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Matthew G. Stanard. *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. 387 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-3777-3.

Guy Vanthemsche. *Belgium and the Congo, 1885-1980.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 289 S. ISBN 978-0-521-19421-1.

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Sammelrez: M. G. Stanard: Selling the Congo

Over the past decades several publications have seen the light of day that address the impact of the colonial experience on the European metropole. The vast majority of these writings deal with British imperialism only. The French experience comes in second. One might wonder how representative the two vast, grand and long-lasting empires are for the colonial impact in the rest of Europe.

In the past five years the Belgian case has entered the scene as well. Guy Vanthemsche, Congo. De impact van de kolonie op België, Tielt 2007; idem, La Belgique et le Congo. Empreintes d'une colonie (Nouvelle histoire de Belgique, vol. 4), Bruxelles 2007; Vincent Viaene / David Van Reybrouck / Bambi Ceuppens (eds.), Congo in België. Koloniale cultuur in de metropool, Leuven 2009. In 2011 the here reviewed monograph by Matthew G. Stanard provided an in-depth study of the history of imperialistic propaganda in Belgium. In 2012, an English translation/updated version of a 2007 monograph published in Dutch and French by Guy Vanthemsche appeared. These two monographs made the impact of Congo on Belgium accessible to an English reading audience.

The two books are complementary, Vanthemsche's covering how Congo influences Belgian politics and economics, and Stanard's how colonialism was operationalized and conveyed to the Belgian public through propaganda. They both contribute to a broader understanding of the impact of colonialism on colonial powers. Nevertheless, the two works are very different in research and writing style.

Mathew G. Stanard is Associate Professor of history at Berry College (Georgia, USA). In his youth he lived in the vicinity of Brussels for several years. This experience has sown the seeds of his interest in Belgian imperialism. This eventually led to the writing of "Selling the Congo", a well written book that gives a good overview of Belgian imperialistic propaganda, but to my opinion misrepresents some of these initiatives by lack of appraisal for the wider societal and political context.

On the flap we read that "Belgium not only ruled an African empire but also, through widespread, enduring, and eagerly embraced propaganda, produced an imperialist-minded citizenry". The argument developed by Stanard is a tad more nuanced than how the publisher rendered it. In the preface he still leaves all options open: "Was propaganda evidence of an imperialistic spirit? Or did it indicate the contrary, since so many people apparently needed convincing?" (p. x). He addresses the imperialistic spirit of the makers of the propaganda, but when it comes to the impact on "so many people", the author assumes more than he bears out. Throughout his analysis he tends to read imperialism in a lot of activities which appear squarely nationalistic or royalist to me.

After an introductory chapter and a historical sketch of the beginnings of Belgian colonialism under King Leopold II, he discusses five media of colonial propaganda in his core chapters: expositions, museums, education, monuments and films. The argument he develops in each of these chapters illustrates his insightful summary of Belgian colonial propaganda: "stress on others' jealousy was to be a recurrent theme in succeeding decades, alongside effusive praise for Leopold II, for colonial pioneers, and for the so-called anti-slavery campaigns" (p. 37). This continuity, fundamentally aimed at nation-building and attachment to the monarchy, is convincingly established. What is less convincing are the way he deals with dynamics, changes and differences.

In expositions and museum exhibitions Stanard identifies a shift after the First World War. Before the war, displays and discourses stressed a rupture between the

Independent Congo State and the Belgian Congo. After the war, the two eras are collapsed, and Leopold II and colonial pioneers heroized. Stanard frames this shift inside Belgian imperialism. However, the new approach is completely in line with how the War itself was addressed (heroizing the king and the military) and can better be understood against this background.

Likewise, when he notices a significant rise in the number of statues of Leopold II in the 1950s, he assumes that these monuments convey a colonialist message, whereas they coincide with an intra-Belgian struggle over the continuation of the Belgian monarchy in the aftermath of the Second World War. Hence, although maybe infused with a touch of Belgian imperialism as a secondary message, these statues mainly want to rally Belgians around the dynasty and the nation.

When it comes to colonial education, the author mixes up education about the colony and education for the colony, at the same time ignoring education in the colony (e.g. p. 142). Training of civil servants to be employed in the Congo is of a very different nature than instilling the school going generation with an image of Belgian imperialism. As an example of such messages, he recognizes that Congo is depicted as a unified and homogenous country, which is obviously not concomitant with the Congolese reality. What he does not realize, though, is that this homogenous and unified image is perfectly in line with the impression Belgian propagandists want to convey of their own divided country.

He is aware of the obvious but not always relevant division between Flemings and Walloons, but he seems to miss the divide between clerical and anti-clerical, which is probably even more important when it comes to Belgian colonialism. His persistent focus on propaganda efforts by the state and colonial circles results in a one-sided image, ignoring what is probably - at least in Flanders - the most important actor when it comes to representations and perceptions of the Congo: the Church. In the chapter on films, for instance, the author struggles with *Tokèndé*, a film that does not fit his interpretation of the bulk of colonial cinematography. It is not a coincidence that it is a missionary film. The Church does not fit his raster to interpret pro-Empire propaganda.

The merit of this book is to give a solid overview of the initiatives of colonial propaganda, bringing together previously scattered research. He does occasionally draw attention to the surrounding political and social context in Belgium. At times, he recognizes the strong nationalistic and royalist aspects of the colonial propaganda (e.g. p. 112, 198, 201), but too easily assumes that the underlying rationale remains essentially imperialistic.

Largely missing from his analysis is the impact of propaganda efforts on the targeted audience. He does, for instance, mention the number of visitors to colonial expositions but it is not clear to me how "more than thirty million Belgians from all provinces" (p. 66) can possibly have visited the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi section at the World Expo 1958, knowing that Belgium had only nine million inhabitants at the time.

After reading "Selling the Congo" I am still inclined to consider Belgians as "reluctant imperialists". To give one example, Stanard holds that the fact that displays in the Museum of the Belgian Congo in Tervuren were not changed after independence, is proof that the Belgians had already interiorized imperialism (e.g. p. 116). It could just as well mean that the colonial propaganda abruptly came to an end and that the population at large could not care less.

Style-wise, the contrast with the history writing of Guy Vanthemsche could hardly be bigger. Vanthemsche is history professor at the Flemish Free University of Brussels (VUB) and is specialized in the economic and institutional history of the 19th and 20th centuries. He dedicates his book to his wife, who is born in the Congo, and to the late Jean Stengers, renowned historian at the French speaking branch of the Free University of Brussels (ULB). Stengers can be considered the founding father of critical history writing about Belgian colonialism, and Vanthemsche is clearly continuing in his footsteps.

Much like his mentor, Vanthemsche is an exponent of meticulous historical research resting on massive solid data. This does not mean that he shies away from topics where evidence happens to be scant. I think he would be the first, though, to admit that he is not the kind of historian who would write a book like Stanard's. The difference in style is paramount, although they both fill a void in the research on imperialism outside of the British and to a lesser extent French atypical archetypes.

In the chapter on Belgium's domestic policy, Vanthemsche points out that the Congo never had a big impact on the Belgian institutional layout or on public conscience. The Congo only mattered for the major political players, and even then only three times: (before) the beginning, during the Second World War and (after) the end. When the Belgian state took over the Congo from King Leopold II in 1908, the issue was divisive, but faded out right after the take-over and was soon eclipsed by the First World War. At the beginning of the Second World War, the position of the Congo determined the side the Belgian government would be on. Towards the end of the

1950s the Congo became part of everyday party politics and - quite ironically - the eight months after the Congolese independence the former colony finally became one of the dominant issues on the agenda. Apart from these sporadic eruptions of Congo-mania, colonial affairs were merely the object of connivance between political and economic elites and of conflict between the ministers of colonies and of foreign affairs.

In the next chapter the author points to the paradoxes between Belgium's external position and its colonial policies. "The colonial empire allowed Belgium to play an international role that far exceeded its intrinsic capacities." (p. 101) This overrated position of Belgium reached its climax when the American war effort relied on uranium from the Congo, an episode which is painstakingly reconstructed by Vanthemsche. However, the colonial stances often clashed with the normal diplomatic behaviour of the country. Belgium's neutrality was at odds with a self-assured colonial policy, its openness with the isolationist behaviour in colonial affairs. Moreover, throughout the colonial era the Belgian authorities never stopped fearing the (perceived) British and French threats.

In the chapter on the economic impact of the Congo, Vanthemsche demonstrates that the Congo had a positive impact on the Belgian balance of payments despite a deficit on the trade balance. The distribution through the port of Antwerp, a sophisticated system of dues at the same time respecting and circumventing the free trade zone, a separate budget for the Congo, and a currency parity clearly advantaging the Belgian side of the equation, all led to a positive impact on the Belgian macro-economy. When looking in more detail, it appears that mainly a few big Belgian financial holdings and industries profited from it, whereas most investors and industrialists were hardly interested in the Congo.

The final chapter describes the decline of Belgian interests in the Congo. From an attempt to continue the Belgian hold on Congolese politics and economics at the time of independence, the political, economic, development and personal connections were all but severed by 1990. Contrary to the previous chapters, the post-independence story is primarily unfolding in the Congo rather than in Belgium. Precisely because of this shift in focus, it becomes more problematic than in the previous chapters that there is very little agency for Congolese. Especially because of Vanthemsche's eye for inter-personal relations and intrigue, it is a pity that Mobutu seems to be the only African whose agency is acknowledged.

In the end, it becomes clear that Congo mainly mattered for Belgian elites on the one hand and for people who spent part of their lives in the Congo on the other. The underlying motivations were either material benefits or strengthening of the nation (including attachment to the monarchy), if not a combination of both. In that sense the rationale of high politics and haute finance were in line with the propaganda efforts described by Stanard. For the society as a whole, however, Belgian colonialism and the Congo remained very marginal.

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