whose formative years did not overlap with the height of the colonial era.
Albert Thys was a key figure in the world of colonial affairs in the CFS and then in the Belgian Congo after 1908. He was particularly influential because of his role in the building of the Matadi-Leopoldville railway, and because of his behemoth colonial enterprise, the Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et l’Industrie. He was a native of Dalhem, a small town in eastern Wallonia located between Liege, Maastricht, and Aachen. He died in 1915 in Brussels.

The modest memorial to Thys in Dalhem was put up across from his birth home, on the former place du Marché, which was renamed rue du Général Thys in his honor. The bust is by artist Charles Samuel and dates back to 1915. It was donated for the 1948 memorial by Gilbert Périer, who was not only a grandson of Thys but also a prominent businessman who at one point was director general of the national airline Sabena. Planning for the Dalhem memorial started in 1947 so that it would be up in time to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1898 opening of the Matadi-Leopoldville railway. The monument’s 1948 inauguration suggests how colonial monuments, in their own small way, served as points of unification for Belgians around the colonial idea. During the colonial period, in official colonial discourse, it was not “French-speaking Belgians” or “Dutch-speaking Belgians” who went to the Congo, rather simply Belgians. As Léon Anciaux, Thys’ biographer for the BCB put it, at the opening ceremonies, former Minister of Colonies Paul Charles said of Thys that, “il apportait l’hommage de la Belgique toute entière: ‘Grand réalisateur, grand cœur et grand Belge!’” (he bore the tribute of the whole of Belgium: “A great implementer, a big heart, and a great Belgian!”)
Another reason the 1950s had Belgians looking back at colonial times of yore through rose-tinted glasses is because of the contrasting, terrible experience of what preceded those years, namely World War II and its immediate aftermath. The war had led to extended tours of duty for functionaries in the colony, hardships, difficult working conditions, and rising tensions among Congolese, as witnessed by the 1944 Force publique mutiny at Luluabourg. In Belgium, the Nazi occupation was devastating. Future Inforcongo photographer Henri Goldstein (1920-2014) was imprisoned for years during the war in multiple camps in Germany, later recounting that there were “times when he lived like a beast or a savage.”

Going to work for Inforcongo after the liberation, “He arrived in Africa still extremely thin and bearing the physical traces of the war.” His arrival to a peaceful, more prosperous colonial situation could only have struck him as a major improvement. Or consider what renowned historian and anthropologist Jan Vansina (1929-2017) said about living through occupation: “We grew up in the fear and clamor of war (…) I was used to the sound of incoming artillery by the time I was seven or eight. (…) I remember dinners consisting of a single potato.” The reader of Vansina’s memoir, from which this quote is taken, should be unsurprised he dealt so well with the privations he endured after he left home for the colony in the early 1950s for an extended research stay among the Kuba. With the occupation and post-war strife of the 1940s ingrained on many minds, memories of a prosperous Congo in the 1950s were especially sweet.

The 1950s also signified the high water mark of awareness of the overseas empire, be it through travel there, classroom lessons, exhibitions of empire, or returning missionaries spreading the word about their work. That same decade also represented a colonial-era peak of recognition of Congolese
There was more production of colonial films and photos during the decade than ever before as the Ministry of Colonies’ information office—Inforcongo—stepped up its efforts to promote and defend Belgian overseas rule both at home and abroad. The Leopoldville administration’s Congopresse photo agency, created in 1947, produced volumes of visual documentation that were sent to the Ministry of Colonies in Brussels for editing and dissemination. The administration largely controlled images that circulated about colonial rule, and it was only after the Congo’s independence that non-governmental press agencies really began to photograph and film on the ground there. The number of Belgians who traveled to the Congo was never large as authorities exercised tight controls not only over the movement of Africans, mentioned earlier, but also over the mobility of whites. In addition to administrative controls over travel and settling in the colony, it was expensive to send journalists there, and because the Ministry of Colonies provided copy for press releases, film clips, and photographs to news outlets at virtually no cost, this was further disincentive for independent journalism. This led to in retrospect odd situations such as the socialist and in theory anti-colonialist newspaper *Le Peuple* running photographs of colonial scenes shot by photographer Henri Goldstein, who worked for Inforcongo. For news outlets, the Ministry of Colonies made it worth their while not to expend their limited resources to send journalists all the way to the Congo, with one result being that newspaper articles, television reports, and other press accounts reflected the official pro-colonial line. This also meant that independent news sources did not build up their own archives of images, for example photographs of everyday life in the colony, or of Congolese political activity, and so forth.

Florence Gillet and Anne Cornet have traced how a long-established colonialist imaginary was sustained in photography through to the end of the colonial era. Photographs juxtaposed colonizer and colonized and in doing so contrasted the former’s civilization, dominance, and normalcy with the latter’s savagery, submissiveness, and exoticism. Official photos showed little about travel to and from Africa in order to omit the subject of distance and the emotional and physical distress it could cause. They also avoided indelicate topics such as sickness, old age, or métissage, that is mixed-raced unions and their issue. Instead official photography underlined harmony between blacks and whites, peace and order, work and productivity, accomplishments in the fields of medicine and education, and the comforts of city living in the colony’s (white) urban areas. This also pertained to motion pictures, discussed in chapter 4.
Continuities across 1960

Although the Congo crisis shocked, there were many continuities across the “divide” of 1960. Certain things continued as if the Congo had never achieved independence, meaning that in important ways decolonization did not “happen” around 1960 in Belgium, at least culturally. In the days leading up to the Congo’s independence, a cartoon in De Standaard showed a worker taking down a street sign that read “Koloniën Straat.” In real life, Koloniën Straat, or the rue des Colonies, kept its name, and the street signs remained.

Pro-empire commemorations continued year after year as former colonial settlers, CFS and other military veterans, and pro-colonial enthusiasts kept holding annual celebrations of empire, often at one of the numerous colonialist monuments that remained in place across the country. Over time, a number of such markers had been or were to be moved, but one could count on one hand the number of them ever taken down, either before or after 1960. Some monuments almost vanished into obscurity on their own, for instance the statue to Camille Coquilhat in a dark corner of Antwerp’s Koning Albertpark behind a pond and surrounded by thick foliage, both of which made it largely unapproachable. But this can be overstated, and we should not forget that monuments “concretize particular historical interpretations; in time, such memory grows as natural to the eye as the landscape in which it stands.” Memorials large and small, even such a modest one as a marker to colonial
Colonial pioneers
Location: Seraing, former maison communale
Inauguration: unknown
Funded/built by: unknown

This simple plaque sits high up on the northeastern side of the former maison communale in Seraing, a city at the center of nineteenth-century industry in eastern Wallonia, especially steel production. The plaque memorializes five men—Victor Crismer, Nicolas Hubin, Ferdinand Lamy, Jean Laubenthal, and Ernest Lenoir—all of whom perished in the Congo before 1908, that is to say during the “heroic” period of Leopoldian rule.

Victor-Oswald Crismer was an accountant who died at the colonial port city of Matadi at the age of 27. Lamy was a mechanic and locomotive fitter who joined the Compagnie du Chemin de fer du Congo in May 1892, at the time of the building of the Matadi-Leopoldville railroad. Lamy died along the railway route just a month and a half after arriving to the Congo, joining the many hundreds of European, African, and Asian workers who perished during its construction. One can gather from the plaque itself that these five individuals spanned a generation of young men from Seraing, each of whom found their way to central Africa for one reason or another, with Ferdinand Lamy (b. 30 August 1857) being born more than twenty years before Jean Laubenthal (b. 4 November 1877). Collectively, their deaths spanned some 13 years, from 1892 to 1905, and all died young, between the ages of 26 and 34. Most perished in different places: Crismer and Lamy in the port of Matadi, Lenoir in Lusambo in central Congo, Hubin in northern Congo on the Ubangi, and Laubenthal at Stanleyville (Kisangani). Other than these scant facts, the historical record speaks little to us across the years about these five early agents of colonialism.
pioneers in Seraing, remained in place, and by doing so framed people’s everyday lives throughout the post-1960 era.

The removal of a monument to Baron Francis Dhanis, dismantled completely in 1954, is revealing in its rarity. Dhanis was born in 1861 to a Belgian mother and Irish mother in London and spent his formative years in Scotland. Following higher education in Belgium he joined the military, then the CFS Force publique, and he eventually played a role so significant in the Congo “Arab wars” of the early 1890s that he was made a baron. His 1894 return to Antwerp following those campaigns was triumphal, and he instantly became a well-known figure, his story to be retold for years as a heroic example of the civilizing mission. Dhanis returned to the Congo twice, most notably to play a key role in the suppression of a Force publique revolt in 1897. Back in Belgium, he died in November 1909, of septicemia, only 47 years old. After his death, friends and admirers mobilized to memorialize him, including renaming an Antwerp street Baron D’Hanislaan, a moniker it retains to this day. The Club africain d’Anvers-Cercle d’Études coloniales assembled a Comité exécutif du Monument Dhanis to build a large monument to him in a prominent site in front of Sint-Michielskerk on the Zuiderlei, called Amerikalei after 1918. The work, by sculptor Frans Joris, was financed by public subscription, and the committee needed just a few months to pull together the funds to build it. The large monument was inaugurated on 12 October 1913, proclaiming “Voor de menscheid” (For humanity). Dhanis, top and center, was depicted in uniform in a triumphant pose, holding a rifle aloft in his right hand in a semi-bellicose gesture. An African woman behind and to his left held up an infant in supplication, while the figure of an Arab in a turban, surrendering, is to be seen cowed before him, to his right. The scene was encircled by exotic plants. The monument was dismantled on 21 May 1954, and moved to the grounds of the nearby Colonial University in Middleheim (Antwerp), where it remained, apparently in pieces. Why? It had nothing to do with anti-colonial sentiment or a reconsideration of Dhanis’ history, rather it was simply due to construction for road expansion in order to accommodate increased traffic on Amerikalei, a major artery.

Coincidentally there was yet another public tribute to Dhanis that was removed, this one after 1960. The Grand’Poste in downtown Brussels for decades displayed an 1896 painting honoring Dhanis by J. Emmanuel Van den Bussche, located in the building’s entrance hallway. The tableau showed Dhanis arriving back to Antwerp after the Arab wars, with Governor-General Théophile Wahis presenting him to a gathered crowd, and Leopold II’s representative tendering him the title of baron. In the painting, Dhanis was followed by two Arab chiefs whom he had defeated and brought with him.
The 1908 annexation of the Congo
Location: Antwerp, Stadspark, on Rubenslei
Sculptors: Jules Baetes and Jan Kerckx
Architect: Emile Van Averbeke
Inauguration: 1911
Funded/built by: Antwerp Chamber of Commerce

This tall and slender four-sided bronze and granite memorial in Antwerp’s Stadspark, topped by a sculpture of an outstretched Mercury, draws the viewer’s eyes upward toward the sky. Two of its four sides bear different plaques but the same inscription, one in French, the other in Dutch: “In the presence of His Majesty King Leopold II the Chamber of Commerce of Antwerp celebrates the annexation of the Congo to Belgium. 6 June 1909.” The northwestern side bears a plaque showing Leopold II in profile, while a plaque on the southeastern side shows a caduceus, symbolizing commerce. The monument also bears the coat of arms of the city of Antwerp as well as a bronze star.

The inscriptions in bronze refer to a celebration of the Congo’s annexation that took place on 6 June 1909, so just several months after Leopold II turned the Congo over to Belgium, and just six months before his death in December 1909. The annexation monument shares several characteristics with other colonial memorials, such as being made of granite and bronze, its inclusion of the Congo star, and its commemoration of Leopold II. At the same time it is highly unusual in that rather than commemorating military men or calling attention to colonial “pioneers,” it is a memorial to commerce. Very few other monuments in the country find their origins in commercial
upon his return, and two Congolese children bore the fruits of their country. It was a representation on canvas of the civilizing mission, the victory over slavery, a connection with the dynasty, and the promise of the benefits to be had through the exploitation of the Congo’s natural resources, all in one scene. The defeated Arabs and the Congolese children, and the absence of adult African men and women who might resist, suggested there were no more threats in the Congo; the country was now open for business. The painting hung for decades in the Grand’Poste, an imposing structure built in 1892 and located at the place de la Monnaie in central Brussels. Then the building was gone: torn down beginning in 1966, the Grand’Poste was replaced by the uninspiring Centre Monnaie (1971), an administrative and commercial building. The removal of first the Antwerp monument and then the Grand’Poste tableau left surprisingly few commemorative traces in public space of this key figure. Beginning in 1958, Dhanis’ profile figured among several others on a large memorial plaque in the Tervuren Congo museum, and there are streets named after him not only in Antwerp but also in Sint-Niklaas, Tervuren, and Etterbeek. But there is no large, public monument to Dhanis, despite him having been hailed for decades as one of the greatest figures of Leopoldian and Belgian overseas action. The removal of the memorials to Dhanis are exceptions that prove the rule, namely that colonial monuments were not taken down, which revealed a lack of questioning of the country’s colonial history. Indeed, people generally maintained an overwhelmingly positive view of their action in central African during the colonial era as the dominant post-1960 narrative remained one in which Belgians had “done good” in a part of the world that had been terribly backward before their arrival. One journalist, reviewing publications by the Tervuren Museum in the 1960s, discussed how museum director Lucien Cahen was extending the museum publishing’s ambit to embrace works of history, including previously unpublished manuscripts, for instance diaries.
by Belgian explorers and colonial administrators. He lamented the current situation, that of the Congo of 1965, asking the reader to think “about the pitiful situation where lies the country that the pioneers brought out of savagery.”

Literature and colonialism

Just as decolonization did not “happen” in the realm of monuments, when it comes to literature, to consider 1960 as some kind of sharp dividing line makes limited sense. Works produced before Congo’s independence did not simply disappear—take Léon Debertry’s *Kitawala* (1953) as one example, or even more significant, Gerard Walschap’s *Oproer in Congo* (1953). As its title suggests, Walschap’s award-winning 1953 book, based largely on a 1951 visit to the Belgian colony, hardly painted a rosy picture of the colonial situation. Nonetheless, it was well-received and continued to receive praise well into the post-colonial era. Such “colonial” works of literature remained available even if, as scholar Philippe Delisle states, some became more difficult to find after 1960, including *Tintin au Congo*. Other “colonial” books and publications were being written at the time of the Congo’s independence, but only appeared afterward, and of course the experiences upon which people drew for their writing in the years after 1960 often straddled the political divide that that year represents. What is more, poetry, fiction, *bandes dessinées*, novels, and other literary creations are never exclusively “colonial” because innumerable influences inform their production and reception, for instance international and global exchanges that led “colonial” issues to become immixed with related ones, for instance immigration and multi-culturalism.

All this said, it is clear that “colonial” works held a marginal position in the realm of Flemish- and French-language Belgian literature. Even if well-known works with colonial connections such as *Tintin in the Congo* became harder to obtain, or perhaps dropped in popularity, they remained in circulation and did not disappear overnight. The same is true of Georges Simenon’s few works that touch on African issues, his “African Trio.” Simenon is best known for his Maigret detective novels. But this prolific writer, among Belgium’s best-known and probably its most translated, also wrote what are known as his *romans durs*, those that do not follow inspector Maigret. Among these are *Le Coup de Lune* (1933), *45° à l’ombre* (1936), and *Le blanc à lunettes* (1937), all three of which connect to Africa and colonial themes. Simenon was not writing to promote overseas colonialism. Indeed, he harbored serious doubts about it, and sometimes wrote frankly and unflatteringly about the “colonial situation.” For instance, in *Le blanc à lunettes*,
he clearly lays out how sexual relations between whites and blacks were a commonplace in the Congo, which Belgians frowned on at the time.

With Congo’s independence, “Flemish literature on the Congo underwent a drastic change. The rioting, which broke out after independence clearly made a big impression on writers.” Some chose to ignore the horrible loss that had occurred, burying the trauma under positive depictions of life in the Congo before 1960. In contrast, a number of other works that emerged soon after the *dipenda* (independence) used the violence of the period as backdrop for considerations of the experience of loss; these include Jan van den Weghe’s *Djiki-Djiki* (1972), Paul Bordeel’s *Ik blanke kaffir* (1970), and André Claeys’ *Het duistere rijk* (1963) and *Zonen van Cham* (1964). As noted, pre-1960 works influenced by colonialism continued to circulate, for instance *Lijmen* by Willem Elschot, in which Elschot uses the protagonist’s reference to colonial business to comment on the domestic situation within Belgium. There is also the work of pro-Flemish poet Gaston Burssens (1896-1965), who was anything but a “colonial” writer, but some of whose texts made subtle connections with overseas expansion, such as when Burssens used the CFS and the Belgian Congo as a metaphor for oppression, thereby tying an aspect of colonialism into debates on the oppression of Flemish.

Many other works published soon after independence revealed a Eurocentric bias and the open wounds of the shock of 1960, for example Daisy Ver Boven’s *De rode aarde die aan onze harten kleeft* (1962). “Most authors were eyewitnesses who were caught up in the violence themselves. In their novels the blacks are drawn in a very negative light while the whites are seen as the innocent and defenceless victims of raw racial hatred.”

Perhaps the best known author who drew on his colonial experiences wrote in Dutch, the late Jef Geeraerts. Like fellow writer André Claeys, Geeraerts was a former colonial administration, and he stands out because of the complexity and shock value of his novels. Geeraerts’ autobiographical cycle *Gangreen*, beginning with *Black Venus* (1967), was based on his experiences circa 1956-1960, and revealed the depravity and degeneration of colonial rule. Geeraerts’ protagonist, channeling the author’s own experiences, is oversexed and sodden with drink through much of the novel’s action. The novel manages to criticize religion in all sorts of ways, refuting the image Belgium’s colonial action as civilizing, Catholic, and uplifting supposedly benighted Congolese. Geeraerts shares in the trauma of decolonization and what followed in *Ik ben maar een neger* (1962) and *Het verhaal van Matsombo* (1966), depicting among other scenes the brutal murder of a Flemish priest in a street in Bumba. But he also has as protagonist Grégoire Désiré Matsombo, an African who criticizes blacks and whites, and both Belgian colonial rule
and African independent rule that followed. Geeraerts elevates Matsombo to the position of protagonist, but also mocks him by making him appear vain and shallow. These early works by Geeraerts made a big splash, with *Gangrene* at first winning a major national prize before the controversy over it provoked the government to seize and investigate the novel.

**Conclusion**

For several years after the Congo’s independence in 1960, people in Belgium followed events in central Africa closely as the end of empire unfolded as a trauma. Dutch and French speakers were united in their shock at the turn of events in the former colony. The great extent to which the Congo crisis was covered in the press and shook the nation revealed that there was a significant awareness of colonial affairs, and that a certain “colonial culture” had developed to a perhaps surprising degree by 1960. Belgian identity had never been profoundly marked by an avid colonialist spirit, but both Dutch- and French-speaking Belgians had grown to take pride in what were commonly believed to be incredible achievements in central Africa that had brought Christianity, infrastructure, modern technologies, and civilization to backward, benighted peoples. This came to an end beginning on 30 June 1960. Of course, we do not know how Belgian identity would have changed had things turned out differently, that is if the Congo had remained a colony after 1960. Perhaps the export of the country’s language disputes to central Africa would have accelerated. Contrariwise, it might be the case that the colony’s loss eliminated a common project around which Flemish and French speakers would have continued to unite, in a fashion. What is clear is that a common thread ran through memories of empire in both of the country’s main language communities after 1960: the experience of the 1950s. That decade came to have an outsized influence on people’s memories as Belgians of all backgrounds looked back on a golden age that preceded the ignominious end of the colonial endeavor.