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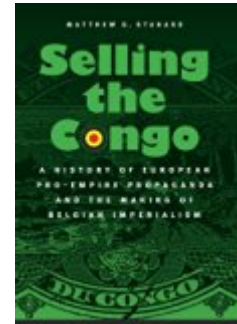
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

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Colonial Culture in Context: *Selling the Congo* and Belgian Pro-Empire Propaganda

In recent years scholars have begun to explore the question of colonial culture in Europe. Where “empire” was once understood as a distant land across the seas, visited by enterprising young men in government service and proselytized by missionaries, scholars now suggest that one need not have worn colonial flannels to have had some connection to the colonies. Guided by the works of scholars like Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, many historians now see Europe and overseas territories together in a dynamic of shifting and negotiated methods and philosophies of expansion and rule, with a significant feedback loop. With a more fluid understanding of empire, questions about empire have become linked to questions about the culture and lived experience of Europeans within Europe. The stakes in the investigation are high. Some ask, for example, whether German methods of colonial warfare, constructions of race, and treatment of non-Europeans, can be connected to the Holocaust.[1] Most studies of colonial culture have looked at Britain, France, and Germany. Matthew Stanard’s *Selling the Congo* looks to expand our view of European colonial culture and consider the new understandings of empire in a different context, that of Belgian imperialism and pro-empire propaganda.

Long overshadowed by Britain, France, and Germany, not just in the world wars but also in colonial studies, the Belgian case is fertile ground. The Belgian empire in Congo began without popular enthusiasm at the end of the nineteenth century, was christened in scandal on the

eve of World War I, and yet lost with a sense of shock and dismay in 1960. The distance between the lack of popular enthusiasm at the outset and the fairly widespread disappointment at the end of empire was covered by pro-empire propaganda, which Stanard closely examines in *Selling the Congo*. Adam Hochschild’s widely read *King Leopold’s Ghost* (1998) explored the creation and scandal of Leopold II’s personal empire in Africa. *Selling the Congo* examines the attempt by the state, missionary organizations, and private interests to create enthusiasm for the “inherited” empire in Belgium through expositions, museums, education, monuments, and cinema. Because the focus is on imperial advocacy some elements of popular culture, including commercial advertising and literature, are largely omitted. The question of colonial culture, in Belgium and Europe more broadly, is at the forefront.

The chapter on imperial exhibitions, “Denying African History to Build the Belgian Nation,” showcases the strengths of Stanard’s approach. This chapter explores international expositions and world’s fairs, in Belgium, alongside national and even local expositions. Advocates of expositions held many of the same positions as pro-empire propagandists outside of Belgium: “they emphasized nation and dynasty; the benefits of European technology, education and healthcare for Congolese children; agricultural advancement; and industrial growth, all the while denying the value of indigenous culture, society, and economy” (p. 88). Stanard’s analysis of

smaller, local events highlights the particulars of the Belgian case. The analysis also provides evidence of some, if limited, popular enthusiasm. Local chambers of commerce and colonial clubs were responsible for most local exhibits. *Selling the Congo* is successful in its attempt to explore Belgian pro-empire propaganda specifically and to place it in a wider European context.

Edward Said insisted that culture is always a matter of “appropriation, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures.”[2] This is certainly the understanding behind most analysis of colonial culture. In keeping with that understanding, *Selling the Congo* shows some of the ways that imperial propaganda attempted to shape understandings of the nation. Colonial exhibitions changed little about their portrayal of Congo between 1908 and 1960. In fact, the 1958 World’s Fair included Congolese people on display, which was retrograde enough to provoke public outcry. Yet, as Stanard points out, the portrayal of Leopold II changed significantly between 1908 and 1960. Leopold became a colonial hero, “a great figure,” who “provided the country with the one and only tradition with which it might bolster the legitimacy of its colonial rule” in the shadow of Germany and the interwar economic crisis (p. 59). The Congo may not have played a role in the daily life of most Belgians or have provided significant economic benefits to average taxpayers, but an imagined Congo did allow the creation and redemption of Leopold II as a strong nation- and empire-builder and Belgium as a powerful, civilizing force. The empire was also a “national project, around which disparate elements in the metropole could associate,” a bond for Flemings, Walloons, and German-speakers in Belgium (p. 249). Imperial propaganda was selling Belgium alongside the Congo.

In particular, *Selling the Congo* is informative on the sources of pro-empire propaganda that moved Belgium from an uneasy embrace of its empire to the feeling of a bond severed in 1960. The state, private capital, and the Catholic Church were the three, interconnected “pillars” of support for empire in the Congo. Private colonial enthusiasts initiated Belgian colonial cinema and colonial clubs and religious educational institutions were responsible for most of the colonial education before World War II. Local governments and colonial veterans were primarily responsible for the colonial monuments and memorials which dotted the country, serving as civic sites, and which were often deemed valuable enough to be rebuilt or relocated if damaged in the First or Second World War. However, many clubs and organizations were in-

tertwined with the state, which not only provided financial contributions but managed to “centralize information production” about empire (p. 254). Colonial clubs relied on information from the government and sometimes guidance from the Office Colonial staff for their locally generated displays and exhibitions. The state controlled a uniform message of empire and “downplayed if not outright suppressed potentially diverse messages” (p. 254). This is useful analysis of how the pro-empire message was both spread and controlled within Belgium. Stanard rightly points out that studies of the interplay between state and private interests in pro-empire propaganda elsewhere would be beneficial to scholars.

Stanard argues that the case of Belgium gives insight into broader colonial culture in Europe and can serve as a testing ground for some of the new theories and approaches to empire. Recent approaches emphasize considering the metropole and colonies together in a unified field of analysis. *Selling the Congo* suggests that, while an analysis of metropole and colonies together is useful, in some cases “older models of empire are still relevant,” arguing that there was still a fairly clear divide between home and empire in the Belgian case (p. 31). Empire was never central to Belgian identity and the Belgian Congo provides an example of European empire that, while “assymmetrically large” compared to its metropole, was considerably smaller than the often studied British and French empires. Few Belgians went to the Congo and imperial enthusiasm was never widespread. The Belgian government was also “exceptionally concerned about the presence of Africans in the metropole, resulting in a policy of control and exclusion” (p. 252). Just as empires may sometimes be better understood as shifting relationships, the findings in *Selling the Congo* suggest there is no framework of analysis for colonial culture that can easily be imposed across Europe without adjustments.

Selling the Congo brings Belgium into the conversation about pro-empire propaganda and colonial culture within Europe but it does raise some questions for non-experts in Belgian history. Throughout the book Stanard refers to the fact that Belgium “inherited” rather than “conquered” its empire. That may have been the technical reality, but was that always the popular understanding, across the decades considered? Certainly early imperial propaganda was an attempt to sell “Leopold’s Congo” to the Belgian public. However, Leopold II was king of Belgium and later colonial enthusiasts linked his empire-building with the Belgian nation. A bit more nuanced discussion of the popular understanding of the “inheritance” of the Congo would be useful for the non-

specialist. More information could also be provided on the end of Belgium's empire and perhaps the state media which accompanied it. If few Belgians were colonial enthusiasts, why was the loss of empire after a relatively brief conflict met with "shock and unpreparedness" (p. 14)?

Selling the Congo suggests many possible avenues for future research, especially in the direction of colonial clubs. The agents of pro-empire propaganda have been identified and their methods of communication analyzed, but scholars have yet to fully explore their motivations. One imagines the possibilities of a study that integrates more individual accounts and explores the colonial clubs in depth. Colonial enthusiasm was a male domain, but how did colonial clubs differ from other male associations in the same time period? Were colonial veterans groups significantly different from post-World War I veterans groups? This is an especially pertinent question considering that enthusiasts intended for Belgium's empire to project greatness, though in reality it often served as a fig leaf to shield the country from the glare of an increasingly strong Germany. How long did associations last and did colonial clubs have a steady supply of younger members, or did they more closely resemble today's Elks Lodge? What happened to colonial clubs after the loss of empire?

Selling the Congo brings more focus to the image of colonial culture in Belgium and in Europe. Even if "home" and "empire" still remained distinct in the minds of most Belgians, there were meaningful connections between them. The enthusiasts of Belgium's empire certainly seem to have been concerned with the status of their small country in the shadow of the wars which defined the first half of the twentieth century in Europe.

Whether or not the Belgian state was able to effectively create a widespread appreciation for empire, pro-empire advocacy involved considerable state control of private organizations. That in itself seems a significant aspect of colonial culture in Belgium. Though Belgium had an empire on which the sun set daily and its loss did not lead to a crisis of national identity, *Selling the Congo* has broad relevance for many who do not study Belgium. Stanard's efforts to identify the specific sources and mediums of pro-empire propaganda—those who actually built the monuments in small towns—are an important part of studying colonial culture in Europe. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper assert that empires had "repertoires of rule" rather than fixed responses.[3] In the same way, pro-empire propaganda had multiple media and transmitters. Those sources must be identified to prevent pro-empire propaganda and sentiment from becoming little more than a cloud hanging over Europe. And considering a broader Europe, in richness of detail, will hopefully prevent historians from creating a European colonial culture as inaccurate and lifeless as the statues of colonial figures that populate Belgian street corners and old post-cards.

Notes

[1]. Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama, *German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[2]. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 217.

[3]. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 3.

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