

MATTHEW G. STANARD

Selling the Congo

A HISTORY OF EUROPEAN
PRO-EMPIRE PROPAGANDA
AND THE MAKING OF
BELGIAN IMPERIALISM



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Preface

In 1984 my family moved to Brussels, Belgium; my brothers and I attended an international school in Waterloo where we could see the Butte du Lion—the monument to Wellington’s victory over Napoleon—from some of the school’s top-floor classrooms. One day, my science classmates and I went on a field trip to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. As a recently expatriated American preteen, I was ignorant of Belgian politics, society, and culture, but I still remember wondering: Why was this absolutely enormous museum about central Africa located in the middle of little Belgium? I also remember that during the several years my family lived in Belgium, I heard about the Zairian government’s repeated demands that artifacts and other materials be repatriated to central Africa, and the Belgian government’s steadfast refusal to do so. I was puzzled why Belgium would care so much about African artifacts from such a faraway place to the point of sticking tenaciously, for years, to an apparently unethical position.

Fifteen years and five changes of address later, I was sitting in a graduate seminar on European imperialism with Bill Cohen at Indiana University–Bloomington in spring semester of 2000. The year previous I had left my lobbying job in Washington DC to go to graduate school to study European history and especially modern European imperialism. Although my time in Belgium

was key to developing an interest in European history that eventually led to graduate school, I had zero intention of studying Belgium's history or Belgian imperialism. Yet as the semester unfolded that spring and as I researched pro-empire expositions, I found that while much had been written about how British and French colonies affected their respective metropolises, precious little had been published on the Congo's effects on Belgium. I ended up writing a seminar paper on the colonial section of the 1958 Brussels World's Fair and Belgians' views of their empire. My interest in the reverberations of overseas empire continued in the years after 2000, with a focus on Belgium; the appeal of the subject only intensified as I discovered the many ways in which the empire had "come home" as well as the surprising degree to which Europeans promoted imperialism among their countrymen and women. Along the way, the question kept posing itself as to the nexus among information produced about the colonies; the root causes of imperialism; and empire's echoes in European politics, society, and culture. What could we tell about the nature of empire by looking at those who deliberately promoted overseas expansion and at their motivations for doing so? Was propaganda evidence of an imperialistic spirit? Or did it indicate the contrary, since so many people apparently needed convincing? Did pro-empire messages succeed or fail, or succeed only in part, or did they instead lead to unplanned outcomes? The result of all this questioning is the following study of pro-empire propaganda in Belgium, its genesis and sources, and its effects.

Along the way, I have incurred many debts. Support from the Belgian American Educational Foundation for study in Belgium was crucial for the bulk of the research that went into this work. Indiana University–Bloomington provided support in a number of ways, including a Chancellor's Fellowship, a Doctoral Student

Grant-in-Aid of Research from the Research and University Graduate School, and Hill and Dissertation fellowships from the Department of History. A Wolfsonian-Florida International University Fellowship provided the opportunity to research in The Wolfsonian archives in Miami Beach in 2006–7, and various research stipends from Berry College helped along the way.

In Belgium the staffs at the Cinémathèque Royale, the Archives Générales du Royaume, the Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, and at the Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique Albert Ier were wonderful. Patricia Van Schuylenbergh and the staff at the Royal Museum for Central Africa were particularly helpful during my many days there, as were Françoise Peemans and Pierre Dandoy at the Archives africaines at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This work could not have been accomplished without the help of Berry College Memorial Library, especially Xiaojing Zu, but even more so the tremendous resources of the Indiana University libraries, especially Rhonda Long and the rest of the Document Delivery Services staff in Bloomington.

A number of other individuals were fundamental to this book's completion. Noemi Sarrion has supported me in the most important ways, for many years now. Jim Diehl and Phyllis Martin, whose help has been invaluable, have been tough, critical, and inspiring mentors over the years. Both Bill Schneider and Jim Le Sueur generously agreed to work with me beginning in 2003 and have been supportive ever since. The faculty and staff of the Indiana University Department of History and the Berry College Evans School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences have been unfailing in their support over the years, and I especially thank George Alter, Carl Ipsen, David Pace, George Brooks, Chad Parker, Alexia Bock, Larry Marvin, Jon Atkins, and Christy Snider. My parents, Doug and Bonnie Stanard, have

always been encouraging and were crucial when it came to the logistics involved in multiple research stays in Belgium. I also was lucky to enjoy innumerable stays, dinners, and conversations at “Hotel Spangenberg,” Meredith and Adolf Spangenberg proprietors. Every time I am in Brussels, Jean-Luc Vellut is unfailingly welcoming, generous, and helpful. My debt to the many other students of European and African history is evident in the book’s notes. Thanks also is due to Heather Lundine and her team of readers at University of Nebraska Press and the others who read, listened to, or commented on earlier versions of parts of this study, many of whom are named above. Special thanks to Jeremy Hall, Diane Land, Andrea Lowry, and Kelly Petronis, all of whom read the entire manuscript. Amanda Haskell and Amber Spann helped out with notes and references. Of course any errors or omissions are my fault alone.

My advisor at Bloomington, Bill Cohen, passed away unexpectedly in November 2002, while I was in Brussels on an extended research trip. To me, and to many others, he was a giant: always enthusiastic, at times delightfully inscrutable, and funny when he wanted to be. Above all, he was a prodigiously talented scholar, and he inspired me to try to do my best as a historian. I still miss him very much. I can only hope that he would have enjoyed reading this little study about Belgian imperialism. It is dedicated to him and his memory.

Abbreviations

AA	Archives africaines, Ministère des affaires étrangères/Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken
AGR	Archives générales du royaume/ Algemeen Rijksarchief
AIA	Association internationale africaine
AIC	Association internationale du Congo
AICB	Association des intérêts coloniaux belges
AUCAM	Association universitaire catholique pour l'aide aux missions
BCB	<i>Biographie coloniale belge/Belgische koloniale biografie</i>
BCK	Compagnie du chemin de fer du Bas-Congo au Katanga
CAPA	Centre d'accueil pour le personnel africain
CCACC	Centre congolais d'action catholique cinématographique
CCN	Cercle colonial namurois
CCS	Commission Coloniale Scolaire
CID	Centre d'information et de documentation du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi
ECS	École coloniale supérieure
EIC	État Indépendant du Congo/Onafhankelijke Congostaat

Abbreviations

Foréami	Fonds Reine Elisabeth pour l'assistance médicale aux Indigènes du Congo Belge
Forminière	Société internationale forestière et minière du Congo
FRAIUTO	Fondation royale des amis de l'Institut universitaire des territoires d'outre-mer/ Vriendenfonds van het Universitair Instituut voor de Overzeese Gebieden
Inforcongo	Office de l'information et des relations publiques pour le Congo Belge et le Ruanda-Urundi/Voorlichtings- en Documentatiecentrum van Belgisch Congo en van Ruanda-Urundi
INUTOM	Institut universitaire des territoires d'outre-mer
MRAC	Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale/Koninklijke Museum voor Midden Afrika
NOVA	Nieuwe Organisatie voor Verkoop en Aankoopsbevordering/Nouvelle organisation favorisant ventes et achats
OC	Office colonial
OCIC	Office catholique international du cinéma
POB/BWP	Parti ouvrier belge/Belgische Werkliedenpartij
PSR	Parti socialiste révolutionnaire
Soprocol	Société auxiliaire de propagande coloniale
ULB	Université libre de Bruxelles
UMHK	Union minière du Haut-Katanga
UN	United Nations

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Introduction

One July afternoon in 2000, a group of people, including former colonials, walked through the Cinquantenaire Park in Brussels and halted before the simply named Colonial Monument. The monument's foreground depicted a young African lying down, representing the Congo River. On the left a European soldier combated the slave trade, while figures on the right represented another colonial soldier tending to a wounded comrade. The large central panel portrayed the African continent, "henceforth open to civilization," and a group of soldiers surrounding King Leopold II. Atop the monument a young woman represented the country of Belgium, "welcoming the black race."¹ Two members of the group advanced solemnly toward the memorial and, kneeling, placed wreaths to honor the memory of the nation's colonial pioneers.²

Similar scenes continue to be enacted at other monuments across the country. In June 2003 a "national ceremony to honor the flag of Tabora" commemorating the World War I victory in German East Africa began at Namur's Leopold II monument.³ On 24 June 2005 a large equestrian statue of Leopold II was reinaugurated in Brussels after a restoration in time for the country's 175th anniversary, at which a small group from the Association des anciens et amis de la Force publique du Congo Belge (Association of Veterans and Friends of the Belgian Congo



1. Vinçotte's Colonial Monument in Cinquantenaire Park
(photo by the author).

Armed Forces) honored Leopold II by presenting the colors.⁴ All these people were paying homage to imperialism at just a few of the dozens if not hundreds of imperialistic monuments that still dot the Belgian landscape five decades after the Congo's independence. These memorials are remnants of the country's colonial past, former propaganda pieces created to rally public support for the Belgian empire in central Africa. The large body of pro-empire propaganda produced in Belgium is the subject of this book.

Because the term "propaganda" has taken on numerous meanings over the years, a brief word on its definition is in order before examining the case of Belgian imperialistic propaganda. As a result of the mobilization of enthusiasm and censorship that accompanied World War I, propaganda "came to be a pejorative term; all governments installed propaganda offices, and all of

them falsified news.”⁵ The word became more suspect after the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union became better understood. Goebbels and Hitler believed Germany had lost World War I in the realm of information production and created propaganda with little regard for the truth. Even Communists turned against the Soviet system, as the extent of the interwar show trials and Stalin’s cult of personality became better known.⁶ These developments led many to equate propaganda with outright lies. Nevertheless, to understand propaganda as only untrue is to misconstrue the term. Propaganda is the production and dissemination of information to help or hinder a particular institution, person, or cause, and the actual ideas, concepts, and materials produced in such an effort. As Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell define it, “Propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”⁷ Propaganda might be biased or partial, but it is not necessarily false. For example, particular government, missionary, and private films deliberately misrepresented the situation in Belgium’s colony or events in its history to make particular points, thereby qualifying those films as propaganda. But often films were tendentious rather than deliberately misleading, having as their goal the instruction of the audience along the lines of a particular ideology.

Many also understand propaganda as primarily a state product.⁸ Yet it can issue from a variety of sources, such as during World War I when not only governments but also various elites produced propaganda. In Italy, for instance, the army controlled the press and information at the front; the government produced information directed at foreign audiences; and civil, financial, and industrial elites worked in concert with both.⁹ The same

was true for propaganda in favor of overseas empire: it emanated from a variety of sources, including the state and colonial administrations, commercial interests, missionary orders, and individuals. A distinction is to be made, however, between propaganda and advertising—the latter of which endorses products and, in the case of imperialism, comprised narrowly focused promotional materials by specific enterprises.

This study of pro-empire propaganda and the making of Belgian imperialism is centered on five major media of propaganda that reached the mass of the population in the metropole, with an emphasis on the period of twentieth-century Belgian state rule. The first chapter demonstrates how in 1908 Belgium inherited not only a colony from Leopold II—along with its burdensome legacy of abuses—but also a tradition of pro-empire propaganda that set much of the tone for information produced during subsequent decades. The bulk of the book then examines five media of propaganda: expositions, museums, education in favor of empire, monuments, and colonial cinema. The chapter on expositions explores the major Congo exhibits at Belgian world's fairs, of which there were five between 1908 and 1960, and then ventures further to examine smaller and much more numerous colonial exhibits throughout the country. Similarly, the chapter on colonial museums and their curators goes beyond the now-infamous Congo museum in Tervuren to uncover what other permanent collections of Africana in Belgium preserved, represented, and displayed. These two chapters highlight how expositions and museums were particularly powerful propaganda because they complemented each other, with museums' permanent displays of power reinforced by expositions' temporary messages. Public education, the subject of another chapter, added force to these two powerful media at the university,

secondary, and primary school levels, in particular when the Ministry of Colonies entered the classroom to educate school-children directly. Two final chapters explore two differing ways Belgians represented the empire: in the more traditional media of stone and bronze, namely, colonial memorials in the metropole, and in the new medium of film.

Certain means of communication for information about the colony have been excluded, for various reasons. Literature is included only in cases when something was written primarily as a tool to promote the colony or imperialism, as opposed to a work of pure fiction.¹⁰ Thus an analysis of *bandes dessinées* (comic strips), such as *Tintin au Congo*, is excluded.¹¹ African artwork is considered within the confines of the expositions, museums, and other sites in which Belgians displayed it. Photographs are likewise taken into account only insofar as they played a role in other media.¹² Because they rarely bore imperial imagery, Belgian postage stamps, banknotes, and coins are excluded, as are the many commemorative colonial medals that were cast, which circulated infrequently.¹³ Dozens if not hundreds of streets and squares were named after colonials, but a study comparable to Robert Aldrich's essay on colonial street names in Paris would require an additional study, the conclusions of which likely only would reiterate many of those in the chapter on monuments.¹⁴ The study does not delve into radio because examining the few transcripts available, such as those of White Father Léon Le-loir's broadcasts in the 1930s, might skew the evidence, considering so many others are irretrievable.¹⁵ The book also leaves out commercial advertising and packaging that may have promoted products from the Congo, because they were not geared toward promoting the colony as such. Although Belgium administered the League of Nations mandates Ruanda and Urundi (later UN

Trust Territories) as colonies, the Congo remained the primary focus of the kingdom's overseas imperialism; thus propaganda attempting to "sell" the Congo to the metropolitan population is the main object of inquiry.

Imperialistic Propaganda and the Nature of Belgian Empire

A more profound understanding of pro-empire expositions, museums, education, monuments, and film forces us to revise our views of the nature of Belgian imperialism in a number of ways. The examination of imperialistic propaganda that follows shows, for instance, that there was a surprising number of people cheering on the empire in the metropole and that arguably a colonial culture arose in the country as well. To say that a colonial culture developed is to assert that the Congo was more than an economic, diplomatic, or political concern of an elite. In an era of universal primary education, high literacy rates, an extended franchise, and mass entertainment, colonies overseas entered into people's everyday lives in multiple ways. Some people became aware that their livelihood or those of family members were dependent on colonial commerce. Others became conscious of the empire in multiple forms, consented to it, and in many cases actively supported it.¹⁶

The notion of enthusiastic imperialism in Belgium flies in the face of the literature on the Belgian Congo, which has long depicted Flemings and Walloons as indifferent to overseas empire.¹⁷ This interpretation goes all the way back to Belgium's takeover of the Congo in the first place: when the state took control of the colony in 1908, it did so with virtually no imperialistic tradition and no groundswell of support for empire. The Kingdom of Belgium had become independent only in 1830 after centuries of being a *victim* of imperialism within Europe. Ultimately, it was