



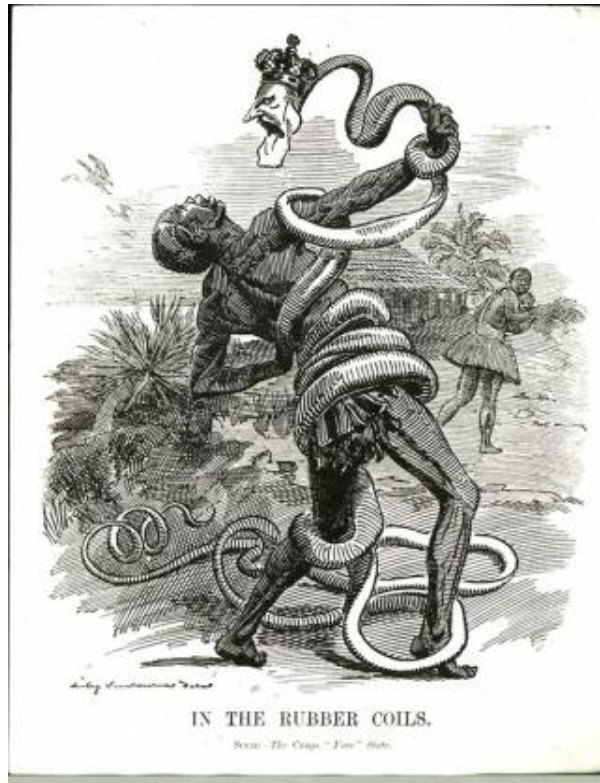
EDUCATION IN A COLONIAL ENVIRONMENT

The colonial past in Belgian history education since 1945

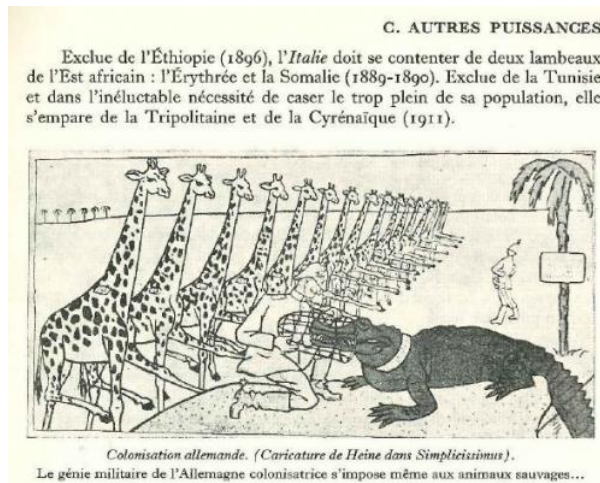
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ABSTRACT

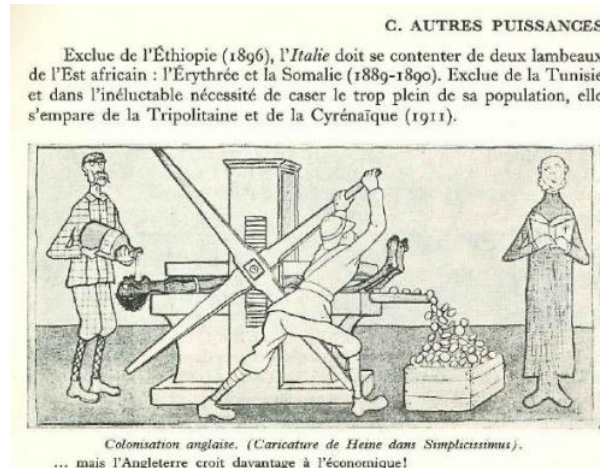
This contribution focuses on the evolving representation of the Belgian-Congolese colonial past in Belgian secondary school history textbooks since 1945. Research distinguishes four phases. As long as the Congo was a Belgian colony, the account of Congolese colonialism was patriotically inspired and triumphalist. Modern imperialism in general was addressed rather critically, but nevertheless constituted a Eurocentric narrative of Western superiority. After the decolonisation of the Congo in 1960, attention to the colonial past dwindled and an amnesia occurred. Only from the 1990s onwards attention to the Belgian-Congolese colonial past increased, particularly focusing on two episodes: the period of the Congo Free State, and the decolonisation process. In the account of the modern imperial past in general a Eurocentric perspective of 'the West and the Rest' prevailed. The new (Flemish) history standards since 2019 require that the colonial past is addressed from multiple (also non-Western) perspectives. In so doing, they aim to counter a purely Eurocentric perspective, and to foster postcolonial reflection.



Cartoon "In The Rubber Coils. Scene - The Congo 'Free' State" in which Belgian king Leopold II is presented as a snake murdering an enslaved Congolese rubber laborer, by Linley-Sambourne in the British satirical magazine *Punch*, November 28, 1906.



The representation of other European countries' colonial enterprise in a Belgian history textbook: extract from *Histoire et Humanités* (1959).



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From 1908 to 1960, Belgium ruled the Congo as a colonial power. The 1960s marked not only decolonisation, but for Belgium also the start of a federalisation process, which led to the regionalisation of education in 1989. This contribution focuses on the evolving representation of the Belgian-Congolese colonial past (also in relation to the general account of the modern imperial past of other European metropolises), in Belgian history textbooks for secondary school since 1945.

Triumphalism and apologetics (1945-1960)

During the period in which the Congo was a Belgian colony, Congolese colonialism was addressed in the voluminous chapters on Belgian history. Patriotism and a national identity were then widely promoted, and the Congolese enterprise (contrary to the Rwandan and Burundian colonial pasts which remained largely invisible, also in historical culture) was enabled in that effort. It was described in triumphalist terms. The Belgian colonisers were represented as heroes who brought civilisation to the colony, and chief among them was the 'brilliant, wise, and generous' King Leopold II. The abuses that occurred in the rubber domains were not denied, yet minimised. The Congolese themselves were barely mentioned. Openly racist stereotypes toward colonised (Congolese and other) peoples were therefore absent from the textbooks, as these were mostly ignored. The account in the textbooks of colonialism in the Congo was in line with historiography, which was rather hagiography.

The account on modern imperialism in general initiated by other European imperial powers, by contrast, was rather critical: the authoritarian regime and economic gain of for instance the British and French colonial enterprise were not ignored. At the same time, however, the textbooks also mentioned the colonial *mission civilisatrice* and used that as the starting point to build a Eurocentric narrative of Western superiority. The contrast between the superior 'West' and the 'poor' and 'underdeveloped' 'Rest' was clearly expressed.

Congolese amnesia (1960-1989)

The decolonisation of the Congo in 1960 was followed by chaos and dictatorship. This led to a post-colonial malaise in Belgian society. Simultaneously, due to the contested (ideologically-charged and communitarian) memory of the Second World War, the Belgian government decreased its engagement in memory politics, and the national (including the 'own' colonial) past started to evaporate from historical culture. This resulted in a quasi-collective amnesia towards the colonial past, which contrasted sharply with academic historiography, that began to reject the hagiographic approach and to take a critical approach.

The representation of the colonial past in history education mirrored the trend in society at large. Parallel to the waning attention to the national past and the disappearance of fostering patriotism as a goal of history education, attention to the Belgian colonial past also dwindled, and was limited mainly to the Congo Free State period (Rwandan and Burundian pasts remained ignored). The triumphalist tone disappeared, and slightly more critical voices appeared, although the account remained quite laudatory of the role Belgium had played in the Congo; furthermore, the responsibility for Congo's turbulent decolonisation and ensuing chaos was assigned exclusively to the Congolese (and to the first Congolese prime minister Patrice Lumumba who was portrayed as a 'first class demagogue').

The tone about the modern imperial past became sharper. Prompted by a growing critical societal spirit which prioritised respect for human rights and democracy over patriotism, a great deal of attention was paid in the 1960-70s to the 'black pages' of history represented by colonialism and slavery, phenomena that became the central targets of a 'hunt for a wrong past'. Contrary to the judgment on the 'own' colonial past, other European countries' colonial enterprises (particularly the French, British and German) were fiercely criticised as being harsh and primarily oriented toward economic gain. However, the underlying Eurocentric narrative of 'the West and the Rest' remained intact. The indigenous peoples of Africa's colonies were still presented as primitive and uncivilized (e.g. indigenous farmers being not sufficiently developed for commercial crops), which in turn accentuated the superiority of the West.

Renewed and critical attention for the remote colonial past (1990-2019)

Shortly after the formal handover, in 1989, of all educational from the Belgian to the regional level, the Flemish and Francophone governments issued standards: minimum objectives per subject. The history standards emphasised critical thinking skills rather than specific (factual) knowledge. New history textbooks continued to provide a critical account of the imperial endeavor of other European metropolises. The national past continued to evaporate in the textbooks, while the Belgian-Congolese colonial past was paid more attention to again. Two episodes were focused upon: the period of the Congo Free State, and the decolonisation process including the assassination of Lumumba. This focus was inspired by two books published at the end of the 1990s and having caused heated public debate: Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost. A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (1998) and Ludo De Witte's *The Assassination of Lumumba* (1999).

In relation to the remote past of Leopold's late nineteenth century rule in the Congo, the textbooks all took a very critical stance. The idea of the colonial *mission civilisatrice* was rejected as hypocritical, and Leopold II was now presented as a 'villain' rather than a hero. By contrast, the textbooks featured much less criticism of the role played by Belgians in the recent Congolese past. Belgium's involvement in the murder of Lumumba was largely ignored, even though this involvement had been clearly demonstrated by academic historians in a Parliamentary Enquiry Commission in 2000. Furthermore, textbooks did not connect the colonial and post-colonial eras to each other. The chaos and misery in the DR Congo over the past fifty years was for instance solely explained from internal-Congolese and intra-African factors. In so doing, the textbooks again failed to connect with academic historiography which became much more attentive to those issues. They rather remained close to historical culture in which a consensus existed that colonialism had its good and bad sides, was a closed chapter, and in which a Eurocentric view of the colonial past prevailed over African counter voices. Nevertheless, textbooks did start to introduce, very modestly though, a Congolese perspective by including primary sources from Congolese (i.e. oral testimonies from eye witnesses of specific events). Modern imperialism, however, was still narrated from a Western perspective, and at least implicitly encouraged a Eurocentric feeling of superiority. Only from 2010 onwards, the academic 'New Imperial History' started to appear in a new textbook, not coincidentally supervised by academic historians.

Historical thinking about the colonial past from multiple perspectives (2019 -present)

Since 2019, new history standards are being gradually implemented in secondary school education in Flanders. In Francophone Belgium, an educational reform is in preparation. The Flemish history standards put key historical concepts such as colonialism, imperialism, decolonisation and neocolonialism explicitly to the fore. In order to transcend a Eurocentric approach, they require, in line with recent academic historiography, that non-Western societies as well as the intercultural contacts between those and Western societies in the past be addressed from multiple (also non-Western) perspectives. In so doing, they aim to, in line with postcolonial migrant communities within society at large who have loudly raised their voices lately, counter a purely Eurocentric perspective. Furthermore, the history standards aim to foster among students a nuanced understanding of the colonial past, and critical reflection on the complex relationship between the colonial past and the post-colonial world. This relates to the current (north-south) power relations, and the extent to which a colonial mindset endures today and fuels 'us-them' thinking, stereotyping, racism and discrimination.

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