The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock
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Chapter 5
A New Generation, 1994-2010

“Africa was my brother’s preserve, his fiefdom, and I’m not at all concerned with it.”¹ — King Albert II, 1999

“There’s an entire generation that wasn’t brought up with the Congo, it wasn’t mentioned in our history classes and that explains the strong urge to rediscover this country.”² — David Van Reybrouck, 2010

“Some made some mistakes. Progress in these distant lands, was it not ultimately a series of trial and error? But it is to decidedly lack critical thinking and intellectual honesty to place mistakes above successes.”³ — Mémoires du Congo et du Ruanda-Urundi, a publication of former colonials, 2016

The decade and a half between the 1994 Rwanda genocide and the fiftieth anniversary of the Congo’s independence witnessed renewed attention to central Africa and the colonial past. As earlier, however, other issues often predominated during this time, which largely overlapped the reign of Albert II (1993-2013). In 1998, Enzo Scifo and Franky van der Elst each garnered greater renown by playing in their fourth World Cup tournament on the national football team, the Red Devils. Scandals were important, most prominently one surrounding the botched arrest and imprisonment of serial killer Marc Dutroux, which rocked the country beginning in 1996.⁴ Three years later a dioxin scandal hit when it was revealed the government had known of the presence of carcinogenic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in animal feed, yet covered it up.

The world from the mid-1990s was a post-Cold War world, contributing to a changed relationship between Mobutu’s government and the West, including Belgium. The new status quo challenged Belgians less to reconsider their colonial past, and more their future as a united state. The Belgian presence in Zaire had been reduced to a very low level by the 1990s: by 1993 there were maybe 2,800 Belgians working and living there, which further declined to 2,500 by 2001, which was on the eve of an evacuation of even more Belgian citizens from the country. “By the end of the twentieth century, the former colony’s economic significance to Belgium had become quite marginal.”⁵ Guy Vanthemsche rightly points out that just as Zaire’s political, diplomatic, and economic significance to Belgium had declined by the early 1990s, so had
the former colonial power significance to Mobutu’s Zaire only increased in reverse proportion as Mobutu sought aid and prestige through his Belgian connections. Even though the former colony’s everyday significance to Belgium shrank, paradoxically, the colonial past loomed ever larger.

**Colonial memories and national identity(ies)**

By century’s end, Belgium had better come to terms with a longstanding issue, namely World War II and the question of collaboration, which at least opened up space for the consideration of other historical issues. Hugo Claus’ *Het verdriet van België* (1983), discussed earlier, made a splash because it broke the taboo of discussing wartime collaboration, a subject on which Belgians had generally remained silent after 1945. An unspoken myth had taken hold that collaboration was widespread among Dutch speakers, but much less so in the country’s south and among French speakers. The 1950 referendum on the *Question royale* reinforced this, as many more in Flanders than in French-speaking areas supported the return of a king tainted by suggestions of wartime collaboration with the enemy. What actually happened during the war, of course, was more complex. Some Flemish speakers did collaborate, but many vehemently opposed the occupier, and some joined the resistance. The country’s French speakers also resisted Nazi occupation, but there were of course French speakers who collaborated to greater or lesser extents, from prominent cases like Rexist Léon Degrelle, to borderline ones, such as comic strip artist Hergé.⁶

The issue of collaboration had weighed heavily on debates about identity, regionalism, and nationalist demands, especially by Dutch speakers, which was exacerbated when politicians stoked the issue to mobilize voters. Post-1945 negative views of collaborationism among Dutch speakers were tinged by the nagging belief that the associated post-war clampdown was a Trojan horse for the oppression of Flemish spirits. Overall, Belgians on the political right, whatever their native tongue, tended to view collaborators as slightly less morally objectionable, and amnesty for collaborators as more acceptable. The views of many Flemish shifted over time to where some tended to view collaboration less harshly—and supported amnesty more—than their compatriots in the country’s southern provinces. The views of the country’s francophone minority were more unchanging. One 2017 study concluded that, “French-speakers [were] more uncompromising towards collaboration and amnesty, while Dutch-speakers [were] less judgmental of collaborators during WWII and [were] relatively more favourable to amnesty.”⁷ Although unresolved, the issue was more out in the open by century’s end, allowing
for freer discussion of it. Inhabitants of Flanders, who in 1950 held more favorable views of the monarchy, had tended to turn more and more against the country’s ruling house, whereas the opposite was true among French speakers, whose allegiance to king and kingdom strengthened.

Questions about collaboration and about the colonial past were inseparable from those surrounding Belgian-ness, an identity that by the turn of the century had diminished to become quite weak. Some people, in particular francophone pro-monarchists, were reticent when it came to talking about the dark chapters of the country’s colonial history, fearing that doing so might weaken the monarchy, and thereby Belgium itself. Contrariwise, “the questioning of the country’s colonial past (...) enabled certain Flemish nationalists to criticize the role of the monarchy and the influence of the former French-speaking élite.” Indeed, exerting Flemish identity meant displacing Francophones from their historically central position; this could include attacks on colonial history because the francophone bourgeoisie and elites had predominated in the Belgian Congo administration and economy. Yet paradoxically, the more one dredged up the colonial past, the more one by necessity had to speak of a “Belgium” and people’s shared, national past. This meant the debate over colonialism in the 2000s held the possibility of rekindling the idea of “Belgium.”

The turn-of-the-century weeping and gnashing of teeth about the colonial past was not a phenomenon unique to Belgium, rather it is was one manifestation of a larger, paradoxical development, that of a Europe of diminished powers asserting itself by dwelling on its culpability for past misdeeds. Pascal Bruckner argues that self-criticism and apologies for a dastardly past have allowed Europeans to continuously foreground their centrality in history and in the contemporary world, even as Europe’s relative power has declined. Speaking as a European, Bruckner asserts that in the case of the loss of empire, “Decolonization has deprived us of our power, our economic influence is constantly decreasing, but in a colossal overestimation we continue to see ourselves as the evil center of gravity on which the universe depends.” Belgium, which had enjoyed the ability to “punch above its weight” during the colonial era because of its possession of the massive Congo, could now return to the global stage through a largely cultural move of reflection and repentance. Maybe Belgium, which had been breaking up since 1960, was in part sustained by engaging in a common project; not actual overseas rule, as in the past, but through a special mission of regret coupled with a renewed relationship with central Africa.

But did Belgians truly feel repentance toward their colonial history? After the 1998 publication of Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost*, many
commentators criticized them for not facing up to that past, especially the atrocities of the Leopoldian era, even though plenty of time had elapsed to allow for a full accounting, occurring as they had some one hundred years in the past. There is, of course, some truth in such accusations. For example, it is astonishing that in 1997, on the centenary of the Tervuren Museum’s founding, a new monument honoring Leopold II was inaugurated on the museum grounds, Tom Frantzen’s “The Congo, I presume.” That said, one must consider the context in which any consideration of the past would have occurred at the time. By the 1980s and 1990s, open divisions within the country made it more difficult to address the colonial past as one country.

The partitioning of Belgium has made it harder for the country to own up to its historical responsibilities toward the Congo and its neighbors. As the national consciousness fades along with the national institutions, so does the national sense of history and responsibility.  

Present-day issues impinged on historical reflection as the ongoing split with Mobutu and the continued decline in Zaire remained paramount to many minds. Any former colonial, or any Belgian for that matter, who read Lieve Joris’ account of her almost Kafka-esque incarceration and questioning at the end of her 1985 voyage to Zaire in Terug naar Kongo would be forgiven for concluding that the Belgians had indeed done a good job during the colonial era, and that decolonization was a loss for both Belgians and Congolese. When the former colony was dealing with such intractable problems, why dwell on issues from the long-distant past?

**King Leopold’s (and Lumumba’s) ghost**

A turning point arrived in 1998 when American journalist Adam Hochschild published King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa, which was quickly translated into French and Flemish. Reactions were mixed and strong, and the book placed past colonialism front and center in the country. Many admitted that there had been abuses during the Leopoldian regime but countered that Hochschild’s book exaggerated its negative aspects. “The book triggered contrasting reactions. (…) Some—in particular the former colonials—expressed indignation, contesting and delegitimizing this version of history and stressing the positive side of colonialism (…) Other Belgians welcomed the book as a revelation (…) In both cases, the emotion—as a response to infamy or unveiled truth—was
vividly felt. For both groups, the conflict between the two historical narratives was intertwined with concerns about the meaning of their identity.”

Why did Hochschild’s book have such an impact? Earlier works by Daniel Vangroenweghe and Jules Marchal had detailed the same abuses, as did Martin Ewans’ *European Atrocity, African Catastrophe: Leopold II, the Congo Free State, and Its Aftermath*, which appeared not too long after Hochschild’s book. In no small part Hochschild’s success was due to his engaging writing style. As one reviewer put it, Hochschild achieved “a vivid, novelistic narrative that makes the reader acutely aware of the magnitude of the horror perpetrated by King Leopold and his minions.” The book also arrived on the heels of the 1994 Rwanda genocide, Mobutu’s 1997 fall, and the soul-searching that these had caused in Belgium. Not only was the country the former colonial power in Rwanda, but its government had withdrawn all of its soldiers from Rwanda on April 10, 1994 (after several casualties), which was followed by the killing of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and Hutu moderates. The genocide then induced Belgium to disengage from Africa, leading to inaction there. The First Congo War took place 1994-1997, ending with Laurent Kabila’s accession to power and Mobutu’s exile and death in 1997, followed by the outbreak of a Second Congo War in 1998 and eventually Kabila’s mysterious assassination in 2001. News of all this was regularly brought to francophone and Flemish readers by a host of journalists including Eric de Bellefroid at *La Libre Belgique*, Axel Buyse at *De Standaard*, and above all Colette Braeckman, author and journalist at *Le Soir* who for decades relentlessly lived and told of the turmoil in the Congo.

Braeckman not only was a journalist and editor for *Le Soir*, she wrote for *Le Monde diplomatique*, published a blog, authored numerous books on central Africa such as *Le Dinosaure: Le Zaïre de Mobutu* (1992), and collaborated on related film projects. As Jean-Luc Vellut put it in 1994, the sum total of such reporting in the country’s media, “assures for central Africa an echo and a weight that this region does not find elsewhere in the world.” While Congolese continued with their struggles, in Belgium a commission investigated the government’s action and inaction during the Rwandan genocide. Even if Belgium during these years was actually less active on the ground in Africa, “the works of the Rwanda commission and what followed from them opened Pandora’s Box.” At the moment that Hochschild’s book appeared, the country was ripe for reconsideration of its past actions in Africa. This had not been the case years earlier, and when Ewans’ book appeared in 2002, it could not jolt the public as had Hochschild’s retelling of the story of CFS atrocities.

What astounded many readers of *King Leopold’s Ghost* was its author’s electrifying assertion that 10 million people, or half the population of the
Congo, had perished as a result of Leopoldian rule, a claim Hochschild made even though it was impossible to prove or disprove due to the nature of demographic evidence from the era. Critics ran with the number of 10 million, and it was reiterated repeatedly on television, in the press, in public criticism, and in academic and other publications, so much so that it became a widely-accepted figure despite being contested by academics and others, some arguing with statistics that it was a “totally inflated figure.” Only slowly have more careful efforts to treat population figures of the Leopoldian era shifted popular opinion, a task made difficult by the risk that by critiquing Hochschild or his figures, one might be perceived as an apologist for Leopold II.

Another spur to sales of King Leopold’s Ghost was Hochschild’s use of the term Holocaust, even though colonial rule in Congo was never genocidal. The French title of the book, Les fantômes du roi Léopold: Un holocauste oublié, left little to the imagination, and in the text the author drew parallels between Leopold II, Adolf Hitler, and Joseph Stalin. Hochschild’s critics pointed out that although deaths in the CFS might have been genocidal in scale, they were not so in essence or intent, and Hochschild himself later backtracked from his use of the term Holocaust without admitting its misuse. In an opinion piece criticizing the 2005 Tervuren Museum exhibit “Memory of Congo: The Colonial Era,” Hochschild took issue with an exhibit that addressed the loss of life during Leopold’s regime: “One wall panel at the new museum exhibit raises—and debunks—the charge, ‘Genocide in the Congo?’ But this is a red herring: No reputable scholar of the Congo uses the word.” Yet earlier in the same piece he upheld his linkage of Leopold’s regime with Nazi Germany by asking, once again, about the Tervuren Museum’s historical silence on the deaths of Africans under the CFS: “It was as if a great museum to Jewish art and culture in Berlin revealed nothing about the Holocaust.” Hochschild’s book and choice of terms were so influential that the terms “Holocaust” or “Congolese Holocaust” were often and rather carelessly used in subsequent years in innumerable book reviews, news articles, and even academic publications on Belgian colonial history. From such an interpretive standpoint, accusations that Belgians had forgotten their colonial past were particularly troubling because of the ethical implications, following on the imperative to “never forget” the Holocaust. This gave Hochschild’s book, in the words of one reviewer, “a particular ethical urgency.” Reactions in Belgium showed how by 1998 people in the country were well aware of the Holocaust: its use as a frame of reference resonated strongly. This contrasted with their ignorance about their own colonial past. The debate about Hochschild’s book indicated quite a bit about culture, public memory, and colonialism in Belgium, but also much about the great awareness of the Holocaust there and in Europe more generally by century’s end.
King Leopold’s Ghost was quickly followed by the publication of Ludo de Witte’s De moord op Lumumba (1999), which caused controversy not because it revealed Belgium’s involvement in Lumumba’s death; many were aware their country was at least partially responsible for the murder. As Colette Braeckman put it, “depuis quarante ans aussi, entre la Belgique et le Congo la mort du leader congolais fait partie de ces secrets de famille que chacun connaît mais dont, par bienséance, on ne parle pas.” (Also, for forty years, between Belgium and the Congo, the death of the Congolese leader was one of the ‘family secrets’ that everyone knew, but about which one did not speak, out of a sense of propriety.) Some did learn, or were reminded of this responsibility by de Witte’s book, but it made a splash by breaking a certain taboo on the subject of Lumumba’s death, and by accusing the government of assassination; that is, of deliberate, calculated murder. This is something seen more clearly in the title of the French-language translation that appeared in 2000, L’Assassinat de Lumumba. De moord op Lumumba was partly a response to Jacques Brassine’s successful Ph.D. thesis (ULB), defended in the 1990s, which had largely exonerated Belgium for involvement in Lumumba’s death. De Witte’s book did not totally reshape public opinion, but it, along with accompanying films and interviews on television, did “reopen old wounds” and awaken dormant emotions.

The attention paid to the period of Leopoldian rule and the era of Congo’s independence in King Leopold’s Ghost and de Witte’s book, respectively, is reflective of a trend, namely the overwhelming focus of scholarly and other commentary regarding Belgium’s colonialism being centered on the years before 1908 and those from around 1960 to 1965, with little interest in the longer period of Belgian state rule in between. Criticisms of Belgian colonialism and its vestiges in Europe tended to focus on only the most salacious aspects of Leopoldian rule, collapsing Belgian state colonialism into the period of “red rubber.” As Benoît Verhaegen rightly put it, we must not “télescoper les périodes en attribuant au colonisateur belge de 1950 les atrocités du système léopoldien,” (collapse the two periods together by attributing to the Belgian colonizer of 1950 the atrocities of the Leopoldian system) and he called on people not to conflate colonial rule in the 1950s with Leopoldian atrocities circa the 1890s. There also is the tendency to view the Belgian “system” in isolation without reference to other colonial regimes, or to idealize pre-colonial African societies and cultures. Considering the focus on Leopoldian atrocities and the assassination of Lumumba, colonial history is too often depicted as binary—colonialism bad, Africans good—whereas history is not two-sided but multifaceted.
An explosion of productions

The Rwanda genocide followed by Mobutu’s fall and then Hochschild’s and de Witte’s books in quick succession led to growing attention to central Africa and Belgium’s colonial past, which manifested itself in myriad ways. Just five years after the genocide, the francophone theater group Groupov, based in Liege, staged the epic five-hour work *Rwanda 1994*, directed by Jacques Delcuvellerie. The play starred Yolande Mukagasana, who had barely managed to escape the genocide with her life and who lost her entire family, including her three children. Performances first took place at the 1999 Festival d’Avignon and then the following year in Liege, Brussels, and Lille, confronting audiences in two European countries involved in the lead up to and response (or lack thereof) to the genocide to face this recent past. The play was then taken elsewhere, including Rome and Paris, and even Rwanda itself by 2004. *Rwanda 94* combined music, images, theater, fiction, and non-fiction in order to understand the incomprehensible: “le spectacle use de tous les possibles du théâtre pour mieux s’approcher de l’indicible d’un genocide.” (the show uses all that is possible in theater to get closer to the unspeakable of a genocide.)

It included long sequences of images of massacres. It is worth noting that when he was thinking about the audience for *Rwanda 94*, Delcuvellerie started from the premise that audiences would not know much if anything about central Africa. In his words, “le public n’avait quasiment aucun référent sur l’Afrique centrale, sur l’histoire du Rwanda et sur la complexité extrême de ces sociétés et de leur histoire.” (the public had almost no reference regarding central Africa, the history of Rwanda, or regarding the extreme complexity of these societies and their history.)

Other cultural productions followed. Internet sites dedicated to colonial history and issues took off, for instance the website for COBELCO, which was set up in 2000. In April 2000, the play *Bruxelles, ville d’Afrique* by Antoine Pickels, Jacques André, and Virginie Jortay (Groupe Kuru) took the audience through the capital city, tracing its colonial connections, for example in former headquarter buildings of colonial companies. The year 2001 witnessed a number of related expositions: the exhibit “Notre Congo” in Liege; the ExitCongoMuseum exhibit at Tervuren Museum (discussed below); and an exposition about the career of museum director Frans Olbrechts at Antwerp’s Ethnographic Museum, curated by Constantine Petridis. These kinds of exhibits were anything but controversial. African suffering, including in Rwanda, was not the only subject. A certain renewed focus on whites who suffered during and after 1960 because of their flight from central Africa also emerged. An example is Flemish public broadcast journalist Peter Verlinden’s
Weg uit Congo: Het drama van de kolonialen, which sought to bring to life the drama of the July days of 1960, when settlers in the Congo became “vluchtelingen”—refugees in what had for them become their new home. Reflections on the colonial past and its aftermaths emerged in new film and television productions. As he was to do several times in the 1990s and early 2000s, documentary filmmaker Thierry Michel tapped into a larger francophone audience with a film centered on the Congo after colonialism. His documentary Mobutu, roi du Zaïre emphasized the role of the individual by documenting Mobutu’s decades of misrule. Michel followed this enthralling figure from Mobutu’s 1965 seizure of power through to his death, including footage from surprisingly candid conversations with the dictator. Another Belgian film director, Francis Dujardin, produced the touching Boma-Tervuren: Le voyage, about the deaths of Congolese Ekia, Gemba, Kitoukwa, M’Peia, Zao, Sambo, and Mibangé at the 1897 colonial exposition in Tervuren, suggesting that some were not as unaware of this tragic past as many observers of Belgium claimed. In 2000, Haitian director Raoul Peck released Lumumba, a tour de force of the tragedy of decolonization that at the same time in its final scenes expressed hope in a post-Mobutu future. VRT’s Canvas channel produced the mini-series “Kongo” in 2002, which focused on the life of planters in the colony. Hochschild’s book made a reappearance of a sorts in 2004 in the form of Briton Peter Bate’s film Congo: White King, Red Rubber, Black Death, a British production shown on BBC Four in February 2004. It was brought to Belgium and shown on RTBF and VRT in April of that year, the RTBF version being followed by a debate; the film and debate on RTBF attracted 145,200 and 113,900 viewers, respectively. The film, which depicted a mock trial of Leopold II, followed Hochschild’s lead by drawing explicit comparisons between Leopold II and Hitler. Foreign headlines announced “Belgian fury” at the film’s showing, but in truth it was the Belgian government more than ordinary people that denounced the film, with Foreign Minister Louis Michel calling it “partisan” and “one-sided.” As with the Lumumba commission, discussed below, some Flemish nationalists took advantage of this new flare-up to attack the Belgian state and the monarchy.

Sad chapters of the past also lent art a renewed subject, namely colonialism’s last years and the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. Luc Tuymans’ reflections on Lumumba’s murder were shown in “Mwana Kitoko: Beautiful White Man” from November 21 to December 23, 2000, at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York, and then again in the Belgian pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale. His paintings of Baudouin (Mwana Kitoko) and Lumumba juxtaposed the leaders and their actions in an almost accusatory way, calling
attention to the young king’s complicity in the prime minister’s downfall and assassination, prefiguring the conclusions of the Lumumba commission that would release its findings the same month the Venice Biennale closed.

The Lumumba Commission

The turn of the century witnessed a minor settling of accounts, which fit a larger pattern of European apologies for past misdeeds, from Germany’s apologies and reparations for the Holocaust to French recognition of its role in the same, to repeated European apologies for colonialism. In April 2000, Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD, Liberals) apologized for Belgium’s role in the Rwanda genocide. Verhofstadt, who had been in charge of a 1996-1997 parliamentary commission of inquiry (in the Senate) on Belgium and the genocide, traveled to Rwanda for its sixth anniversary where he publicly assumed “the responsibility of my country, the Belgian political and military authorities.” There were other turn-of-the-century manifestations of a continuing interest in the legacy of colonialism, for example, considerations of what remained of colonialism’s successes, forty years after independence. Unlike earlier and later celebrations of Congo’s independence, however, there was no visit by the king in 2000, nor even by the prime minister. Instead, Laurent Kabila had to content himself with the company of Foreign Minister Louis Michel. As at other moments, Michel’s visit was not without controversy: criticisms of Congo’s human rights record and the Yerodia affair—where the Belgian government issued an arrest warrant for the Congolese foreign affairs minister, Abdoulaye Yerodia Ndombasi—made the foreign minister’s stopover anything but comfortable.

Verhofstadt’s apology was followed by a parliamentary inquiry into Lumumba’s murder, sparking a long debate whose presence in public life was accentuated by other developments. As noted, Belgium issued an arrest warrant in 2000 for the Congolese foreign minister; in 2001 the government ordered the trial of four Rwandans for their role in genocide; and in 2004, Congo president Joseph Kabila (Laurent Kabila’s son) spoke before the Belgian parliament, and was surprisingly positive about the colonial era, folding the story of white missionaries, colonial functionaries, and CFS pioneers into the history of his country.

But back to 2000. Although there was a “broad national consensus” in favor of the parliamentary commission, it did not arise merely out of a general will to face the past but because of the conjuncture of de Witte’s book and the politics of the moment. The spring 1999 dioxin scandal helped lead to the coming to power of the Flemish Liberals or Open VLD (Open Vlaamse
Liberalen en Democraten), under Verhofstadt, who now as prime minister led a coalition of Flemish and francophone liberals, socialists, and greens. This not only had Liberals lead a government for the first time since 1938, it put the Christian Democrats out of power for the first time since 1954; it had been leading figures of the Christian Democrats who had been involved or at least implicated in the events of 1961 in the Congo. Foreign Minister Michel pivoted the nation’s foreign policy toward central Africa, saying that, “Belgium has a heavy responsibility regarding the African continent.”53 He recognized the complexity of issues there, but did not let this deter him from engagement, and his April 2000 visit to the Congo was the former colonial power’s first official state visit in nearly 12 years.54 When Belgium took over the rotating presidency of the European Union Council, Verhofstadt’s government made plain it would make central Africa a priority.55

In short, the parliamentary commission on Lumumba’s murder led to an official yet somewhat vague recognizance of the country’s role in Lumumba’s death.56 The commission’s work has been criticized from many angles, for example for not giving enough credence to oral testimonies. Membership in the commission was comprised of both experts appointed by parliament and political members. A book based on its work that appeared in 2004 did strange work in the sense that in writing it, the commission acted less as independent, impartial historians reconstructing events of the past and more as judge and jury, seeking to prove or disprove Belgium’s innocence. In the end it was the political members rather than the experts who pushed for the recognition of Belgium’s “moral responsibility.”57 The commission did take strides toward a public and official coming to terms with Lumumba’s murder, and although it split the difference between recognizing the country’s responsibility and absolving the government of the time, it did conclude Belgium had a “moral responsibility” in Lumumba’s death. Another result was an additional apology, one of many emanating from Western countries around the turn of the century, this one in 2002 from Foreign Minister Michel. Less of a blanket apology, Michel recognized the responsibility of certain Belgian “actors” in the 1961 death, and offered his government’s sincere regrets.58 As Gauthier de Villers has pointed out, the apology by Michel, as vague as it was, was applauded by politicians across the political spectrum, and constituted a milestone. “Dans un pays où Patrice Lumumba, transformé en bouc émissaire pour une décolonisation ‘cochonnée’, fut si exécré et diabolisé, le phénomène est impressionnant.” (The phenomenon is stunning in a country where Patrice Lumumba, transformed into a scapegoat for a ‘bungled’ decolonization, was so execrated and demonized.)59 By contrast, some politicians were shocked by Michel’s speech and continued to believe Lumumba should have been eliminated from the
political scene—if not assassinated—because of his politics and what he had done following independence. A group of ex-colonials met with Michel to protest the government’s decision to create a “Fondation Lumumba” as a kind of recompense for Belgian responsibility in Lumumba’s death.\textsuperscript{60}

The Lumumba commission report shows how the colonial past was used at times to influence contemporaneous debates. The fact that the report revealed at the very least neglect on the part of Baudouin to prevent Lumumba’s death opened up room for those critical of the monarchy to attack it. Unsurprisingly, there was less support for a positive view of state rule—but not necessarily a negative view of the role of missionaries in the Belgian Congo—among Dutch-speaking Belgians. As\textit{ Le Soir} put it,

\textit{au nord du pays, le rapport de la Commission Lumumba entraîne des conséquences imprévues: le fait que la responsabilité du roi Baudouin ait été mise en cause, qu’à l’époque le souverain ait pris des initiatives personnelles sans toujours en informer le gouvernement, est utilisé comme argument par ceux qui souhaiteraient revoir la fonction royale!} (in the north of the country, the Lumumba Commission report led to unforeseen consequences: the fact that the responsibility of King Baudouin was called into question—that at the time the king took personal initiatives without always informing the government—was used as an argument by those who wished to modify the royal function.)\textsuperscript{61}

The anti-monarchist extreme right-wing Vlaams Blok could use de Witte’s exposé and what followed to attack the monarchy and the state because de Witte’s book implicated Baudouin in the assassination.

Some institutions and individuals continued to hold the line on a positive vision of Belgian colonialist action, in particular former colonials, including those who ran the African museum in Namur. The centrality of the Tervuren Museum meant it had always overshadowed smaller museums of the Congo. Despite the overwhelming focus on Tervuren by journalists, scholars, and commentators, other museums linked Belgium to Africa and the colonial past throughout the twentieth century, including a small institution in Namur, the Musée Africain de Namur, largely organized and run by former colonials.\textsuperscript{62}

There had been different incarnations of the Namur museum of Africa during the colonial era, after which it continued on as the Musée Colonial de Jambes, before closing in 1977. It re-emerged in the mid-1980s, taking over the caserne Léopold in the city, and was inaugurated by Minister of Public Works Louis Olivier in 1985 as the new Musée Africain de Namur.\textsuperscript{63} Into the twenty-first century, the Namur museum remained Eurocentric and unabashedly royalist
and colonialist, with rooms named after missionaries like Scheutist Father Emeri Cambier and conquerors like Alexis Vrithoff, who fought in the “anti-slavery” campaigns and died in 1892, supposedly cooked and eaten.\(^{64}\) Former colonials donated much of Namur’s collections, and its triumphant displays of weaponry and related objects, many surely seized by force or under the threat of force, indicated a lack of reflection on the origins of the museum’s pieces.\(^{65}\) While the Tervuren Museum was preparing to launch the self-reflective 2005 “Mémoire du Congo” exhibit and looking ahead to a complete renovation, the Musée Africain de Namur was still evoking “la grande épopeée africaine,” or “great African epic,” and still calling Leopold II “le grand roi,” and lauding his “genius” and humanitarian actions in Africa.\(^{66}\) Nonetheless, the museum continued to function and receive some attention in the local press.\(^{67}\) One other local, rather idiosyncratic museum was one created to celebrate Albert Thys, the Musée du Général Thys in Dalhem, sustained by Georges Defauwes, who wanted to highlight native son Thys’ achievements.\(^{68}\)

Thus there was attention paid to central Africa right around the turn of the century, which during the years of Verhofstadt I (1999-2003) centered around responsibility, the Rwandan genocide, and Lumumba’s assassination. As noted, this reawakening to past crimes was not a strictly Belgian phenomenon. Indeed, there was also a certain coming to terms with the 1954-1962 Algerian conflict—which France only recognized as a war in 1999—as well as Germany’s recognition of the atrocities and genocide it perpetrated in German Southwest Africa; revelations in Britain about the Mau Mau uprising; and new findings on Australia’s sad record with Aborigines. Nevertheless, many recent studies on Belgium and colonial “guilt” treat the Belgian case, as it were, in a vacuum. Too many foreign observers continue to harp on Belgium’s supposedly complete lack of coming to terms with the past, as seen in the quote from Michela Wrong that forms part of the epigraph to this book’s Introduction.\(^{69}\) In fact Belgium has come some distance in facing up to its past, especially in comparison to some other former colonial powers. As mentioned, Belgium apologizing for its role in the Rwandan genocide and in Lumumba’s death can be seen as part of a larger story of European self-flagellation regarding the supposedly unmitigated destructiveness of Europe’s past.\(^{70}\)

The Tervuren Museum

The Tervuren Museum of the Congo has long had a reputation for being “dusty.” As one scholar described his impressions after a visit in 2003, “One could almost think that the Congo is still a Belgian colony.”\(^{71}\) The museum
focused on its scientific and educational goals and remained conservative and unreflective regarding the colonial past through the tenure of director Dirk Thys van den Audenaerde (1986-1999). But to argue that it “remained largely untouched for nearly a century,” as Debora Silverman puts its, “a virtual petrified forest of imperial triumphalism,” oversimplifies a more complex history. A museum and the visitor experience derive only in part from the physical building itself and its permanent displays, and also important are temporary exhibits, the context of the visit, and the visitor him or herself.

Viewed more comprehensively, the Tervuren Museum did change after 1960, albeit not dramatically. As discussed, it did maintain a colonialist spirit and acted as a vehicle praising Leopold II. The salle de mémorial remained in place, with its “Mémorial à la mémoire des Belges morts au Congo avant 1908” (Memorial to the Memory of the Belgians who died in the Congo before 1908) that included the names of the hundreds of Belgians who died in central Africa during the Leopoldian era. That room also included busts of famous colonial heroes and vitrines highlighting the fight for the colony, for instance one display case with memorabilia from Émile Storms. The museum continued to depict Congolese as anonymous types and the Congo as frozen in time.

Nonetheless, and as noted earlier, Lucien Cahen oversaw the renovation of several rooms in the museum between 1958 and 1977, and but a single room remained unchanged after the museum’s 1910 inauguration, the so-called Crocodile Room. Director Thys van den Audenaerde took advantage of the institution’s vast riches by participating in important itinerant exhibitions, a move that made sense considering the museum itself could only display a tiny fraction of its enormous collections, which numbered in the many millions of items. An example of the kind of shows that resulted was 1995’s successful traveling exhibit “Hidden Treasures of the Tervuren Museum.”

By the last decade of the twentieth century, Tervuren was playing host to painting contests that involved children and events like book launches for works on central Africa, in addition to organizing exhibitions to highlight past as well as contemporary African paintings. It continued as a research center, producing innumerable publications in many fields including archaeology, botany, ethnography, ethnomusicology, geology, history, ichthyology, linguistics, and zoology, among others. And this despite the fact it had suffered severe budget cuts after 1960 and continued with meager funding in the decades thereafter.

Since the turn of the century the museum has taken a number of major steps to address the colonial past, and the museum’s role in it, something that cannot be said of many other former colonial museums or other such institutions elsewhere in Europe. Director Guido Gryseels, who took over in
Émile Storms (1846-1918)
Location: Brussels, square de Meeûs
Sculptor: Marnix D’Haveloose

This white stone bust of General Émile Storms in Brussels remembers one of the very earliest of Leopold II’s “pioneers.” Storms was likely one of the oldest of the king’s adjutants, being almost of the same generation as Leopold. Storms embarked for central Africa even before the CFS came into existence, taking part in a fourth expedition organized by the Belgian committee of the Association Internationale Africaine (1882-1885), the supposedly neutral committee that Leopold II used as a front organization to set up his own takeover of territories in central Africa. Although Storms’ first term in Africa was a successful venture of exploration and conquest, he was recalled home in late 1885 and completed only one more term of work for the CFS before returning to military service in Belgium. Just eleven years’ Leopold II’s junior, Storms died nine years after him, in 1918, at the age of 72.

The inscription on the square de Meeûs memorial is straightforward: “Au Lt Général Storms 1846-1918, Fonda le Station de M’Pala Mai 1883, Étendit la civilisation sur la région au Tanganika” (To Lt. General Storms 1846-1919, founded the station of M’Pala Mai 1883, extended civilization over the region to Tanganyika). As with so many other such colonial markers, it emphasizes the role that extending “civilization” played in the country’s overseas conquest and rule, or at least in the self-conception Belgians developed about them. The bust was originally in bronze, and the square where it was located was originally called the square de l’Industrie, which was renamed square de Meeûs in 1946. The original bronze was removed at night sometime in 1943, during Nazi Germany’s occupation of Belgium, probably to be melted down.

Storms was also honored with a display case of memorabilia about him in the salle de mémorial in the Tervuren Museum, a bust in that same room, another
memorial in his hometown of Wetteren, in addition to having a “rue Général Storms” named in his memory in Florennes. Storms himself left other traces of the colonial era in his home country. Similar to some others who conquered the Congo, Storms became a collector, sending back from his explorations and encounters numerous natural specimens, African objects, even the skulls of vanquished foes.84 He himself carried home the skull of the Tabwa chief Lusinga, whom he had beheaded in December 1884 after defeating him in a conflict.85 Storms’ widow donated much of his collection to the Congo museum in Tervuren.

2001, set out to gain greater attention for the museum. That year, Boris Wastiau and guest curator and Congolese artist Toma Muteba Luntumbue staged the ExItCongoMuseum exhibit, an “examination of conscience” that reflected on the origins of the institution’s collections and the museum itself, even asking how its main building might be considered part of the museum’s displays.86 In 2003, the small-scale self-guided tour “A Historical Stroll” consciously placed several key displays and their items in the context of the time at which they were created in order to give the visitor a sense of the museum’s history.87 There was more open recognition that missionaries had forced Africans to hand over objects, that all sorts of items had been seized in military actions, and that functionaries had been ordered to collect items and send them back to Belgium, which oftentimes included the use of force.88 The museum’s staff foregrounded how the museum’s collections were tied to conquest and colonialism in the most intimate of ways, and that the museum would have to change if it was going to remain relevant in a post-colonial world.

The museum only continued “opening up” to a fuller recognition of its own colonial past and the need to incorporate Congolese voices into the institution. Scholars who worked through the museum to organize academic conferences tried to increase collaboration with African researchers by finding travel funding to bring people in from Africa. The museum started new initiatives to reach a broader public, including the country’s now much-larger Congolese population. One 2002 children’s Africa-inspired art contest involved 1,618 different school classes and drew 38,915 paintings and drawings.89 The museum organized a yearly Tervuren/Congo fashion show and festival starting in 2007.90 Most significant was the 2005 exhibit “Memory of the Congo: The Colonial Era,” spearheaded by Africanist and historian Jean-Luc Vellut and accompanied by a richly-illustrated edited volume by expert authors. Gryseels was supportive of Vellut’s independence when the latter took on the difficult task of organizing the exhibit, which was intended as a broad-ranging reconsideration of central Africa’s history.91
This support continued in the face of criticism along the way. Gryseels said at the time that he received “a flood of letters from Belgians who are concerned that the exhibition will besmirch the names of all those who dedicated their lives to the Congo’s development.” Critics on the left desired a more radical confrontation with the era’s atrocities, and Adam Hochschild censured the exhibit for what he said was a whitewashing of killing that had occurred on a genocidal scale. Critics on the right, meanwhile, exercised pressure by publicly and privately expressing fears that the exhibit might go too far to discredit the country’s past actions overseas. In the end, “Memory of Congo” navigated the rocky waters of public opinion with success, accomplishing a large, more Afro-centric exhibit in a prominent central space in the Tervuren Museum, giving African history its due by explaining European intervention—as significant as it was—as but one stage in a longer history of central Africa. The exhibit reached a large audience, bringing in some 140,000 visitors and garnering in the neighborhood of 400 press articles, in addition to being covered in dozens of radio and television programs.

Monumental memories

That Brussels and other urban areas, mainly Ostend, owed a great deal of their urban fabric to wealth from the Congo was a fact widely known by century’s end. The site of most traces was Brussels, and people including Antoine Tshitungu, Lucas Catherine, Erik Nobels, and the group CADTM (Comité pour l’annulation de la dette du tiers monde) had begun giving occasional guided tours of those colonial sites, for example the “Congolese” neighborhood of Matonge. Catherine even published a short book to take the reader on a “Walk in the Congo” by means of a colonial “tour” of Brussels. The book is explicitly anti-colonial, falling into the unhelpful good-bad dichotomous interpretation of history that has attracted so many. As John Darwin has commented, some scholars “convey the impression that writing against empire is an act of great courage: as if its agents lie in wait to exact their revenge or an enraged ‘imperialist’ public will inflict martyrdom on them.” In other work Lucas Catherine has fallen into another trap that many others have fallen into, namely confusing all of Leopold II’s architectural achievements in Belgium with his Congo profits, as discussed earlier. Many traces of empire are very small-scale, such as the colonial bric-a-brac for sale in various stores and markets, for instance at Eric Van Ghendt’s stand of antiquités in the Grand Sablon, where colonial-themed books and a sign urging to “Achetez Congo”
have been on display for purchase. Many such traces have changed over time, from antiques changing hands to the disappearance of the bar “Congo belge,” at 8, rue Ropsy Chaudron. Chéri Samba’s mural Porte de Namur, Porte de l’Amour at Chaussée de Wavre and Chaussée d’Ixelles at the entrance to the Matonge neighborhood was taken down for some time, before being returned. All this said, many if not most of these are locations that virtually no one would recognize as prima facie “colonial” sites today.

By the start of the twenty-first century, Belgians had done nothing to put up monuments recognizing the “dark” aspects of their colonial past, nor had they deliberately torn down monuments that celebrated colonialism. Indeed, the country actually added colonialist memorials after 1960, such as the 1970 Schaerbeek Force publique monument, plaques honoring the former Belgian African administration inaugurated on the Musée de la Dynastie in Brussels (today the Musée BELvue), and the Tervuren memorial honoring Leopold II by Tom Frantzen, “The Congo, I presume,” unveiled in 1997. One can compare this to France, which removed its last rue Pétain in 2013. In Spain, a “Law of Historical Memory” helped drive a removal of statues to Francisco Franco and a renaming of streets in that country, and in 2018 its socialist government revived plans to deal with the Valle de los Caídos, the massive memorial to Franco, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, and the quasi-fascist dictatorship that ruled the country 1939-1975. As noted, some Belgian pro-colonialist memorials have moved or disappeared completely, although not for ideological reasons but because of construction, for instance Antwerp’s memorial to Dhanis on the Amerikalei in front of Sint-Michielskerk. First relocated to the Colonial University in Antwerp, in recent years it reappeared in a small museum in Sint-Niklaas, southwest of Antwerp. Another example is the commemorative stone to Alphonse Lange dating to 1898 that was moved to a park in Wenduyne after the cemetery in which it was located was eliminated. A memorial to Hubert Lothaire was at some point relocated from Rochefort’s hôtel de ville to a nearby park. Such examples of moved or vanished monuments are rare. Many colonial-era monuments have in fact been restored. Gent’s well-known “Moorken” to brothers Jozef and Lieven Van de Velde was restored around 2004, as was the Colonial monument in the Parc du Cinquantenaire around 2006 and the Leopold II place du Trône equestrian statue in 2005, the latter in time for Belgium’s 175th anniversary celebrations.

Following the appearance of Hochschild and de Witte’s books and the showing of Bate’s film on television, attacks on public representations of colonialism in Belgium spiked. Beginning as early as 2001, there were multiple attempts to protest memorials honoring empire, particularly those to Leopold II, and
Alphonse Louis Lange (1865-1897)
Location: Wenduyne (De Haan), Lange Park
Sculptor: Hippolyte Le Roy
Inauguration: 1898, re-inaugurated 1936
Funded/built by: friends of Alphonse Lange

A commemorative stone to Alphonse Lange, originally from Liege, and who fought in the anti-slavery campaigns, was put up on 21 August 1898, just 12 months after he died. It later was moved to a park in Wenduyne today named “Lange Park” after the cemetery in which it was originally located was removed, sometime around 1930. Today it sits in the park that bears his name right on the edge of Leopold II-laan and almost directly across from the Wenduine Molen.

Lange fought in the anti-Arab campaigns under the command of Francis Dhanis and alongside other figures later memorialized in Belgium, including Aristide Doorme and Pierre Ponthier. Lange also explored the Ruzizi River and established two posts there. Struck by dysentery, he returned to Belgium on 29 July 1897 and died one month later, in Wenduyne.

The monument calls attention to the fact that he was wounded in fighting in October 1893, during the same fighting that saw Pierre Ponthier suffer a mortal wound. The stone is inscribed with the names of locations of battles, Lange’s rank, that he was an officer of the Force publique, and the places and dates of his birth and death. The bronze on the monument shows Lange in profile, wearing a kepi and uniform, bearing several medals.
The brothers Van de Velde from Ghent were both explorers, and both died in the Congo. Their native city’s monument to them can be found today in Citadel Park, and is known colloquially as “Het Moorken.” It was inaugurated in 1888, the same year in which Lieven died. A stone medallion attached to a rough-hewn boulder shows the two brothers in profile, and the whole is topped by a bronze sculpture of an African boy, Sakala, whom Lieven brought with him to Belgium for a time. The profile portrait of the men was originally enwreathed with a bronze garland, and there were various items set at the foot of the memorial, including a shield and two spears. Apparently these were removed (stolen) during World War I, presumably to be melted down, a fate that befell a number of other monuments as well. The Van de Velde brothers were honored in multiple ways, and the city of Ghent boasts several other memorials to the colonial era. A street was named after them, Gebroeders Vandeveldestraat, and the City of Ghent put up a plaque honoring them on their birth home, a house that was later demolished. There were busts of both brothers to be found in the MRAC (1887, 1888, by Jul. Lagae, cast by J. Petermann, Brussels). In Ghent, there is also a memorial to the city’s vétérans coloniaux—those who died in the Congo before 1908—which was inaugurated on 29 June 1936. It is a large star-shaped sculpture set in the ground, which includes numerous names, including those of the Van de Velde brothers. A close-by monument to Leopold II by statuary Géo Verbanck, from Ghent, was inaugurated 24 September 1955. The latter was put up by “la Foire de Gand” on the occasion of the 10th trade fair in Ghent, at whose inauguration were present
a representative of the king in addition to Minister of Colonies Auguste Buisseret.\textsuperscript{113} Both are located at Acht Mei Plein, northeast of Citadel Park, where in 2018 there was a substantial explanatory plaque in French, Dutch, and English.\textsuperscript{114}

\textbf{Hubert Lothaire (1865-1929)}

Location: Rochefort  
Inauguration: 16 September 1934\textsuperscript{115}

Lothaire was a leading military figure in the CFS. Although his campaigning was extensive, he is best known for the arrest and execution of Charles Stokes in 1894-1895 and the controversy that ensued.\textsuperscript{116} Stokes was an Irish-born merchant from Britain who became an arms trader in central Africa. Lothaire believed Stokes to be a trafficker in arms who was aiding the Arab-Swahili forces with which the CFS was struggling, and so he had him arrested. After a brief trial, Stokes was found guilty and executed by hanging. This provoked the “Stokes Affair,” a major diplomatic incident that only further tarnished Leopold II’s repu-
tation in Britain. The CFS actually brought Lothaire to trial in the capital, Boma, as a result. He was acquitted, a decision affirmed afterward by a Belgian court.

Lothaire’s acquittal paved the way for his complete rehabilitation, in the eyes of his compatriots at least. A few years following his death in 1929, a commemorative plaque in honor of him was inaugurated, with fanfare, at Rochefort’s city hall. It bore a quotation from Albert I that honored him while harkening back to an essential justification for Belgium’s takeover of the Congo: “Je rends un profond hommage à la mémoire de ce colonial de haute valeur, à ce chef militaire intrépide qui prit une part décisive à la destruction de la puissance des Arabes, trafiquants d’esclaves.” (I pay a profound tribute to the memory of this colonial of great worth, to this intrepid military leader who took a decisive part in the destruction of the Arabs, traffickers in slaves.) This quote and a similar if not identical bronze of Lothaire in
there were efforts to rename streets named after him. In 2004 the local chapter of the Flemish left-liberal party Spirit asked the city of Halle to remove a monument to Leopold II in the city park “because mass murderers do not deserve a monument.”

That same year a dramatic attack sawed a hand off of an African figure on Ostend’s large memorial to Leopold II. The activist group De Stoeten Ostendenoare published a photo of the severed hand on the internet, saying they would return it if a corrective plaque was affixed to the monument explaining where the money came from to build it and for the development of Ostend: from Congolese.

This act of vandalism—or of correction, depending on your view—was promoted on the internet, including in Pieter De Vos’ celebratory short film *Sikitiko: The King’s Hand*.

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**Leopold II (1835-1909)**

Location: Ostend, at the “Drie Gapers” archways on the Zeedijk

Sculptor: Alfred Courtens

Architect: Antoine Courtens

Inauguration: 19 July 1931

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*Leopold II monument, showing memorial plaques to Aristide Doorme (left) and colonial pioneers (right), Ostend, 2018*
This large monument inaugurated in 1931 by Albert I and Queen Elisabeth celebrates Leopold II as benefactor and protector of both the Congo and the coastal fishing community of Ostend.\(^{123}\) It is flanked on either side by a plaque bearing the names of Ostend colonial pioneers and by a memorial to Aristide Doorme (1863-1905). The latter calls Doorme a “Hero of the campaigns against the Arabs and the Batetela,” referencing the 1892-1894 anti-slavery campaigns and the 1897 Batetela revolt.

The Leopold II monument itself has been vandalized multiple times and restored each time, with one exception: in 2004, the group De Stoeten Ostendenoare protested the monument’s complete lack of contextualization by cutting off the hand of one of the Congolese figures. Initially unnoticed, the group had to call attention to their own vandalism, which was later highlighted in the 2010 short film *Sikitiko: The King’s Hand*.\(^{124}\) Despite pleas
from associations of former colonials, the city council decided against restoration of the hand and in favor of adding an explanatory sign, which was later replaced with a revised plaque. The newer plaque explains how the ensemble is a “typical example of colonial art,” and points out the fact that the king’s many investments in the city of Ostend were largely financed by his Congo profits. It also references the 2004 attack that left one of the figures without a hand and calls attention to the nearby plaque to Doorme and its colonialist rhetoric about the anti-slavery wars that “was used at the time, and sometimes still is, as justification for colonization.” The monument came under renewed scrutiny amid the mounting attention to the colonial past at the time of the December 2018 reopening of the Tervuren AfricaMuseum.

Leopold II (1835-1909)
Location: Halle, Koning Albert I Park
Sculptor: Arthur Dupagne
Architect: Guy Lefebvre
Inauguration: 28 June 1953
Funded/built by: Cercle Colonial de Hal and the Ministry of Colonies, among other sources

This modest memorial in Halle is one of at least fifteen public monuments in the country to Leopold II, the others being four in the Brussels-Capital area, two...
in Ostend, and one each in Ekeren, Mons, Tervuren, Ghent, Arlon, Namur, Genval, and Hasselt.

In 1948, the Cercle Colonial de Hal (1920-1966) formed an honorary committee composed of a number of prominent former colonials in order to build a monument to the memory of the colonial work of Leopold II. Orders were placed with sculptor Arthur Dupagne to cast a bust and with architect Guy Lefebvre to design a monument with a map of the Belgian Congo on it. It was inaugurated on 28 June 1953 during that year’s “colonial day.” Unveiled in the Albertpark in Halle, it faced a memorial to Baron Jacques de Dixmude and local colonial pioneers that had been inaugurated 20 years earlier.

The monument is of stone and metal, the latter being a large bronze bust on its front side, alongside a simple inscription of the king’s name and the inauguration date. Its reverse bears an outline map of the Congo and the words “ARBEID EN VOORUITGANG” and “TRAVAIL ET PROGRÈS”—“WORK AND PROGRESS,” the slogan of the CFS.  

As with others to Leopold II, the memorial in Halle has become a focal point of criticism of the king’s colonial reign. In 2004, a politician for Spirit Halle asked for it to be taken down because, as he put it, “mass murderers do not deserve a monument.” A compromise solution was an explanatory plaque, which was added in 2009, and which recognizes that harm was done to the Congo. It reads, in Dutch:

The “civilizing work” of Leopold II, the slogan for which was “Work and Progress,” was supposed to bring the Congolese people prosperity. The colonial rule of Leopold II, who ruled from 1885 to 1908 as king-sovereign over the for-
mer International Congo Free State, was then already intensely criticized. The rubber and ivory trade that was largely in the hands of the king took a heavy toll on Congolese lives.

The compromise explanatory plaque has not satisfied everyone. When this author last visited the monument, in May 2018, it had been defaced with spray paint that read suceur de bite, “cocksucker.”

Colonial pioneers of Halle
Location: Halle (Hal), city park
Sculptor: Dole Ledel
Architect: Mario Knauer
Inauguration: 29 May 1932

At the top of this cylindrical stone monument is a carved profile representing Jacques de Dixmude. On its side is a standing African figure, who looks up and back over his shoulder, almost lovingly, at the bald, mustachioed, and large head of Jacques that seems to hover above and just behind him. Like many African figures on Belgian colonial monuments, this nameless African figure appears to be nearly, or perhaps even completely naked. He stands in front of a short plant carved into the stone and carries what appear to be bananas or some other tropical produce, which sculptor Ledel seems to have conveniently used to cover his mid-section. As the figure appears to be African yet the stone color is quite light, almost white, some have labeled the monument “De witte neger” (The white negro).

Also inscribed on the monument’s sides are the names of Jacques de Dixmude, Albrecht (Albert) Ardevelde, Victor Baetens, and Felix Steens, labeled as “pionniers de l’œuvre colonial / pioniers van het koloniaal werk.” (pioneers of the colonial work.) The site is a centrally-located and sometimes busy city park in Halle between the train station and downtown. The day-long inauguration festivities at its unveiling provide an example of how these markers were national productions that acted to unify the French- and Dutch-speaking people of the country.

Other native sons of Halle who also died in the Congo are not honored on the memorial, including missionary Jean-Baptiste Brichaux, who went by the name Frère Mathieu, and Louis Nelis. Brichaux died in 1944, so after the monument’s inauguration. Nelis died in Leopoldville in 1919, thus years before the monument’s unveiling, but after 1908, meaning Nelis was not a “colonial pioneer” of the first hour. One local native who was a colonial pioneer yet who is not
Different groups have taken additional actions at other monuments. The activist group CADTM has pushed for the removal of a plaque commemorating Liege’s dead that pro-empire enthusiasts, including colonial veterans groups, installed in 1934. Those who have advocated for removal have argued that such historical markers are fundamentally untruthful:

Des citoyens, et notamment des jeunes, entrant dans le hall de l’hôtel de ville de la ville de Liège, ou allant de la rue du Trône vers la place Royale à Bruxelles, passent devant la plaque saluant l’œuvre coloniale ou devant la statue équestre de Léopold II. Des citoyens passent devant la statue de Léopold II érigée à Ostende en front de mer. Ils voient un Léopold II majestueux avec, en contrebas, des Congolais tendant leurs mains reconnaissantes. Seul commentaire: le rôle civilisateur de Léopold II pour libérer les Congolais de la traite des esclaves… Il est urgent de rétablir la vérité historique et d’arrêter de mentir à nos enfants, de mentir aux citoyens belges, d’arrêter d’insulter la mémoire des victimes, des descendants des victimes et des descendants des Congolais qui ont subi dans leur chair, dans leur dignité, une domination absolument terrible.

(Citizens, and notably young people, entering into the foyer of the city hall of Liege, or going from the rue du Trône toward the place Royale in Brussels, passing before the plaque saluting the colonial work or before the equestrian statue of Leopold II. Citizens passing in front of the statue

honored on the Halle marker is Ernest Courtois, one of the very first Belgians to travel to the Congo. Courtois was a pharmacist who departed for central Africa on 1 August 1883, nearly two years before the CFS even came into being. Assigned to go on the Hanssens expedition of 1884, Courtois fell ill and died of hematuria during the night of 25-26 June, 1884, near Basoko.137

When this author last visited the sculpture in May 2018, it looked as if someone had recently put red paint on the African figure’s head and perhaps elsewhere, and that it had been cleaned. Traces of the red substance remained.
of Leopold II erected in Ostend that faces the sea. They see a majestic Leopold II with, below him, Congolese reaching up their hands, gratefully. The only interpretation [possible]: the civilizing role of Leopold II to liberate the Congolese from the slave trade… It is urgent to reestablish the historical truth and to stop lying to our children, lying to Belgian citizens, to stop insulting the memory of the victims, the descendents of the victims, and the descendents of the Congolese who suffered, in their flesh, in their dignity, an absolutely terrible domination.)

City councilor Messaoud Barkat’s October 2006 speech asking for the removal of the plaque in Liege’s historic hôtel de ville met with strong resistance. Around the same time, protestors doused a statue of Belgium’s second king in Ekeren with red paint, which was repeated at least once, in November 2009; someone set up a Facebook page calling for its removal. In 2008, wearing a shirt that read “Leopold 2 – serial killer,” artist Théophile de Giraud climbed up on top of the Leopold II equestrian statue at the place du Trône and doused it with red paint. One June 27, 2010, someone draped, “un collier fait de mains coupées,” (a necklace of [knitted] hands,) over the same statue. De Stoeten Ostendenoare in 2013 attacked the bust of Leopold II in the Prinses Clementinaplein in Ostend with a red smoke bomb. When this author visited the bust in 2018, it bore marks of someone having tried to cut off Leopold II’s nose with a power saw.

Leopold II (1835-1909)
Location: Brussels, place du Trône
Sculptors: Thomas Vinçotte, Frans Huygelen
Architect: François Malfait
Inauguration: 15 November 1926
Funded/built by: Baron Carton de Wiart; Albert I; Princess Stéphanie; public subscription

This statue is probably the country’s most prominent monument to Leopold II. It comprises a large bronze equestrian statue on a stone base prominently situated in the place du Trône, right next to the Royal Palace and on the city’s inner ring road.

As unpopular as Belgium’s second king was by the end of his reign, within days of his death on 17 December 1909 a committee had formed to build a monument in his memory. The effort was officially announced in the Moniteur of 31 May 1914, and a national committee was put together. King Albert I gave 100,000 francs, and Princess Stéphanie, one of Leopold II’s daughters,
another 20,000. Other major donors included members of the aristocracy and military and prominent political figures. Mining company Union Minière de Haut-Katanga (UMHK), which of course owed its very existence to the deceased sovereign, provided the materials for the statue from the Belgian Congo itself for a bronze alloy of copper, tin, and perhaps pewter. Several colonial companies gave large sums, including the Banque d’Outre-mer (10,000 francs) and the UMHK (3,000 francs). All told, the public fundraising campaign was oversubscribed, collecting 625,000 francs by August 1914. The statue was inaugurated in a large ceremony on 15 November 1926, Saint Leopold’s Day, and also Belgium’s Fête de la Dynastie. Still, some in the public jeered and made fun of the statue, suggesting Leopold’s enduring unpopularity. The place du Trône monument was conceived, funded, and inaugurated as a national commemoration, but because of Leopold II’s prominent role in overseas colonialism, it unavoidably celebrated the country’s colonialism as well. Yet in appearance, the monument is not colonial, with a simple inscription that reads “REGI BELGARUM, 1865-1909, PATRIA MEMOR,” which could be translated as “the homeland remembers” or “the native city remembers.” (Leopold was born in Brussels.) Even if its appearance suggests no colonial connection, its placement in public space connects it to overseas expansionism and the civilizing mission. A bird’s eye view of the statue’s position reveals that it mirrors the placement of the statue of Godefroid de Bouillon—another equestrian statue, the first in Brussels—on the opposite, western side of the Royal Palace. Moreover, numerous parallels connect Leopold II and Godefroid across the eight centuries that separate them in time. Godefroid (ca. 1060-1100)—who some say was from Brabant—was a knight, lord, and eventually a duke, while Leopold II, who was from Brabant, was Duke of Brabant before ascending the royal throne. Like Leopold II, Godefroid led a crusade to fight against Arabs overseas, in his case
not in the Congo but in the Levant, and both men tried to expand the realm of Christendom, whatever their motivations. As Leopold II became roi-souverain of an overseas colony, the CFS, so did Godefroid become ruler of his own overseas kingdom, in Jerusalem.152

The place du Trône monument became iconic, reproduced in many forms over the years and becoming a symbol of Leopold II and empire. Because the fundraising for the memorial was oversubscribed, surplus monies were used to cast a similarly-sized statue that was put up in the Belgian Congo capital of Leopoldville (Kinshasa). Other duplicates were produced as well, including a smaller-sized reproduction in bronze in Elisabethville (Lubumbashi).153 The monument’s image or silhouette could be seen in innumerable photographic reproductions, which found their way into various publications over many years.154

Like a number of other prominent colonial monuments, the place du Trône statue is a destination to pay tribute to Leopold II and Belgian colonialism that in more recent years has become a site of protest. The monument was a site of pilgrimage for colonials throughout the state rule years, offering opportunities to laud the civilizing mission and sustain a positive image of a rehabilitated monarch.155 In 1960, after his dismissal as head of the Armée nationale congolaise, General Émile Janssens made a scene in front of the monument: almost immediately upon his return to Brussels, he visited the statue, placed a bouquet of flowers before it, and was widely quoted as having said, in reference to Congo’s new leaders, “Sire, ils vous l’ont cochonné.” (Sire, they have botched it up.)156

As at the Cinquantenaire Park Monument du Congo, pilgrimages to the place du Trône statue continued into the twenty-first century.157 One such commemoration took place after it was cleaned and restored for the country’s 175th anniversary of independence in 2005. On 24 June of that year, the shiny, refurbished statue was re-inaugurated in a ceremony organized by the Association des Anciens et Amis de la Force publique du Congo Belge, a group that annually pays hommage at the site.158

Numerous protesters have used the monument to contest the country’s colonial past. In 2008, artist Théophile de Giraud climbed atop the equestrian statue and dumped red paint on it.159 In 2010, a group placed a harness of crocheted hands around the horse’s neck to call the public’s attention to the mains coupées of the red rubber era.160 The monument was further vandalized in 2015 after the city proposed and then cancelled a ceremony to honor the king’s contributions to the Brussels area, and then once again in 2018, when someone doused the statue with red liquid.161 In all these instances, authorities have carefully cleaned and restored the statue so that any casual passerby or tourist would have no idea the monument had been defaced in the past.
Colonial pioneers
Location: Liege, hôtel de ville, salle des pas perdus
Sculptor: Théo Derocher
Inauguration: 24 June 1934
Funded/built by: Liege section of the Association des Vétérans coloniaux

Liege is known as having been the seat of the Prince-Bishopric of Liege and, later, for its role resisting the German onslaught at the start of World War I. Many visitors might not suspect the city also has connections with overseas colonialism in Africa, including having sent dozens of men to explore, fight, and die for Leopold II’s colonial venture.

This plaque “Aux 75 Coloniaux Liégeois Morts pour la Civilisation, 1876 — 1908” is located in the salle des pas perdus of the city’s historic, three hundred year-old city hall. It lists three columns of names of men from the city who died in central Africa before 1908. Similar to other such markers in the country, many of those honored died young and because of illness, for example dysentery, including the two best known among them, Lucien Bia (1852-1892) and Camille Coquilhat (1853-1891). Bia led several early expeditions, including one during which Jules Cornet discovered Katanga’s great underground riches, before Bia died of an unspecified illness of the liver. He was also celebrated in other memorials, including busts like the one on display for decades in the Tervuren Museum. Coquilhat was a central figure in the earliest years of European action in central Africa, serving alongside Stanley to explore and set up posts as of 1882, under the banner of the AIA. Coquilhat eventu-
ally rose to become Vice Governor-General, a position he held at the time of his death in 1891 of dysentery. He was born in Liege, and his mortal remains were repatriated to Antwerp where a statue by Comte Jacques de Lalaing was put up in 1895 to honor him.

The plaque in Liege was inaugurated during the traditional colonial festivities of the year 1934. Its unveiling was a moment to celebrate not just the colonial enterprise but also the city of Liege, and in his speech Mayor Xavier Neujean not only honored the men but also heaped praise on Wallonia, Liege, and the locals for their pioneering work. There were busts to Baron Jacques de Dixmude and Baron Tombeur de Tabora in the salle des pas perdus at some point as well, and a memorial to Colonel Louis Haneuse (1853-1938) was inaugurated in 1939 or 1940 at his tomb in the Liege cemetery. The funerary memorial to Haneuse continues to be a site of pilgrimage where former colonials go to lay wreaths.

In 2006-2007, there were multiple attempts to call attention to the plaque and to open debate about racism, the country’s colonial history, and the role of Liege and its citizens in it, one of which was spearheaded by the activist group CADTM. They were unsuccessful and the plaque remained. There was a thorough restoration of the salle des pas perdus in 2014, and the decision was made to keep the plaque, and it remains there today.

### Leopold II (1835-1909)

Location: Ostend, Prinse Clementinaplein
Sculptor: Thomas Vinçotte
Inauguration: pre-World War II; 1986 in current location

This bronze bust of Leopold II on a marble socle is one of several colonial-related memorials and monuments in Ostend. It was first displayed in Ostend’s “second” Kursaal, the large seaside center for theater, concerts, and other entertainment. German occupying forces destroyed the Kursaal during World War II, after which the bust was transferred to the Ostend Historical Museum De Plate, which itself moved locations several times over the years. In February 1986, the memorial was transferred to its current location, in a corner of the central and verdant Prinse Clementinaplein, just a few hundred meters from the large equestrian monument to Leopold II on the city’s boardwalk.

The bust at Clementinaplein is suggestive of how memorials to Leopold II have become sites of protest about the colonial past, and also how those protests have gained little traction. One 2008 attack saw the statue doused with red paint on November 15, St. Leopold’s Day, and just a few weeks afterward artist Théophile de Giraud mounted the Brussels equestrian statue of the king.
The bust was attacked with red smoke bombs by the group De Stoeten Ostendenoare, the same activists who severed a hand from an African figure on Ostend’s Leopold II equestrian statue. But again, in a statement the attackers suggested anarchist tendencies more than a desire to attack the kingdom’s colonial past or the city’s reluctance to face up to it.\textsuperscript{173} The bronze was subsequently cleaned, but one could still in 2018 detect traces of red paint, and close inspection revealed that someone had taken a power saw to Leopold’s nose to remove it from his face. The bust in 2018 was accompanied by an explanatory plaque, although it said nothing about colonialism.\textsuperscript{174}

The memorial to Leopold II at the Prinses Clementinaplein also highlights the leading role sculptor Thomas Vinçotte played in the commemoration of Leopold II and Belgian empire. Born in Borgerhout (Antwerp) in 1850, Vinçotte studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bruges, then in Paris. He eventually worked at the National Fine Arts School in Antwerp. His bust of Leopold II in the Prinses Clementinaplein is the same as other such bronzes in Auderghem and Parc Duden in Forest, among others. He aslo created the same form of Leopold II but made entirely of ivory that for years graced the \textit{entée d’honneur} of the Tervuren Museum of the Congo. Aside from these busts, his other major works to Leopold II and the Congo colony are the place du Trône equestrian statue, the Colonial Monument in the Parc du Cinquantenaire, and the sculpture atop the Arc du Cinquantenaire, completed with Jules Lagae.
Justin Malfeyt (1862-1924)
Location: Ostend, Leopold Park
Sculptor: Frans Huygelen
Architect: Paul Jaspar
Inauguration: 1929
Funded/built by: committee

Malfeyt first embarked for Leopold II’s CFS in 1891, where he ended up playing a major role suppressing revolts and extending the king’s control, particularly in eastern regions of the colony, where he became an administrator. Like many others, Malfeyt then continued in colonial service after Belgium’s 1908 takeover of the Congo, becoming Vice Governor General of the Belgian Congo in March 1909. It was during his seventh extended stay in the colony that World War I broke out, and after the victory of Entente colonial forces in eastern Africa, he was named royal commissioner for occupied territories in (former) German East Africa. He returned to Belgium in December 1919, retired two years later, and died in 1924.

At the center of the memorial is a bronze profile of Malfeyt in military uniform with a bronze wreath above it. Originally located further east in the park, it was moved because of the construction of Leopold II-laan, and today stands at the northeast entrance of Parc Léopold. The monument’s inscription reads:

Justino Malfeyt
MDCCCLX [sic] – MCMXXIV
QVI IN HORRIDIS AFRICAE REGIONIBUS
AUCTORE ET AUSPICE LEOPOLDO II
EGREGIAM OPERAM NAVAVIT
CIVES MEMORES
The reaction to all these attacks has been general indifference and official opposition, even if there have been press accounts including television and radio reports following some of them.\textsuperscript{180} The interest group “Mémoires coloniales” has tried to awaken debate on the colonial past, including the financial gain Belgium enjoyed because of the Congo, represented in Leopold II’s adornment of the capital and Ostend; with little effect. Mémoires coloniales has managed to broach the subject of possible reparations, but the concept appears to have no traction among the broader public.\textsuperscript{181}

It is telling that the various busts and statues that have been attacked have all been restored: the paint scrubbed off in Ekeren and Brussels; graffiti removed from the stele supporting Leopold II’s bust in Parc Duden outside Brussels; and so forth. One exception is the hand of the African cut off in Ostend, which has not been replaced, although one can argue this was because of indifference more than anything else. Over four years the short film \textit{Sikitiko}, which called attention to the attack and the monument, garnered only 5,670 views on YouTube.\textsuperscript{182} An anti-colonial tour of Brussels run by CADTM in September 2008 gathered a mere 70 people, some of whom were former colonials who had tagged along “soucieux de défendre les aspects positifs de la colonisation.” (anxious to defend the positive aspects of colonization.)\textsuperscript{183} When you consider that there are more than a dozen monuments to Leopold II still standing in cities across Belgium today—not to mention his tomb in the easily-accessible royal crypt in Laeken—the fact that there have not been more defacements is indicative of the apathy on the issue.

One group in Belgian society not indifferent to attacks on colonial monuments is former colonials. By the first decade of the twenty first century, the number of former colonials had declined to around 30,000. Year after year, different organizations of these former colonials organized public commemorative displays at monuments in various cities from Namur to Hasselt to Brussels to honor Leopold II and uphold a positive narrative of the country’s past actions in Africa. After the 2004 attack on the monument to Leopold II in Ostend, several pro-colonialists tried, unsuccessfully, to have it repaired. More than five decades after independence, many former colonials remained highly nostalgic, maintained stereotypical “colonialist” views, did

\begin{center}
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[The citizens remember Justin Malfeyt  \\
1860 [sic, b. 1862] – 1924  \\
Who in the rugged regions of Africa  \\
under the authority and auspices of Leopold II  \\
rendered distinguished service]  \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}
not question the colonial past, and viewed empire as something that was necessary since whites were dominant and black Congolese inferior and in “need” of colonial rule. The Congo’s decline only reinforced their belief that colonialism had been not only good but necessary. Former colonials kept their positive interpretation of history alive by means of letters to newspapers, social media, their own cercles coloniaux, and, as noted, ceremonies at public colonialist markers. One association, Mémoires du Congo et du

Leopold II (1835-1909)
Location: Ekeren, Markt, next to Sint-Lambertuskerk
Sculptor: Joseph Ducaju
Architect: Eugène Gife
Inauguration: 1873

This statue of a young Leopold II, already recognizable with his trademark beard, bears the simple inscription, “Aan Z. M. Leopold II, 7.7.1873.” It was the first public statue erected to honor the country’s second king, and considering it was put up years before the 1876 Brussels Geographical Conference even took place and more than a decade before the declaration of the CFS, it is no surprise that there is nothing colonial about its appearance. It was originally part of a town water pump, and was put up to mark the king’s brief August 1869 visit to Ekeren, just a few years after his ascent to the throne. Although not colonial in origin and form, the Ekeren statue has become “colonial” over time as people have used it as a site to protest the king, vandalizing it several times, including by dousing it with red paint. It has been cleaned and restored each time. In response, the communal government in 2018 took the decision to add an explanatory plaque about the king’s role in colonialism, even though the statue is not itself colonialist in appearance or origin.
Ruanda-Urundi and its Dutch-speaking division Afrika Getuigenissen, not only continued to propagate a positive vision of empire, it began recording interviews with Belgians, Congolese, and others to capture memories of the colonial era. A number of cercles coloniaux continued to put out their own publications, which, as can be seen in this chapter’s epigraph, gestured toward potential excesses but always adhered to a hard line that maintained colonialism was on balance a very positive stage in central Africa’s history. As noted, even though the number of former colonials necessarily declined after 1960, the number of associations that made up the pro-colonial “lobby” in Belgium actually grew. Their sometimes public but more often than not behind-the-scenes defense of an upbeat view of the country’s history in Africa helped underpin an enduring, largely positive view of Leopold II and Belgian imperialism.

**The colonial experience on stage**

There was an efflorescence of theatrical productions and collaborations in the first years of the new century. In 2003, director Raven Ruëll dusted off Hugo Claus’ *Het leven en de werken van Leopold II* (1970) for a production at the KVS, after which it was taken to Kinshasa and various theaters in both Dutch- and French-speaking Belgium, including to the Molière theater in Matonge and to Ostend by 2013. In 2005, Mark Twain’s “King Leopold’s Soliloquy” was performed, which touched a nerve; some requested it be banned. The Wallonia-Brussels community established the Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles à Kinshasa with both a theater and a library to foster exchanges and Congolese artistic production. Beginning in 2005 the Festival KVS<>Congo linked Belgium and the Congo through a growing collaboration. KVS members travel to Kinshasa to hold theater workshops, to work with Congolese actors and other artists, and to co-produce performances, making theater a contact point, including at festivals in Brussels and, since 2009, the festival Connexion Kin in Kinshasa. If one considers KVS’ connections to the Congo in context, it is clear that productions related to the Congo are just a fraction of what they do. Still, the KVS in many ways was on the forefront of bringing artistic productions regarding the diaspora, Congolese, Congo, and the colonial past to the Belgian public.

A breakthrough was David Van Reybrouck’s *Missie*, first performed in 2007. This monologue by white missionary Grégoire Vanneste, who was played by Bruno Vanden Broecke, was drawn from Van Reybrouck’s interviews with some fifteen missionaries in Kinshasa, Bukavu, Kamina,
Victor Roelens (1858-1947)  
Location: Ardooie, city park  
Sculptors: Frans Tinel (sculptor), Vuylsteke (mason)  
Architect: Lucien Lattrez  
Inauguration: 1952

Victor Roelens left Belgium for Algeria in 1880 to join Cardinal Lavigerie’s White Fathers. He was ordained a priest by Lavigerie in 1884, traveled to eastern Africa in 1891, and from there continued on to the eastern Congo. In east Africa he was for a time a companion of Alphonse Jacques (later Baron Jacques de Dixmude) as well as of Frenchman Captain Leopold Louis Joubert, as those two soldiers combatted slaving in Africa. In 1893, Roelens founded Baudouinville or Bouwdewijnstad (today Kirungu) in eastern Congo, and two years later became the first bishop in the CFS. He was a tireless missionary, spending the vast majority of his life in the Congo. He died there in 1947 at the age of 89.

This bronze statue to Roelens’ memory was put up quickly. Indeed, the inscription on the back of the monument reads, “First stone dedicated by Monseigneur Lamiroy, placed by Minister Wigny, 16-9-47,” indicating a date little more than a month after Roelens died on 5 August 1947. Today the statue sits in Ardooie’s small city park in the center of town. It was originally located in a more prominent position on the Marktplein next to Sint-Martinuskerk, but was moved to its present location in 1998-1999, where it is visible to passersby and drivers moving along Mgr. Roelensstraat, another hometown honor to the churchman.

The statue emphasizes Roelens’ work as a founder and missionary, depicting him planting a cross on a globe that bears an outline map of Belgium’s African territories. The inscription reads, “Monseigneur Victor Roelens, White Father, Vicar Apostolic of the Upper Congo, First Bishop of the Belgian Congo, Roman
and elsewhere in the Congo, men who collectively had spent many years in Africa. Missie lets the missionaries speak for themselves. Father Grégoire touches on topics including missionary education, personal choices, the call to service, travel to and from Belgium, and the rough conditions of living in the Congo: no electricity, bad roads, corruption, disease, insects, and sometimes terrible food. The monologue conveys confidence and faith, while also revealing moments of self-doubt. Criticism from the missionaries also emerge: about the materialism of life in Belgium; about the attitudes of NGO workers in Africa; and about the terrible violence of the 1990s under Laurent Kabila and Rwanda’s Paul Kagame, including rape, pillage, mutilations, and murder.

Overall, Missie presented a view of missionary action during and after the colonial era from the vantage point of missionaries, and as such it was a sympathetic portrayal of both the mission civilisatrice and proselytization in Africa specifically. What shocks in Missie is how, despite years living in Africa, the missionaries who speak through Father Grégoire tell no stories of personal, close interactions with Africans. When Grégoire speaks of the importance of camaraderie and friendship, he refers to friendships with white European missionaries, not their charges. This is resonant of the analysis of Bambi Ceuppens, who traced the distance separating not only missionaries but also administrators and other colonials from those over whom they ruled. Absent from Vanneste’s monologue is any self-questioning about his fundamental mission, or self-doubt as to the Christian presence in central Africa, or reflections on the connection between imperialism and missionizing, or praise for African cultures.

Missie was a success that was well-received by both the francophone and Flemish press. “Het stuk dat vertolkt werd door Bruno Vanden Broecke kreeg niet alleen een belangrijke prijs, maar werd ook laaiend positief ontvangen door pers en publiek.” (The play, which was performed by Bruno Vanden Broecke, not only won an important award, but also received wildly positive responses from the press and the public.) The play garnered Van Reybrouck the honor of being named laureate by winning the honorary Arkprijs van het Vrije woord, and the play went on to be performed elsewhere, for instance as part of the Festival Theaterformen in Braunschweig, Germany, in 2010.
De Deken, born in Wilrijk in 1852, became a Scheutist missionary, embarking for western China in 1881 where he explored and traveled through Tibet with Prince Henri d’Orléans—great grandson of Louis-Philippe of France—and Frenchman Gabriel Bonvalot. After returning to Belgium he was told to go to the Congo, and he made two stays there in the 1890s, during the second of which he died of fever, at Boma, in March 1896.202

Within a few short years of De Deken’s death, an Antwerp committee made up of local dignitaries organized the funding of a monument to him, which was erected on the Bist, the central square of Wilrijk. The monument was located on the Bist itself for a century before being moved across the street to a new yet very close-by location facing the Bist, just steps from its original location. As in the past, the Bist remains today a central location between the city’s main shopping zone, the town hall, the police department, and several banks.

For more than a century the statue was left to explain itself. The bronze sculpture shows De Deken standing and “baptizing a native” who kneels in intense prayer at his feet.203 The monument’s inscription reads, “Father De Deken, Missionary, Explorer in Tibet, Pioneer of the Congo, 1852 1896.”

Due to construction work on the Bist and the surrounding streets, the statue was taken down around 2009, and then in 2014 came under fire. Antwerp resident and activist Seckou Ouologuem claimed that the statue’s depiction was offensive to many groups in Antwerp and that it should either be removed to a museum, or at the very least accompanied by an explanatory plaque. One journalist claimed that part of the statue’s offensiveness was that it depicts De
The positive portrayal of the Belgian missionary in Missie reflected not a renewed interest in religion—as the play’s protagonist put it, “en Belgique […] les églises sont vides et les prisons sont pleines.” (In Belgium […] the churches are empty and the prisons are full.)—but a nostalgia for missionaries and their work.\textsuperscript{207} Already in 2005, a VRT/RTBF poll to choose “The Greatest Belgian” saw missionary Pater Damiaan (Jozef De Veuster) come in first in the Flemish program and third with RTBF, besting Andreas Vesalius, Hergé, Georges Simenon, and Peter Paul Rubens. A further sign of such fond memories was Annemie Struyf’s documentary “In God’s Name,” which tracked down some of the very last of the Flemish female missionaries.\textsuperscript{208} This is not to say Missie escaped criticism, because it provoked a public exchange on the historical and ongoing effects of missionary activity. Didier Goyvaerts, a professor at Universiteit Antwerpen and Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), called Van Reybrouck an apologist for missionaries for having too often taken his informants at their word, sometimes quoting them and their justifications verbatim. Goyvaerts insisted missionaries were agents of oppression and domination.\textsuperscript{209} Goyvaerts was in turn dressed-down by Hilde Kieboom, president of the Community of Sant’Egidio in Antwerp and columnist for De Morgen, whose refutation of Goyvaerts’ claims not only praised Van Reybrouck’s play but also pointed out a key fact: Missie, a piece centered on missionary activity in the Congo, had been written by an atheist and was being well-received by largely non-Catholic and secular audiences.\textsuperscript{210}

Recent years have witnessed additional theater performances imbued with colonial themes. KVS has taken its Congo project to Ostend’s Theater Aan Zee and in 2010 organized a reading and debate with Adam Hochschild.\textsuperscript{211} Rik Van Uffelen and Greet Verstraete brought King Leopold’s Soliloquy back out at Arsenaal in Mechelen in spring 2010 and at the Theater ann Zee in Ostend in the summer of that year. All this said, if you look at the many cultural outlets in both French- and Dutch-speaking regions, there are many more productions that have nothing to do with the colonial past, which still remain few in number.
Anniversaries and reminiscences

A series of anniversaries followed one after another in the first decade of the third millennium, eliciting a slew of events related to empire’s past. The year 2005 marked the 175th anniversary of Belgium’s independence and the 120th anniversary of the founding of the CFS. Thierry Michel’s documentary Congo River appeared the following year. One year later, in 2006, CIVA’s (Centre International pour la Ville, l’Architecture et le Paysage) “Congo paysages urbains regards croisés” exposition of 11 young Congolese artists and 3 Belgian artists were part of the 150 artists of the festival Yambi that highlighted the Congo. In 2007 also, the Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles in Paris held its 16th Annual Quinzaine du cinéma francophone festival, which gave the Democratic Republic of the Congo a place of honor. Several partners, including the Tervuren Museum, the Cinematek, and KADOC (Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum voor Religie, Cultuur en Samenleving) began a project to preserve the film patrimony of central Africa.

Another anniversary fell in 2008, the year marking the centenary of the turnover of the colony to Belgium, as well as ninety years since the armistice ending World War I and fifty years since the 1958 World’s Fair. A show that year which revealed how memory, colonialism, culture, immigration, and politics mixed was the 2008 exhibition by the commune of Ixelles (Brussels) called “Black Paris – Black Brussels,” a show that, “reversed the traditional thesis that Europe brought culture to Africa.” The exposition drew together a solid array of work from African and other black artists, such as Chéri Samba, as well as Europeans and others who had drawn inspiration from the colonial past or African cultures, including Luc Tuymans. As museum curator Martine Boucher said about the artistes noirs represented in the show, “ces artistes s’inscrivent dans notre histoire et font partie intégrante de notre culture.” (these artists are part of our history and form an integral part of our culture.) Still, a main reason the show was brought to Ixelles was politics. The show launched in Germany, originally called “Black Paris,” and was shown at the Iwalewa-Haus in Bayreuth and the World Cultures Museum in Frankfurt. It grew to include “Black Brussels” after the Musée des Arts derniers and the Mairie de Paris pulled out and organizers needed an additional venue and financial backing. At the time, communal elections were looming in Ixelles, where the Matonge quarter is located, and local officials thought the exhibit might be one way to gain the favor of some voters. Still, the Ixelles exhibit was undoubtedly a success in the eyes of its organizers and received a very favorable reception in the press.
The year of the Black Paris-Black Brussels exhibit was also the centenary of Belgium’s takeover of the Congo, and it was marked by a renewed diplomatic crisis leading to a mini-break between Joseph Kabila’s government and that of Yves Leterme (CD&V – Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams), another chapter in the perennial up-and-down relationship between the Congo and Belgium. Part of the dispute was the much more direct diplomacy under Foreign Affairs Minister Karel De Gucht in Leterme’s government. Belgium had offered assistance to the Congo during the Mobutu era in various ways, including aid through its Office de coopération au développement (OCD). De Gucht baldly stated that if Belgium was to continue sending millions of Euros to the Kabila regime, it had better clean up its act. Accused by some of neo-colonialism for preaching to the Congolese, De Gucht replied that a normal, straightforward approach acknowledging the Congo government’s terrible shortcomings was the approach to take. “If that is what neocolonialism is, than I am a neocolonialist,” he said.

These anniversary years continued to reverberate among the public at large. The year 2008 led to calls to commemorate the “soldat inconnu congolais,” and new calls for reparations from Belgium to the Congo. In 2008, Extra City in Antwerp put on the exhibition “Letter to Leopold.” Things had reached such a state that some issues did reach public debate, for example when the 15-21 November 2008 edition of the popular Télé-Moustique was dedicated to the issue of reparations and the Belgian colonial past, with on its cover a photoshopped image of Leopold II’s statue in the Jardin du Roi being lifted off its socle. The year 2009, which marked a century since Leopold II’s death, saw some scholars take advantage of the centenary to present reconsiderations of the king at a March conference that resulted in a publication about Leopold that appeared simultaneously in French and Flemish.

Generational change

By the first decade of the 21st Century, Belgium had done much to confront its colonial “demons,” and yet for many people colonial issues were literally more distant—in time—as ever. A key reason behind this, of course, was generational change. This shift had been embodied as early as 1993, when Baudouin’s younger brother, Albert II, came to the throne. Unlike for his brother, Africa did not hold a special place in the new king’s heart. As Albert put it, quoted in this chapter’s epigraph, “Africa was my brother’s preserve, his fiefdom, and I’m not at all concerned with it.” This was even though Albert was already 26 when the Congo became self-governing, and despite the fact that he had traveled there.
At the dawn of the twenty-first century most people in both Belgium and the Congo had no direct experience of the colonial era. In October 2004, Foreign Affairs Minister De Gucht put it this way: “When the Congo gained independence in 1960, I was six. And 80 percent of the people now living there were not yet born.”

As author David Van Reybrouck expressed it, quoted in this chapter’s epigraph, a younger generation had not learned about the Congo, but was now eager to do so. Those who had grown to adulthood by the 2000s were born well after the loss of the Congo. “The common silence and/or indifference towards this particular episode of the national past underlines once again—but in a different way—the critical importance of the experience that was lived and transmitted by individuals. Except for a specific and limited group of people, the colonial period remains essentially an external reality that does not resonate with their own life.”

Emblematic of this generational change was the death of Gérard Soete in 2000, the year Raoul Peck’s Lumumba was released. Soete was one of the men who had disinterred Lumumba’s body to dispose of it by cutting it into pieces and dissolving it in acid.

Generational change was at work among academics as well. “Ook wetenschappers zijn verlost van de grote polemiek: zij hebben geen emotionele band meer met Congo en bestuderen de kolonie an sich, zonder apologie of maatschappijkritiek.” (Also scientists are freed from the great polemic: they no longer have an emotional connection with the Congo and study the colony for what it is, without apology or social criticism.)

A younger generation of Belgian scholars were inescapably detached from the Belgian Congo except for distant connections, for instance a forbear who once resided there.

A revival of the field of colonial history could be seen in the 2008 symposium “Belgium-Congo: History vs. Memory” hosted by Brussels-based CEGESOMA (Centre d’Études et de Documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines/Studie- en Documentatiecentrum Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij). Whereas a couple decades earlier, historians working on colonial history were somewhat of an exotic species in Belgium, CEGESOMA in 2008 could draw together Belgian scholars working across a variety of fields, from film (Guido Convents), to history and historiography (Guy Vanthemsche), to Eurafricans and métissage (Lissia Jeurissen and Bambi Ceuppens), to the Lumumba commission (Emmanuel Gerard), among others, the entire symposium introduced by Foreign Affairs Minister De Gucht.

Sustained expertise manifested itself in works such as Filip De Boeck’s ethnography of African urban place and its inhabitants, Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City. One could find renewed efforts to promote Belgium’s expertise on central Africa, for example in the recently-formed E-CA-CRE-AC, or “Belgisch Referentiecentrum voor
de expertise in centraal Afrika/Centre belge de référence pour l’expertise sur l’Afrique centrale.” Moreover, the colonial era was now so far removed from the present that attention had fallen on the post-colonial era, and a shift in the historiography began to occur, away from preoccupations with neo-colonialism and colonizing powers’ responsibility for the shortfalls of independent countries like the Congo and toward a reassessment of the shortcomings of independent African leaders and their governments.²³¹

New research has “led to historical works outnumbering popular literature on the subject,” and it is unclear what affect this has had on Belgian culture more generally. One scholar recently asserted that despite the flurry of publications by historians, their work remains “in the shadows (…) These writings rarely reach the broader public, due mostly to their specialized subjects, different languages and publication by international publishing houses.”²³² Other scholars assert that students of Belgian colonial history clearly have reacted to public debates about the past by allowing their research, and conclusions, to be guided by public interests, and their work in turn has influenced far-reaching cultural works; examples of the latter being Van Reybrouck’s play Missie and his blockbuster Congo: A History.²³³ Congolese contributions to the historiography of the Belgian colonial past have increased, for example the work of Osumaka Likaka and Didier Gondola, both based in the U.S.; Isidore Ndaywel È Nziem and Jean-Marie Mutamba, based in the Congo; Elikia M’Bokolo, who lives between Paris and Kinshasa; among others. At independence in 1960, there had been virtually no African students of higher education. The first history diplômes de maîtrise (Master’s degrees) were awarded only in 1970, and early histories of central Africa were written by Americans and Europeans.²³⁴ One could see that a shift had occurred with the publication of Ndaywel È Nziem’s landmark Histoire du Zaïre: De l’héritage ancien à l’âge contemporain.²³⁵ Even at the turn of the century, however, research on the history of the Congo or Belgian colonialism remained dominated by Europeans and Americans, as one can see—to take just one example—from the participants at the international colloquium “Colonial Violence in Congo” that took place at the Tervuren Museum in 2005, where less than a handful of the more than two dozen participants were from the Congo or of African heritage.

Colonial past, classroom present

As regards education, little on the colonial past was to be found in school history curricula by the end of the twentieth century. As Guido Gryseels, Tervuren Museum director from 2001 to the present, put it, “My generation
was brought up with the view that Belgium brought civilization to Congo, that we did nothing but good out there. I don’t think that during my entire education I ever heard a critical word about our colonial past.” One scholar of textbooks wrote as recently as 2017 that, “Indeed where Belgian history textbooks do address the colonial past, it is the Catholic mission and the Belgian monarchy that continue to symbolise a redemptive liberation from savagery, barbarism, and primitivism.” Research suggests young Belgians in the 1990s, 2000s, and early 2010s simply did not know much about Belgium’s colonial past. When I explained my research on Belgian colonial history to young people during an extended research stay in Brussels in 2002-2003, they responded by saying they knew basically zero about their country’s colonial past.

The lack of attention to atrocities in the Congo in Belgian textbooks is hardly exceptional. Such texts in any country must cover a lot of ground, both in terms of geographic and chronological coverage as well as themes. Many people have criticized Belgium for not coming to terms with its colonial past. One recent study concludes, “The growth in new imperial history or domestic post-colonial studies exploring Belgium’s colonial past has not yet influenced the content or design of Belgian history curricula or textbooks.”

This said, in some recent textbooks, the country’s dark colonial chapter is anything but hidden. It is true you can find textbooks, as Guy Vanthemsche has, that still hew to a pro-colonialist, apologist view, such as Jean-Pierre Lefèvre’s *A la conquête du temps*, which declares:

> When the Belgians arrived in the Congo, they found a population that was a victim of bloody rivalries and the slave trade. Belgian civil servants, missionaries, doctors, colonists and engineers civilized the black population step by step. They created modern cities, roads and railroads, harbours and airports, factories and mines, schools and hospitals. This work greatly improved the living conditions of the indigenous people.

Other recent texts provide a broad context in which to contemplate overseas empire-building, and then delve into the Belgian case without shying away from embarrassing topics. In *Histoire 3e/6e: Jalons pour mieux comprendre*, for example, both atrocities of the Leopoldian era and Belgian failures at the time of decolonization are clearly dealt with, as is the subject of the kingdom’s contemporaneous relationship with its former colony, and the post-colonial debate as to Belgium’s responsibility (humanitarian, political, or otherwise) in central Africa. Students are presented with both sides of the debate, the textbook concluding that the answer probably lies somewhere between the
two extremes of fuller engagement and disengagement. Other textbooks addressed the controversies surrounding imperialism head-on and raised difficult questions, such as one French-language text in use in 2010 that asked whether it was legitimate that European museums keep objects that are part of the African patrimony. By the 2010s, many textbooks provided nuanced views of European imperialism in the Congo and elsewhere, including primary documents from the time depicting atrocities, and incorporating work from Congolese scholars.

Conclusion

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, clear divides had emerged between Belgians who viewed colonialism favorably, those who took the opposite view, and those who were generally or completely indifferent. It is true that many remained either uninformed about, or indifferent to, the country’s colonial past, in particular those born after 1960 and recent immigrants and their children. Most Belgians, if they knew much about colonialism, continued to associate the Leopoldian period (1885-1908) with the Belgian state rule period (1908-1960), conflating them if not considering them one and the same. Former colonials generally had a positive view of Belgian actions, which is not surprising considering their personal implication in them. In general, older Belgians, even if not personally implicated, held more favorable views of colonialism, much more so than younger people who, by contrast, more freely associated mutilations, exploitation, and so forth, with Belgian African rule. Older people tended to talk more about development when it came to issues of “exploitation,” bringing up the hospitals, roads, and other infrastructure Belgian rule created in the Congo. Some older people dismissed the claims of Hochschild’s book as overblown, whereas many young folk took them to heart. At least in the southern, French-speaking part of the country, an opposition developed between two diametrically opposed extremist views of Belgian colonialism, one holding that Leopold II and colonialism were good, the other that Belgian imperialism was wholly bad. Some passed from believing in a “mythe d’un roi génial et bienfaiteur” (myth of a brilliant king-benefactor) to the opposite extreme, believing in a “mythe d’un roi génocidaire.” (myth of a genocidal king.)

As controversy grew over Leopold II’s CFS regime and colonialism more generally, another dividing line emerged: between the Dutch-speaking and francophone communities. The two populations did share many outlooks on the colonial past. For instance, both looked back on the 1950s with
nostalgia as a golden age that preceded the Congo’s descent into disorder and corruption. But Flemish cultural productions from the 1980s were on the whole more nostalgic. Flemish writers and television producers tended to emphasize more missionary activity, perhaps unsurprising considering most missionaries came from more Catholic Flanders. Whereas criticisms of colonial conquest and economic exploitation were acceptable, many cultural productions asserted that, in essence, missionaries were “ok,” as seen in David Van Reybrouck’s Missie. The worst abuses of colonialism were connected to Leopold II, his collaborators, and the colonial administration, which had been dominated by the francophone elite. To consider missionaries and the colonial administration as separate endeavors, in a sense, was not entirely historically inaccurate. Although many automatically associate Christian missionizing in sub-Saharan Africa with European conquest and rule, missionaries and colonial military men and administrators often worked more near than with each other. Not only did their actual day-to-day work have them often working at cross purposes, they viewed the world differently. “While missionaries and secular imperialists traveled similar geographical routes around the world, philosophically they moved on different planes.”

The history of missionaries in the CFS was not one of straightforward collaboration with Leopold’s regime. Belgian missionaries were slow to embrace their king’s colonial vision, and foreign Protestant missionaries were among the first to bring the abuses of the CFS regime to international attention; Belgian Catholic missionaries were more reluctant to join the chorus of criticism. Post-1908 was a different story as missionaries and the administration worked in open, close coordination. As distance grew from the collaborationist stigma of World War II, and as Flanders’ economy came to predominate from the 1960s, some Flemish memoirists, chroniclers, and others tended to accept a rather rosy view of missionary action in the Congo while expressing skepticism about the monarchy and the colonial past more generally, which worked to distance Flanders from the nation-state of Belgium. This also tended, however, to downplay the extreme degree to which Catholic missionaries work hand-in-glove with the Belgian colonial administration after 1908.

Among some older French-speaking Belgians, there was a reluctance to address controversial questions about their nation’s colonial past because of how it might weaken the kingdom, a prospect that was more threatening in economically weaker Wallonia. Regionalism in the southern, francophone provinces was much weaker than its Flemish counterpart, unsurprising considering the troubled economy Wallonia suffered during an era of de-industrialization; inhabitants there needed the Kingdom of Belgium more than their Dutch-speaking counterparts in the north did. Now, support for
the monarchy was greater in the south than in the north, a major shift from the immediate post-World War II era. At the time of the Question royale, Dutch speakers had supported the return of the king more than French speakers. When the 1950 referendum was held, the Flemish vote was 72 percent in favor of King Leopold III’s return, whereas 58 percent of French speakers opposed it. By the twenty-first century, francophone Belgians were much more likely to embrace the kingdom’s ruling dynasty than their Dutch-speaking confrères.