

A Technology of (Post)Colonial Rule?

The Belgian Congo Commission (2020-2022) in Historical Perspective

Sarah Van Beurden and Gillian Mathys

Mise en ligne : décembre 2023

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2023.stc04>

Abstract

This contribution considers the 2020-22 Belgian parliamentary commission on its colonial past (for which the authors served as experts) in a historical perspective, alongside two other Belgian parliamentary commissions on Congo: the 1904–5 Belgian Commission of Inquiry about the atrocities of Leopold II's rubber regime in Congo and the 2000–2002 Belgian Commission of Investigation, which looked into the role of the Belgian state in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. After a brief introduction of the recent commission, we first reflect on the role of commission “experts”, and historians specifically. Second, we investigate to what extent these commissions function as technologies of rule that sustain rather than critique existing balances of power.

Keywords: Colonial past; Congo; Rwanda; Burundi; Belgium; transitional justice; public history; reparations

Une technique de gouvernementalité (post)coloniale ? La commission Congo en Belgique (2020-2022) dans une perspective historique

Résumé

Cette contribution met en perspective la Commission parlementaire belge sur son passé colonial (2020-2022) - et pour laquelle les autrices ont participé en tant qu'« expertes », avec deux autres commissions parlementaires belges sur le Congo : la Commission d'enquête belge de 1904-1905 sur les atrocités du « régime du caoutchouc » de Léopold II au Congo et la Commission d'enquête belge de 2000-2002, qui a examiné le rôle de l'État belge dans l'assassinat de Patrice Lumumba. Après une brève présentation de la récente commission, nous réfléchissons tout d'abord au rôle des « expert.es » de la commission, et plus particulièrement des historien.nes. Ensuite, nous cherchons à savoir dans quelle mesure ces commissions fonctionnent comme des technologies de gouvernementalité qui soutiennent, plutôt qu'elles ne critiquent, les équilibres de pouvoir existants.

Mots-clés: Passé colonial; Congo; Burundi; Rwanda; Belgique; justice transitionnelle; histoire publique; réparations



In December 2022, the mandate of the Belgian parliamentary “Special commission to examine the independent state of Congo (1885–1908) and Belgium’s colonial past in Congo (1908–1960), Rwanda and Burundi (1919–1962), its consequences and the appropriate follow-up” (more commonly referred to as the “Congo Commission”) expired, despite the lack of immediately tangible results¹. The commission was established in July 2020 as a “Special commission” in the wake of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. Such “commissions spéciales” have been created by the Belgian parliament “en vue de remplir des missions autres que l’examen de projets et de propositions de loi ou l’audition de questions et d’interpellations”². At its inception, the commission was hailed by both its president, Wouter De Vriendt, and several media outlets as unique among former European colonizers’ efforts to deal with their colonial pasts³. It failed to fulfil expectations, however. In December 2022, after two reports by experts (one preliminary in October 2021 and one final in November 2022) totaling almost a thousand pages, hundreds of testimonies, and a trip by members of the commission to Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo, the commission’s parliamentary members were unable to agree on any conclusions or recommendations, among which were apologies for Belgian colonialism. This failure deeply impacted those who engaged with its work in good faith and raises important questions about the continued coloniality of the Belgian political system⁴.

This article considers the recent Belgian parliamentary commission on its colonial past (for which the authors served as experts) in a historical perspective and alongside two other Belgian parliamentary commissions on Congo, namely the 1904–5 Belgian Commission of Inquiry about the atrocities of Leopold II’s rubber regime in Congo and the 2000–2002 Belgian Commission of Investigation that looked into the Belgian role in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first Congolese prime minister in 1961. We first reflect on the evolution of the role of the commission “expert”: how they are regarded, how do public expectations of the work of historians contrast with the reality of their professional practice, and what impact do they have on the ultimate outcome of these commissions? More specifically, we question the roles of historians and historical research in these commissions. Finally, we investigate to what extent these commissions function as technologies of rule that sustain rather than critique existing balances of power. If they are created to resolve discrepancies between discourses about Belgium’s colonial and post-colonial political legitimacy on the one hand and the (usually violent) exercise of its power on the other, does that mean they have the potential to legitimize systems of power and inequality by classifying violence inherent to them as incidental?

Trajectory of the 2020–2022 Congo Commission

In May 2020, the police killed George Floyd in Minneapolis. Worldwide protests followed, and in June 2020, over 10,000 people gathered in Brussels to demand the end of police violence against Black people and other people with an immigration background, as well as an end to the rampant racism in Belgian society. The organizers were part of a rich patchwork of African diaspora organizations that had been active in denouncing racism in Belgium society and putting pressure on politicians for years⁵. While many of their demands were aimed at creating a more just contemporary society, they also placed Belgium’s racism in a wider historical perspective, connecting it to the country’s colonial past.

¹ Some of the topics discussed in the commission were taken up by other cabinets and institutions. The secretary of state for scientific research worked on a law for the restitution of colonial collections from former colonies, which was passed in July 2022, see “Loi reconnaissant le caractère aliénable des biens liés au passé colonial de l’État belge et déterminant un cadre juridique pour leur restitution et leur retour”, Chambre des représentants, 3 July 2022, documents 55-2646 (2021/22), available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: https://www.stradalex.com/fr/sl_src_publ_leg_be_moniteur/toc/leg_be_moniteur_fr_28092022_1/doc/mb20220420. A law proposing automatic declassification also introduced significant changes to the accessibility of certain documents on Belgium’s colonial past, see, “Déclassification obligatoire: un grand pas dans la bonne direction”, Archives de l’État en Belgique, 13 June 2022, available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: <https://www.arch.be/index.php?l=fr&m=actualites&cr=toutes-les-actualites&a=2022-06-13-declassification-obligatoire-un-grand-pas-dans-la-bonne-direction>.

² La Chambre, “Règlement de la Chambre des représentants”, décembre 2020, D/2020/4686/07, art. 21, PDF available online, accessed 02/09/2023. URL: https://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/publications/reglement/reglementFR.pdf.

³ See, for example, “Kamercommissie koloniaal verleden krijgt ruime opdracht mee”, *Nieuwsblad*, 10 juillet 2020, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20200710_93687367.

⁴ Coloniality as the normative power matrix and knowledge system rationalizing and underpinning western dominance. See Quijano Aníbal (2007), “Coloniality and modernity/rationality”, *Cultural studies* 21(2-3), pp. 168-78.

⁵ Zacharie Didier, “La manifestation Black Lives Matter à Bruxelles sera ‘tolérée’”, *Moustique*, 5 June 2020, available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: <https://www.moustique.be/actu/2020/06/05/la-manifestation-black-lives-matter-bruxelles-sera-toleree-184037>.

One of the outcomes of this struggle was the adoption in July 2020 by the Belgian federal government of a resolution to instate a “Special Commission” to examine the colonial past and its long-term impact. Unlike more recent postcolonial commissions concerned with states’ colonial pasts, the Belgian commission covered the whole period of Belgian colonialism in Central Africa, from *ca.* 1885 until 1962⁶, in order to deal with its impact today. It was composed of members of Parliament across the political spectrum (majority as well as opposition). In a first phase, between July 2020 and October 2021, a group of ten “experts” appointed by politicians worked on a preliminary report to inform and guide the parliamentarians in their work⁷. During a second phase, between October 2021 and December 2022, public hearings were organized, during which the commission was supported by a smaller group of three experts, this time recruited through publicly advertised positions, who authored the final report, published in November 2022.

The first ten experts included five historians: Zana Mathieu Etambala (Royal Museum for Central Africa), Elikia M’Bokolo (EHESS, Unikin), Pierre-Luc Plasman (formerly Université Catholique de Louvain-UCL), and the authors of this article. The expert group thus had two historians with Congolese roots — Zana Etambala and Elikia M’Bokolo. The five other members of the commission included the late Mgr. Jean-Louis Nahimana (chair of the Burundian Truth and Reconciliation Commission), Martien Schotsmans (head of the Belgian Federal Institute for Human Rights), and Valérie Rosoux (UCL). Art historian and curator Anne Wetsi Mpoma and lawyer Laure Uwase were integrated as “representatives of the diaspora”. In addition, a group of diaspora organizations was accorded an unremunerated and undefined “consultative” role. The composition of the expert panel was publicly criticized. In an open letter, fifty researchers argued that too few historians had been appointed. Diaspora communities raised the issue of the limited number of representatives on the commission and the lack of consultation with diaspora organizations, and controversy arose around the selection of the Belgo-Rwandan diaspora commission member⁸.

The limited time-frame put considerable pressure on its operation. The experts, whose allotted work time was limited to 4 months, were asked to address the following:

- 1) the state of Belgian, Congolese, Rwandan, Burundian, and international scientific research on the history of Belgian colonialism;
- 2) the availability and accessibility of all relevant archives, both public archives and those held by non-state actors in Belgium, Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi;
- 3) the degree of scientific consensus regarding the Belgian colonial past without merely reconstructing the facts, but also naming them (“historical knowledge and truth”);
- 4) gaps in the existing knowledge and propose hearings in the committee;
- 5) the general state of academic research on the relationship between the Belgian colonial past, the postcolonial period, and racism, xenophobia, and intolerance (the “relationship between historical facts and current social phenomena”)⁹.

This first report was publicly released in October 2021. About two-thirds of its 681 pages were devoted to historical questions, while the second part dealt with perspectives from transitional justice and memory studies. The third part addressed the relation between contemporary racism and colonialism. The historians addressed both the existing historiography and new research and responded to the commission’s questions about archives. The limited timeframe in combination with the very broad brief (*all* of Belgian colonialism in Central Africa) meant not all questions posed in the resolution were answered. For example, the questions about Belgium’s colonial past in history education remained unanswered. Nor was Belgian colonialism in

⁶ The Congo Free State (1885–1908) was ruled by Leopold II as an autocrat, while Belgium ruled the Belgian Congo (1908–60). Rwanda and Burundi were invaded and occupied by the Belgians in 1916 during World War I and then confirmed as mandated areas by the League of Nations in 1924. They gained their independence in 1962.

⁷ Not all of the invited experts agreed to participate. Given that the selection and debates were held behind closed doors, we can only guess at what motivated the selection.

⁸ On the lack of diaspora members, see, for example, Rutazibwa Olivia U., “‘Congo’ Commissie—Why I Will Not Participate in the Expert Group”, blog, 21 July 2020, available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: <https://oliviarutazibwa.wordpress.com/2020/07/21/congo-commissie-why-i-will-not-participate-in-the-expert-group/>. On the controversy surrounding the Belgian-Rwandan member, see Struys Bruno, “N-VA wil controversiële experte weg uit Congocommissie”, *De Morgen*, 6 October 2020, available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/n-va-wil-controversiele-experte-weg-uit-congocommissie-bbdfc8bbd/>.

⁹ See Chambre des Représentants, “Commission spéciale chargée d’examiner l’état indépendant du Congo (1885–1908) et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo (1908–1960), au Rwanda et au Burundi (1919–1962), ses conséquences et les suites qu’il convient d’y réserver”, 17 July 2020, 2e session de la 55e législature, 2019–20, DOC 55 1462/001, PDF available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: https://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/pri/congo/55K1462001.pdf.

Rwanda and Burundi addressed. This was in part due to time constraints and restrictions on travel and archival research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, public expectations and ideas about historical research conflicted with the realities of the time and work required for scholarly research and writing, which do not always lend themselves to the framework of public processes such as these¹⁰.

The second phase of the commission's work followed the public presentation of the experts' report to the parliamentary commission in October 2021. The commission then embarked on a year of public hearings with a wide range of stakeholders¹¹. The speakers included representatives of diaspora organizations, academics, activists, and public intellectuals from all four countries. A group of commission members also travelled to Central Africa, although several political parties declined for financial reasons or because of indifference¹². Because respective embassies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized these trips, the choice of interlocutors largely depended on their networks and partners. This meant that the conversations between the commission and civil society in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, arguably some of the most important interlocutors, were very limited, especially since the commission did not cover travel costs for those speaking at hearings taking place in Belgium.

The final report of the commission was written on the basis of the hearings, encounters in Central Africa, and the preliminary report. It was made public in November 2022 and provided an overview of the commission's activities, concluding remarks, and a set of recommendations¹³. It was built on the premise that improved knowledge can lead to recognition of and taking responsibility for past injustices, which can lead to reparative mechanisms, such as apologies.

The chair of the commission, the Flemish green party politician Wouter De Vriendt, then composed a document with 128 recommendations, based on the work of the experts as well as the hearings, and with the inclusion of agenda points to ensure follow-up on the commission's work¹⁴. Recommendations fell under three categories: "History and Research", "Reparations", and "Colonialism and Racism/discrimination". The "History and Research" list was aimed at strengthening academic research, facilitating academic collaboration between Belgium and its former colonies and rendering colonial archives more accessible in a number of ways¹⁵. In addition, it offered recommendations for the "*metissen*"¹⁶, for the recognition of former African combatants in World War II¹⁷, and follow-up recommendations for the 2000 Lumumba Commission (see below). The recommendations under "Reparations" covered symbolic measures, among which the recommendation for apologies became a stumbling block and what were called "future-oriented" reparations. The latter were aimed at national and international reconciliation, education, and restitution of colonial collections. Financial reparations were not part of these recommendations. The section on "Colonialism and Racism/Discrimination" recommended measures aimed at documenting and remedying racism in Belgium, which mostly followed up on United Nations (UN) recommendations and European Union (EU) regulations¹⁸. Finally, the parliamentary commission of Foreign Affairs was charged with implementing the recommendations and the publication of a shortened, accessible version of the final report of the commission.

¹⁰ For more on this contrast, see Mathys Gillian and Van Beurden Sarah, "History by Commission: The Belgian Colonial Past in the Public Eye", *Journal of African History*, pp. 1-10.

¹¹ Hearings and meetings were largely public and are available online. See "Bijzondere commissie Koloniaal Verleden", De Kamer, available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: <https://www.dekamer.be/kvcr/showpage.cfm?language=nl§ion=/pri/congo&story=audition.xml>.

¹² Or used this objection to hurt the commission. See Van de Velden Wim, "Parlementsleden zeggen af voor Congoreis", *De Tijd*, 22 June 2022, available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: <https://www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie/federaal/parlementsleden-zeggen-af-voor-congoreis/10397499.html>.

¹³ The final report is available in French and Dutch: "Commission spéciale passe colonial: introduction et constats des experts", 22 November 2022, PDF available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: [https://www.lachambre.be/kvcr/pdf_sections/pri/congo/20221122%20Constats%20experts%20\(002\).pdf](https://www.lachambre.be/kvcr/pdf_sections/pri/congo/20221122%20Constats%20experts%20(002).pdf).

¹⁴ For the full set of recommendations, see "Recommandations de la Commission spéciale 'Passé colonial'", 22 November 2022, PDF available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: [https://www.dekamer.be/kvcr/pdf_sections/pri/congo/20221122%20Aanbevelingen%20voorzitter%20def%20\(004\).pdf](https://www.dekamer.be/kvcr/pdf_sections/pri/congo/20221122%20Aanbevelingen%20voorzitter%20def%20(004).pdf).

¹⁵ Not merely in legal terms but also in terms of digitization and improved accessibility.

¹⁶ Biracial children, separated from their mothers by the colonial administration in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi and/or forcibly relocated to Belgium in the aftermath of independence.

¹⁷ A matter placed on the agenda mainly through the sustained efforts of organizations such as Bakushinta, which works to benefit and promote Congolese cultures in the Diaspora. See Bakushinta.org, "Á propos", available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: <https://www.bakushinta.org/a-propos-2/>.

¹⁸ See, for example, the report of the UN Working Group on People of African Descent: UN Human Rights Commission (HRC),

Most of the suggestions that had been made in hearings and by experts were represented on De Vriendt's list, with notable exceptions. For example, the proposal for the creation and subsiding of Black Archives — a centre for the documentation and conservation of the history of the African diaspora — was not included. Neither were the recommendations geared towards strengthening the infrastructural organization of diaspora initiatives. In the end, the list represented an attempt at political compromise, reflecting Belgian interests. Most recommendations did not live up to the more structural and radical approaches that had been articulated during the process. Despite the compromise approach, the commission remained deadlocked at its last meeting.

The biggest stumbling block proved to be recommendation number 69, which stated that:

bearing in mind that many Belgians [...] gave the best of themselves when they were in Congo, Burundi and Rwanda, the House of Representatives apologizes to the Congolese, Burundian and Rwandan people for the colonial domination and exploitation, the violence and atrocities, the individual and collective human rights violations during this period, as well as the racism and discrimination that accompanied them.¹⁹

The next recommendation stated that an apology “does not imply any legal liability and therefore cannot give rise to financial compensation²⁰”. This was not surprising given that several parties - such as the Flemish right-wing party *Nieuw Vlaamse Aliantie* (NVa) and the center-right Walloon Liberal party *Mouvement Réformateur* (MR) - repeated throughout the process that there could be no discussion of “reparations”. Of course, reparations may encompass a broad set of measures that include but are not limited to financial compensation²¹. Unfortunately, they were framed narrowly by several political parties and were described as merely large sums of money that the taxpayer would have to pay to parties merely seeking financial gain.

While most centre and right-wing parties were adamantly against any form of apology, the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) insisted on recommendations that went *beyond* apologies. On the other hand, a member of the Flemish Christian Democrat Party (CD&V)²² complained that apologies were being “forced” on the commission members and called for only approving the other recommendations. He expressed concern that apologies would have legal consequences²³. Despite legal experts' testimony that apologies were not legally binding, and notwithstanding the disclaimer about reparations in recommendation 70, most parties opposed to the measures used the argument that issuing apologies would lead to demands for financial compensation on the part of the former colonies. In addition, MR and Open VLD argued that the “regrets” for the colonial past previously expressed by the Belgian king were sufficient, making apologies unnecessary. The Flemish right-wing parties Vlaams Belang and N-Va also argued against any such apologies as motivated by “white guilt” and “Flemish self-hate”²⁴. Yet, the francophone MR's role in the failure of the commission suggests

“Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on its visit to Belgium”, A/HRC/42/59/Add.1, 14 August 2019, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3849772?ln=en>. For the working group's mandate, see <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Racism/WGAfricanDescent/Pages/WGEPADIndex.aspx>.

¹⁹ “Recommandations de la Commission spéciale ‘Passé colonial’”, 69. PDF available online, accessed 30/08/2023. URL: [https://www.dekamer.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/pri/congo/20221122%20Aanbevelingen%20voorzitter%20def%20\(004\).pdf](https://www.dekamer.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/pri/congo/20221122%20Aanbevelingen%20voorzitter%20def%20(004).pdf). In original: “en gardant à l'esprit que de nombreux Belges [...] ont donné le meilleur d'eux-mêmes lorsqu'ils étaient au Congo, au Burundi et au Rwanda, la Chambre des représentants présente ses excuses aux peuples congolais, burundais et rwandais pour la domination et l'exploitation coloniales, les violences et les atrocités, les violations individuelles et collectives des droits humains durant cette période, ainsi que le racisme et la discrimination qui les ont accompagnés”.

²⁰ In original: “implique toutefois aucune responsabilité juridique et ne peut dès lors donner lieu à une réparation financière”.

²¹ On the different interpretations of the term by supporters and opponents, see, for example, Brophy Alfred (2006), *Reparations: Pro and Con*, Oxford, Oxford University Press; Van de Mierop Kenan (2015), “Historical Presents: A Study of the Debates Around Reparations for Slavery in the United States and France, the post racial era and the Age of Commemoration”, PhD thesis, Gent University; Forrester Katrina (2019), “Reparations, History and the Origins of Global Justice”, in D. Bell (dir.), *Empire, Race and Global Justice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 22–51; Thompson Janna (2015), “Reparative Claims and Theories of Justice”, in K. Neumann and J. Thompson (dir.), *Historical Justice and Memory*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 45–62; Torpey John (2001), “‘Making whole what has been smashed’: Reflections on Reparations”, *The Journal of Modern History*, 73(2), pp. 333–358.

²² CD&V commission members were traditionally more apologetic toward colonialism, partly because of the close links between church and state in the Belgian Congo.

²³ Briers Jan, “Cd&v roept alle partijen op om het werk van de Bijzondere Commissie Koloniaal verleden verder te zetten”, 19 december. 2022, available online, accessed 11/09/2023. URL: <https://www.janbriers.be/nieuws/cden-roept-alle-partijen-op-om-het-werk-van-de-bijzondere-commissie-koloniaal-verleden-verder-te-zetten>.

²⁴ Brinckman Bart and Debeuckelaere Heleen, “Congocommissie rijdt zich klem in verontschuldigen en mislukt”, *De Standaard*, 20 december. 2022, available online, accessed 11/09/2023. URL: https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20221219_97959942.

that it was not just caused by a rift between “Flemish” and “Walloon” political cultures or different views on the colonial past in the northern and southern parts of the countries²⁵.

In the aftermath of the failure of the commission to pass any resolutions or recommendations, Belgian media was filled with speculation about potential interference from the monarchy in the final stages of the commission, based on a public statement made by De Vriendt²⁶. The refusal to apologize was clearly political, catering to certain electoral interests, and not based on the reports or hearings, which were quite clear in their condemnation of colonialism and its continued impact. Nadia Nsayi, a Belgo-Congolese political scientist called it a “slap in the face²⁷”.

(Post)Colonial Commissions: Looking Back

It was not the first time a Belgian parliamentary commission focused on events in and around the country’s (former) colonies caused upheaval. At the start of the 2020–2022 commission, Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka, professor at Mons University, wondered “how is it possible for yesterday’s executioner to take the initiative for justice, truth and reconciliation?” and warned that the history of previous commissions is “a sad reminder that any discourse can be limited to its instrumental dimension, and produce the opposite of the ideals it advocates²⁸”. The historical context reveals how the commission’s failure was not just the result of petty party politics but also part of a longer history of fraught Belgian relations with its colonial past. This raises questions about the fundamental coloniality of the current political system: was failure a desired outcome, seen as a way of to marginalise debates about the colonial past?

Truth and reconciliation and other state-sponsored historical commissions are not a new phenomenon. The “Congo Commission”, established by Leopold II in 1904 in response to the international outcry against the atrocities of the rubber exploitation in the Congo Free State is a prominent example²⁹. Although ostensibly about the fate of the Congolese, the societal and political conflicts this commission attempted to resolve were the tensions between the Belgian monarchy and European critics of the “rubber regime”, not the Congolese themselves³⁰. The inquiry served as a method for isolating, defining, and controlling narratives and established the role of scientific “expertise” as a tool for establishing narratives of truth³¹. The 1904–05 commission also needs to be seen in the historical context of the growing field of “colonial sciences”, in which knowledge production about colonized peoples and their practices was used to “improve” and justify colonial control³².

As historian Berber Bevernage demonstrated, opinions about the commission diverged: while some saw (and see) it as a key moment in Belgian colonial history, setting the stage for the transition from the Congo Free State to the Belgian state, others believe it enabled Leopold II to escape relatively unscathed from the international scandals surrounding his rule. Bevernage showed that the relevance of “scientific” expertise to the colonial project grew in the context of debates in and around the 1904–1905 Congo commission. In the

²⁵ Both the Flemish and the Walloon green parties (Groen and Ecolo), as well as the traditional “socialist” parties - Vooruit, *Parti Socialiste*, and the national *Parti des Travailleurs Belges* (PTB)-, voted to approve the recommendations. PTB was the only party in the opposition that voted in favour of reparations.

²⁶ Available online, accessed 11/09/2023. URL: <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2022/12/19/kamercommissie-belgisch-koloniaal-verleden-draait-uit-op-een-sis/>.

²⁷ Lecluyse Lukas, “Een slag in het gezicht”: Belgisch-Congolese politicoloog Nadia Nsayi teleurgesteld over mislukte Kamercommissie”, VRT NWS, 19 december 2022, available online, accessed 11/09/2023. URL: <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2022/12/19/reactie-kamercommissie-congo-rwanda-burundi-nadia-nsayi/>.

²⁸ Bisoka Aymar N., “Belgique-Congo: L’absence et ses masques”, 21 october 2020, available online, accessed 11/09/2023. URL: <https://www.cadtm.org/Belgique-Congo-L-absence-et-ses-masques>. In original: “Comment est-ce possible que le bourreau d’hier prenne l’initiative de la justice, la vérité et la réconciliation” and “rappelle tristement que tout discours peut se limiter à sa seule dimension instrumentale et produire le contraire des idéaux qu’elle prône”.

²⁹ The report was published in 1906. *The Congo: A Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed by the Congo Free State Government*, New York, G.P. Putnam’s Sons.

³⁰ On Congolese testimonies in the 1904 Commission, see Burroughs Robert (2017), *African Testimony in the Movement for Congo Reform: The Burden of Proof*, London, Routledge, pp. 75–103.

³¹ This effort is, of course, part of larger trend, as a broad literature on the construction of scientific expertise demonstrates. See, for example, Shapin Steven (2010). *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as if It Was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press.

³² On Belgian colonial sciences, see, for example, Poncelet Marc (2008), *L’invention des sciences coloniales belges*, Paris, Karthala.

process of the commission's inquiry, appeals were made for a "better colonialism", which would depend on more "expertise" and greater "knowledge" of Congolese customs. In the long term, Bevernage argued, this boost to "colonial science" and the reliance on experts helped create the image of Congo as a model colony, rationally and scientifically managed³³. The commission demonstrated the need for expertise and practical knowledge about the societies and cultures in Congo for the purposes of colonial administration and management. It also enabled Belgians to cast the abuses of the Leopoldian regime in the Congo Free State as aberrations — not inherent to colonialism itself, but rather the result of unskilfully managed colonialism.

In the long run, the recommendations made by the 1904 commission were less important than the role it played as a tool to counteract and channel national and international tensions. In addition, it played a role in increasing the authority of colonial sciences. Even though the 2020–2022 Congo commission and the 2000–2002 Lumumba Commission took place in postcolonial settings, some of the same mechanisms are at work. We now turn to the history of the Lumumba Commission with a critical eye toward its construction, its use of "expertise" and its role as a mechanism for resolving internal Belgian political tensions.

The Mirage of Neutrality: Battles over Expertise, Sources, and Truth(s) in Belgium's Postcolonial Commissions

Despite noteworthy similarities³⁴, important differences distinguish Belgium's postcolonial commissions, not the least in terms of the political acceptance of their results. In the case of the Lumumba Commission, politicians praised the collaboration of politicians and experts and accepted the latter's conclusions with almost no reservations. This contrasts markedly with the political response to the Congo commission. What explains this divergence?

Just as the 1904 commission had more to do with Belgium and the King's image on the (inter)national stage so too was the 2000–2002 Lumumba Commission more of an internal Belgian affair. In 1999, Ludo De Witte published *L'Assassinat de Lumumba*³⁵. The book denounced the murder of Lumumba as the result of a process directly orchestrated by Brussels — and especially its ministers of Foreign (Pierre Wigny) and African Affairs (Charles d'Aspremont Lynden). De Witte held the Belgian government, King Baudouin, and the most important economic players in Congo directly responsible for the violence that ensued during and after Congo's independence³⁶. His book and the attention it received in the Belgian media were the catalyst for a parliamentary investigative commission. This occurred in a changing political context in which the Christian democrats — traditionally more apologetic toward colonialism — were no longer part of the political majority³⁷.

Like the 2020 Congo Commission, the Lumumba Commission was composed of politicians across the political spectrum, but the actual historical work was done by four "expert-historians". As the full title of the "Congo Commission" shows (see above), it was charged with studying the entire period of Belgian colonialism and its aftermath. In contrast, the Lumumba Commission studied events of a historical moment: Belgium's involvement in the Lumumba assassination in 1961. This limited scope isolated his murder from its wider political context of the turbulent decolonization process, as well as from the colonial period preceding it. In doing so, it fulfilled the same exculpatory function as many of these state-organized commission, by making violence (in this case the murder) seem incidental to rather than an integral part of a colonial project that did not end with formal independence.

³³ Bevernage Berber (2018), "The Making of the Congo Question: Truth-Telling, Denial and 'Colonial Science' in King Leopold's Commission of Inquiry on the Rubber Atrocities in the Congo Free State (1904–1905)", *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 22(2), pp. 203–38.

³⁴ See also Mbeka Phoba Monique, Desti Kahuka, and Papa Wetshi (2020), "Analyse et leçons à tirer des expériences précédentes de négociations paritaires dans la relation pré et post-coloniales entre Belges et Africains anciennement colonisés par la Belgique, hier et Afro-descendants de Belgique, aujourd'hui", in *Rapport de la société civile afrodescendante en préparation de la Commission de Vérité au Parlement Fédéral*, 24 septembre 2020, Bruxelles, CACOBURWA, pp. 12–15.

³⁵ Ludo De Witte (1999), *De moord op Lumumba*, Leuven, Van Halewyck. Translated into French in 2000.

³⁶ Verbeeck Georgi (2007), "De Lumumba-commissie: Geschiedschrijving en collectieve herinnering", *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, 122(3), p. 357.

³⁷ On the intimate links between the Catholic Church and colonialism in Congo and the way this was perceived in Flanders, see Langhendries Maarten (2019), "The Missionary: Figure of Reconciliation with the Colonial Past in Flanders (2007–2012)", *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 97(3), pp. 751–71.

The Lumumba Commission was an investigative commission. This meant that its “expert-historians” had a broad range of investigative powers, more closely resembling those of an investigating judge than those normally at the disposal of historians³⁸. For example, they had access to archives that (until today) remain closed to other historians and the general public (they require special security permissions), and they could interrogate witnesses under oath³⁹. No such privileges or powers were granted to the experts in the recent Congo Commission. Our preliminary report was mainly based on a review and summary of the existing scholarship, with little additional primary source research or access to classified archival materials⁴⁰.

As in the 1904 commission, in both postcolonial commissions, “expertise” served political goals and/or reflected wider societal power relations. For both commissions, much of the public debate revolved around the exclusion of African and/or Afrodescendant experts. In the Lumumba Commission, all of the “experts” were white Belgians, only one of whom had Central African research experience, albeit not as a historian. Whereas Prof. Jean Omasombo of UNIKIN (Université de Kinshasa), the only historian with expertise in the subject matter, was only given the position of assistant to the other, white, experts⁴¹. In his own words, his methodology was “shaped above all by prohibitions”. He could not touch Belgian archives, “for his own protection”. He continues:

It was for me an occasion to experience what it was like to be a n*gro, to be perceived as having no individuality by simple biological determinism, as I was made into a representative of a region of the world and spokesperson for its opinion. I could really feel the weight of the still very present colonial gaze.⁴²

His contribution to the report was consigned to the annexes. In the case of the Lumumba Commission, a clear racialized hierarchy of expertise was thus established that disguised itself as “objectivity”. “Experts” were chosen from among those deemed as having enough distance and detachment. However, this “objectivity” was defined very unilaterally. For example, one of the four experts of the commission was a military historian who had a well-known dislike for the figure of Lumumba and showed a clear sympathy for Belgian armed forces⁴³.

The Parliament chose a seemingly different attitude toward “expertise” in the most recent Congo Commission. Not all experts were academics, and half had Central African roots. However, the commission selected a number of organizations to function as “representatives of the diaspora” who were to be “consulted” during the redaction of the preliminary report. Their lack of remuneration and the fact that the content of the report had to be kept from them again created hierarchies between different levels of expert participation. Their sidelining was less blatant than that of Omasombo’s during the Lumumba Commission, nevertheless it was still visible and palpable. Moreover, the expertise of our Black female colleague Anne Wetsi Mpoma was targeted by politicians and in the media on the topic of reparations⁴⁴.

³⁸ An investigative commission (commissions d’enquêtes) can “prendre toutes les mesures d’instruction prévues par le Code d’instruction criminelle ou certaines d’entre elle”. See La Chambre, “Règlement de la Chambre des représentants”, 20 december 2020, D/2020/4686/07, available online, accessed 02/09/2023. URL: https://www.lachambre.be/kvcr/pdf_sections/publications/reglement/reglementFR.pdf.

³⁹ Verbeeck G., “De Lumumba-commissie ...”, art. cité, p. 363; Bevernage Berber (2011), “History by Parliamentary Vote: Science, Ethics and Politics in the Lumumba Commission”, *History Compass*, 9(4), p. 302; Klep Christ (2007), “Een problematische erfenis: België en de moord op Lumumba”, *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, 122(3), p. 380.

⁴⁰ Except for the parts written by Zana Etambala, which relied on primary sources.

⁴¹ Willame Jean-Claude, “Commission Lumumba: Pièges et parasites”, *La Revue Nouvelle*, 11 november 2001, p. 33.

⁴² Tshonda Jean Omasombo (2022), “Commission Lumumba: Difficile regard sur un passé”, Forum Association Belge des Africanistes, 22, p. 11. In original: “faite surtout par des interdits” and “Ce fut pour moi l’occasion de faire l’expérience d’être un n*gre, d’être perçu comme n’ayant pas de personnalité propre, par simple déterminisme biologique, représentant d’une région du monde et porte-parole de son opinion. J’ai pu vraiment ressentir combien était pesant le regard colonial encore bien présent [...]”.

⁴³ Klep C., “Een problematische erfenis”, art. cité, p. 380.

⁴⁴ See, for example, “Expert bijzondere Kamercommissie rond koloniaal verleden pleit voor herstelbetalingen”, HLN Nieuws, 27 oktober 2021, available online, accessed 02/09/2023. URL: <https://www.hln.be/binnenland/expert-bijzondere-kamercommissie-rond-koloniaal-verleden-pleit-voor-herstelbetalingen-aa9e9d04/>.

A Failure to Translate?

While historians in the Lumumba Commission denied the suggestion of political interference⁴⁵ in their work, we have argued elsewhere that it is not necessarily direct political pressure that shapes the work of commissioned history⁴⁶. Rather, it is an awareness of the (sometimes subtle) expectations of the broader public and of politicians in particular and the pressure of “*l'ordre du discours*” of parliamentary reports⁴⁷. To us as well, it was clear that we had to come up with ways to make the very complex history of and historiography on colonialism more digestible to politicians who had little knowledge of or interest in the specialist debates in academic literature. Bevernage calls this a “translation-struggle” — a rephrasing or restyling of historiography to suit the specific audiences (and political objectives) of such commissions⁴⁸.

While this “translation” is apparent in all commissions, it has taken different forms. In the case of the Lumumba Commission, it expressed itself through a heavy emphasis on the possibility of “knowing the truth” combined with the methodology of “historical critique” and a clear hierarchization of sources. Written sources were considered more reliable than other sources, especially oral ones⁴⁹.

In our work for the Congo Commission, we felt caught between public expectations of what history can do in terms of “truth-telling” and our methodology and epistemological foundations as historians. Within the wider public, there is an uncritical belief in objective historical truth, which is assumed to be contained in (preferably) written sources. This approach also seeped into the language of the resolution that led to the Congo Commission. It explicitly required us to establish “areas of consensus” in historical knowledge about the colonial past. Such expectations do not always align with professional historians’ ideas about the fundamentally interpretative character of history and the provisional nature of its conclusions. Historians generally do not think sources speak for themselves — hence the emphasis on interpretation — and believe good history writing is a progressive revision of narratives based on conversation between historians. Our “translation-struggle” thus consisted in the impossible task of reconciling public and political expectations of “truth-telling” with our own understanding of history writing as an interpretive enterprise that nonetheless allows for areas of consensus to emerge through the meticulous application of historical methodologies and source criticism, and the collaborative effort of a scholarly community.

We were very aware of the risk of undermining our own position and arguments as “experts”. Indeed, such self-reflexivity and nuanced debates about the historiography on the part of historians is often misunderstood in the public arena as a kind of relativism in which all “opinions” about the past are equally valid and/or as the absence/impossibility of consensus.

The Lumumba Commission deployed an almost “legalistic” approach to truth-telling in the context of history writing. While historians in the Lumumba Commission stressed they were not “judges”, much of their methodology reflected an almost positivistic approach to the sources. Source critique remained limited to the formal and more technical aspects of the sources. Like the historians working for the recent Congo commissions, it is likely that those working for the Lumumba Commission made some choices in terms of approach based on managing public expectations about the work of historians⁵⁰. Yet, it is not surprising that one of the most important critiques of the Lumumba Commission was its fetishism for texts and the narrow (legalistic) perception of what constitutes “responsibility”. In his annexed report, Jean Omasomba Tshonda, as well as many observers, pointed out that in the tense and tumultuous decolonization period, not all discussions and decisions might have made it into written documents; hence, the almost singular reliance on written texts might have disguised the political responsibilities of some of the actors involved⁵¹.

⁴⁵ Bevernage B., “History by Parliamentary Vote”, art. cité, p. 301.

⁴⁶ See also Rovetta, Ornella (2021), « Écrire l'histoire en commission : La justice pénale internationale à la lumière des archives françaises », *Revue d'histoire contemporaine de l'Afrique*, online, accessed 13/11/2023. URL : <https://oap.unige.ch/journals/rhca/article/view/rwandarovetta/442>.

⁴⁷ Mathys G. and Van Beurden S., “History by Commission”, art. cité.

⁴⁸ Bevernage B., “History by Parliamentary Vote”, art. cité, p. 301.

⁴⁹ See Ceuppens Bambi (2007), “Lumumba. De complotten ? De moord. Onderzoeksrapport of historische studie?”, *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, 122(3), pp. 385–400.

⁵⁰ For a critical reflection by one of the members of the Lumumba Commission, see Gerard Emmanuel (2007), “Het Lumumba Onderzoek”, *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, 122(3), pp. 401–10.

⁵¹ Tshonda cited in Bevernage Berber (2012), “Geschiedenis in overheidsopdracht: Wetenschap, ethiek en politiek in de Belgische Lumumba-commissie”, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 125(1), p. 92. For more on the role of historians in the Lumumba Commission, see Bevernage B., “History by Parliamentary Vote”, art. cité; Ceuppens B., “Lumumba”, art. cité; Verbeeck G., “De Lumumba-com-

In our sections of the report for the recent Congo Commission, we took a different approach. Having neither the time nor ability to access and work with oral or written primary sources, we had to summarize existing debates and literature, which meant our approach was far more interpretative than the almost legalistic, more positivist approach of historians in the Lumumba-commission. In our introduction and own sections, we emphasized broad trends and continuities in the development of knowledge about the colonial past. We focused less on describing what happened under colonialism and more on explaining how colonialism has been understood, devoting special attention to its structural impacts. In the section on archives, we argued the need for a more critical approach to the sources, which treats them as part of the technologies of colonial rule that do not merely reflect “the truth” about the past but also construct historical realities by limiting who is allowed to speak through the archival sources⁵². We also stressed the importance of other sources — oral as well as material — for writing histories of colonialism, as well as the existence of critical methodologies for their use.

Nevertheless, according to Bevernage, part of the necessary work of translation experts do in these commissions is also to make the results more palatable to the politicians involved — effectively depoliticizing the issues at hand and reinforcing the power of these commissions to fulfil their function as a “technology of rule”. Politicians’ demands for consensus from experts can also have such effects. While party politics and political manipulation definitely played important roles in the failure of the commission, we also wonder if our choice to foreground the complexities of historical research on colonialism rather than explaining them away, made it easier to set aside our results. Was its failure also in part the result of an inability (or refusal?) to translate?

Much of the coloniality of these commissions manifests itself in their culturally constructed and often racist assumptions about notions of the neutrality of expertise and the objectivity of scientifically based “truth”. As a technology of rule, they rely on positivistic ideas about historical truth and “the facts” and adopt legalistic definitions of what constitutes “responsibility”. The language of “expertise” is used to give the outcomes of such commissions a scientific cachet. Although “experts” themselves can try to push back against political and societal expectations, they risk undermining their own positions within such commissions. These commissions thus rarely lead to immediate change and can be used to neutralize grassroots initiatives – raising questions about the roles of historians in such politicized endeavours. We attempted to counteract the coloniality of hegemonic knowledge creation, but only had a limited impact on the expectations with which commission members received the report. With the recent Congo Commission, interpretations of expertise broadened — both in terms of the experts selected and the role of hearings — although they remained hierarchical. The role of Congolese in Congo remained limited: they were heard only in the later stages, casting them as “witnesses”, not producers of knowledge. Even with its severe limitations, this broadening of expertise and expert knowledge as well as our refusal to embrace all too legal notions of “responsibility” led some commission members do devalue said experts and expertise.

Some form of “translation” of disciplinary knowledge and methodologies is always necessary, and these processes are necessarily imperfect, but we do wonder if the commission’s failure reveals its limitations as a technology or rule, unable to account for broader notions of expertise and less positivist understandings of historical knowledge. Or was it a more deliberate (but misguided) move to silence discussions on Belgium’s colonial history and ongoing consequences? Or a more banal political failure in which the commission fell victim to current political tensions in Belgium, the limited political reach of the commission’s chair (a member of the Flemish Green party), or indeed pressure from the monarchy? In any case, these recent developments show the limitations of this kind of model of historical

missie”, art. cité, p. 363; Willame J.-C., “Commission Lumumba”, art. cité, p. 33; and Tshonda J.O., “Commission Lumumba”, art. cité, p. 11.

⁵² See, for instance, Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty (1993). “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in P. Williams and L. Christman (dir.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp. 66–111; Stoler Ann Laura (2010), *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

investigative commissions. More importantly perhaps, in failing, it might have shown more clearly the inability of such a commission to function as a gatekeeper that attempts to close off certain societal debates or to symbolically establish an end to the long-term structural impact of colonialism. These debates are unlikely to disappear from the public arena, on the contrary. The commission was perhaps but one element in a larger societal process that continues to unfold.

*Sarah Van Beurden,
The Ohio State University
Gillian Mathys,
Ghent University*

Bibliography

- BEVERNAGE Berber (2011), “History by Parliamentary Vote: Science, Ethics and Politics in the Lumumba Commission”, *History Compass*, 9(4), pp. 300–11.
- BEVERNAGE Berber (2012), “Geschiedenis in overheidsopdracht: Wetenschap, ethiek en politiek in de Belgische Lumumba-commissie”, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 125(1), pp. 80–95.
- BEVERNAGE Berber (2018), “The Making of the Congo Question: Truth-Telling, Denial and ‘Colonial Science’ in King Leopold’s Commission of Inquiry on the Rubber Atrocities in the Congo Free State (1904–1905)”, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 22(2), pp. 203–38.
- BROPHY Alfred (2006), *Reparations: Pro and Con*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- BURROUGHS Robert (2017), *African Testimony in the Movement for Congo Reform: The Burden of Proof*, London, Routledge.
- CEUPPENS Bambi (2007), “Lumumba. De complotten? De moord. Onderzoeksrapport of historische studie?” *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, 122(3), pp. 385–400.
- DE WITTE Ludo (1999), *De moord op Lumumba*, Leuven, Van Halewyck.
- FORRESTER Katrina (2019), “Reparations, History and the Origins of Global Justice”, in D. BELL (dir.), *Empire, Race and Global Justice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 22–51.
- GERARD Emmanuel (2007), “Het Lumumba Onderzoek”, *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, 122(3), pp. 401–10.
- KLEP Christ (2007), “Een problematische erfenis: België en de moord op Lumumba”, *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, 122(3), pp. 374–84.
- LANGHENDRIES Maarten (2019), “The Missionary: Figure of Reconciliation with the Colonial Past in Flanders (2007–2012)”, *Revue belge de Philologie et d’Histoire*, 97(3), pp. 751–71.
- MATHYS Gillian et VAN BEURDEN Sarah, “History by Commission: The Belgian Colonial Past in the Public Eye”, *Journal of African History*, pp.1–10.
- PONCELET Marc (2008), *L’invention des sciences coloniales belges*, Paris, Karthala.
- QUIJANO Aníbal (2007), “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”, *Cultural studies*, 21(2–3), pp. 168–78.
- ROVETTA Ornella (2021), “Écrire l’histoire en commission : La justice pénale internationale à La lumière des archives françaises”, *Revue d’histoire contemporaine de l’Afrique*. Online, accessed 13/11/2023. URL: <https://oap.unige.ch/journals/rhca/article/view/rwandarovetta/442>.
- SHAPIN Steven (2010), *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as if It Was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- SPIVAK Gayatri Chakravorty (1993), “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in P. WILLIAMS et L. CHRISTMAN (dir.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp. 66–111.
- STOLER Ann Laura (2010), *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.

- THOMPSON Janna (2015), “Reparative Claims and Theories of Justice”, in K. NEUMANN et J. THOMPSON (dir.), *Historical Justice and Memory*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 45–62.
- TORPEY John (dir.) (2003), *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices*, New York, Rowan and Littlefield.
- TSHONDA, Jean Omasombo (2022), “Commission Lumumba: Difficile regard sur un passé”, *Forum Association Belge des Africanistes*, 22, pp. 221–61.
- VAN DE MIEROOP Kenan (2015), “Historical Presents: A Study of the Debates Around Reparations for Slavery in the United States and France, the Post Racial Era and the Age of Commemoration”, PhD thesis, Gent University.
- VERBEECK Georgi (2007) “De Lumumba-commissie: Geschiedschrijving en collectieve herinnering”, *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, 122(3), pp. 357–73.
- WILLAME, Jean-Claude (2001), “Commission Lumumba: Pièges et parasites”, *La Revue Nouvelle*, 11 novembre, pp. 30–35.