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HISTORY MATTERS

History by Commission? The Belgian Colonial Past and the Limits of History in the Public Eye

Gillian Mathys[1] and Sarah Van Beurden[2]*

[1]Ghent University, Gent, Belgium and [2]The Ohio State University, Columbus, United States
*Corresponding author. Email: vanbeurden.2@osu.edu

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In 2020 we were both approached to serve as experts for the Belgian Parliamentary Commission on the Colonial Past. The stated objective of this commission was to scrutinize Belgium's colonial past and the impact of that history on today's society. Concretely, this meant we were asked to collaborate with eight other experts on the production of a preliminary report intended to inform the work of the parliamentarians and help them identify important themes they could further pursue. At the end of 2022, after two years of work which included almost a thousand pages of two expert reports and hundreds of testimonies, the chair of the parliamentary commission admitted it was unable to come to a joint declaration, agreement, or set of recommendations. The stumbling blocks were apologies for Belgian colonialism recommended by the experts.

In this contribution we reflect on the roles historians played in this commission and the wider ramifications of taking on such public academic work by historians. By providing this reflection, we aim to contribute to discussions about the role of historians in public debates. Recent conversations among historians about the relationship between academic and public history on topics such as slavery, race, and colonialism demonstrate the growing stakes of debates like these. In this article we investigate how seemingly mundane procedural and practical concerns can shape history writing, borrowing Michel Foucault's terminology about *l'ordre du discours*. Second, we address how tensions between public and academic perceptions of 'historical truths' undermine the possibilities of public processes of reckoning with colonial pasts. We also reflect on how public writing requires a balancing act between recognizing the complexity of historical processes with the public need for straightforward answers, and specifically how too much complexity can reinforce status quo thinking about empire and its aftermaths. Lastly, we ask ourselves whether historians can overcome the limitations of the political processes in which such work is done. We are interested in locating the fissures in these processes; the openings — whether forced or not — through which historians can successfully take responsibility in public debates about the past. We argue that despite the many obstacles and difficulties, there is no absolute impediment to historians partaking in such processes.

Producing the report

Our work was shaped on the one hand by the broad scale and scope of the remit, and on the other hand by the limited timeframe (four months) and lack of procedural transparency.[1] Our report was commissioned to inform the work of the parliamentarians in the commission and help orient them

[1]Tine Destrooper lists some of the more problematic aspects of this lack of transparency in 'Belgium's "Truth Commission" on its overseas colonial legacy: an expressivist analysis of transitional justice in consolidated democracies', *Journal of Human Rights,* 22:2 (2023), 167 and 170n13.

towards topics for further exploration and research. The content of the report was determined by three elements. The first was a very broad set of questions in the parliamentary resolution (see editor's introduction).[2] In addition, it was guided by what we believed was important to the public understanding of the history of Belgian colonialism (such as the history of the economic exploitation of Central Africa), particularly relevant to current public debates (such as the politics of monuments), and/or insufficiently known to the parliamentarians and the Belgian public (such as the history of religious persecution). As a last element, we took into account outside suggestions and feedback. Conversations with diaspora organizations — which were an explicit part of our assigned task — helped establish priorities in terms of content. An example of a topic included as a result of those conversations was the history of Congolese soldiers in the First World War. We also used a questionnaire sent out to a wide range of experts in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi (including but not limited to historians), as well as to historians elsewhere. (Ideally the parliamentarians should have undertaken such a consultation before formulating the commission's mandate.) Recipients were asked their views on the general state of the scholarship about Belgian colonialism, as well as their experiences with archives and other sources. In addition, each of us had targeted conversations with prominent colleagues. These methods of gathering information proved decisive to the success of the section of the report we wrote on the accessibility and state of relevant archives.

Difficult choices were made about what to include in our report. The remit was simply too broad. Some lacunae were also caused by a lack of expert-members located on the continent and a lack of historians with expertise in Rwandan and Burundian history.[3] Different expert-historians chose different approaches to writing the report: some wrote comprehensive overviews about themes mostly within their areas of expertise, others produced research-intensive chapters on smaller topics in order to make broader arguments. The introduction as well as the conclusions and recommendations were approved by all historians.[4] We also had frequent meetings with the entire expert panel. This helped us to identify areas where historians' insights could prove useful, for example a section on the history of scientific racism to contextualize the discussions of contemporary racism by experts Anne Wetsi Mpoma and Laure Uwase. In the end, the combination of a large task and small group of experts with limited time led to an uneven product.[5]

While these challenges, constraints, and decision-making processes help explain the limitations of the report, they also bring to the fore the inadequacy of time and resources allocated to this project by the Belgian State — whether intentional or not. In a broader sense however, the audience for this report was a fundamental influence not only on *what* we wrote about, but also *how* we wrote about it, as we explore below.

[2]Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *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*, Doc 55 1462/001, 17 July 2020, https://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/pri/congo/55K1462001.pdf.

[3]There was a mismatch between in the composition of the team of expert-historians (the selection of whom was a political process that happened behind closed doors) and the expertise required to answer the questions in the commission's mandate.

[4]Although we communicated with each other about each of our individual chapters, there was no process whereby the group as a whole had to sign off on each individual contribution. One historian withdrew early on in the process.

[5]Although they might appear mundane, the number of practical problems we ran into was significant. The Covid-19 pandemic prevented us from meeting in person, visiting archives, and kept several of us at home as (primary) caretakers, next to our other professional responsibilities. We asked for peer review, but this was refused. Difficulties with the translation and editing processes (all texts appeared in Dutch and French) influenced the quality of the texts, and we were not given the opportunity to make final revisions or see page proofs.

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Politicized contexts and *l'ordre du discours*

In engaging with the commission, we faced the reality of a very politicized present. Public debates in Belgium about colonialism oscillate between two poles: on the one hand, there are increasingly louder calls for recognition of the wrongdoings and violence of Belgian colonialism, spearheaded by African diaspora organizations. On the other hand, there are politically influential groups that emphasize the need to also recognize the 'benefits' (*bienfaits*) of colonialism, advocating for a balance sheet approach to the history of colonialism for example.[6] In response to these public debates, we used the report's introduction as an opportunity to challenge prevailing myths and narratives about colonialism in public debates. It was, however, not merely these politicized debates that made writing the report challenging. Other less immediately apparent limitations were caused by a more general mismatch between the demands and workings of historical research on the one hand and public and political expectations about those on the other hand.

The introduction was structured around four key argumentative threads. First, we highlighted the fallacy of the 'balance sheet approach' to colonialism, debunking the notion that colonialism can be neatly assessed weighing pros and cons. Second, we tackled the argument that the current concern with colonial history is presentist, which wrongly suggests that colonialism enjoyed widespread acceptance in its era. This view often neglects the historical critique and resistance to colonial occupation that existed globally. We also underscored that violence was not merely an aberration within colonialism but rather an integral and structural part of it. A fourth argumentative thread in the introduction addressed the tensions between popular perceptions of the concepts of 'truth' and 'fact' and the more complex engagement historians have with the past. The general mismatch between the practice of historical research on the one hand and public and political expectations about those on the other hand was a significant challenge.[7]

Consequently, our work for the parliamentary commission came with a lot of — often invisible — epistemological as well as practical constraints that created a set of important contradictions. Many of these constraints were the direct result of the political nature of such a commission, and what Foucault called *l'ordre du discours* or the institutionalization and the procedural control of (historical) discourse.[8] Or applied to this commission: the state giving space to address the colonial past within such a commission is also a means to control narratives about that past. The boundaries of what is acceptable discourse and the expectations of how 'truth' needs to be established are unwritten but no less powerfully felt.

The way the resolution formulated our task as 'reconstructing and naming the facts' is also symptomatic of a more general public belief in the 'power' of historical research to 'unearth' the 'truth' about 'the' past, and to deliver neat and circumscribed answers to difficult, often political, questions. In other words, it was strongly influenced by a positivistic understanding of historical research as a straightforward uncovering of 'truth', which is to be located in the archives. From the historian's perspective, this meant that the work of this commission contained a tension that was difficult

[6]See for example the discourse of a former Belgian ambassador to Congo, during an audition by the commission: 'Les "bienfaits" de la colonisation font à nouveau debat', *Le Vif*, 23 May 2022, https://www.levif.be/belgique/les-bienfaits-de-la-colonisation-font-a-nouveau-debat/. See also this statement from MR, 'Congo: Effacer ou expliquer l'histoire', 14 Nov. 2022, https://www.mr.be/agenda/congo-effacer-ou-expliquer-lhistoire/. Such approaches are not limited to Belgium, and are also commonly heard in other former colonizer countries, as well as in Africa. For an examples of 'pros and cons' arguments on the British empire, see P. Satia, 'One tool of "critical thinking" that's done more harm than good', *Slate*, 30 Mar. 2022, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/03/pros-cons-british-empire-balance-sheet-history-imperialism.html. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bahati Lukwebo, president of the senate, also raised the absence of the 'positive aspects' of colonization in our report. See C. Braeckman, 'RD Congo: le president du Sénat est indulgent envers la colonization belge', *Le Soir*, 4 Nov. 2021, https://www.lesoir.be/404555/article/2021-11-04/rd-congo-le-president-du-senat-est-indulgent-envers-la-colonisation-belge.

[7]See also: G. Mathys and S. Van Beurden, 'Technologies of (post)colonial rule? The Belgian Lumumba and Congo commissions in historical perspective', *Revue d'histoire contemporaine de l'Afrique,* forthcoming.

[8]M. Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris, 1971).

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to overcome: between the craft of history and this more public perception of historical research and historical truth.

In practical terms, the expectation that a limited panel of historians, with only a few months' access to archives, would be able to pass final judgements about a large number of complex historiographical debates, was impossible, even without the intervention of a global pandemic. Also, while on occasion archival research yields 'smoking gun' evidence about events, as historians well know, the production of historical research is not simply a fact-finding mission, a matter of opening up the archival boxes and 'discovering' the facts. (Indeed, the very discourse used to describe this is couched in colonially inflected language of discovery and exploration.)

In fact, as historians know well, silences abound in colonial archives. As Laura Ann Stoler reminds us, we should regard archives as sites 'not … of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production'. This allows us to understand 'the conditions of possibility that shaped what could be written … what stories [could and] could not be told, and what [could and] could not be said'.[9] Although in the field of African history this problem can be addressed by paying closer attention to oral traditions and sources and to material culture, this does not always entirely resolve this problem. Even with the development of a wide source base, history-writing remains interpretative. Moreover, these archives, while rich and expansive, remain unreliable conveyors of the experiences of the colonized. Even 'against the grain' and other alternative reading strategies cannot undo their centrality to upholding the colonial system.

Along with the political and public expectations of 'truth-telling', the large scope of what we were asked to do also played a limiting role. Studying the events of a particular historical moment allows for a more detailed, nuanced approach; whereas dealing with an entire era requires a broader focus on general trends, structures, and patterns of causation. Although such synthetic work relies on more focused scholarship to reach general conclusions, it necessarily cannot contain the same level of detail.

Even within the group of ten experts, we encountered problems because of our different understandings of truth. Several among us leaned towards a more legalistic approach to truth-telling, based on whether or not a particular conclusion would stand up in a court of law. This more positivistic approach to history arguably has its uses — for example, in the case of the Dutch report on the events surrounding Srebrenica — but it becomes unwieldy when faced with events of larger scope and longer time periods.[10] Hence the choice of the two of us to adopt a more narrative approach that focused on laying out various interpretations of the past.

Another domain where we felt this *ordre du discours* was in the commission's demand for the identification of 'consensus'. Its founding resolution explicitly asked the expert panel to define 'the degree of historical consensus about Belgium's colonial past'.[11] Much of the work of the historian rests in interpreting information and constructing the relationship between various pieces of evidence. The historical field advances through debates about tensions between different reconstructions of the past, which is the collaborative effort of a scholarly community. And while indeed there are broad fields of consensus about (Belgium's) colonial past, the devil is in the details. Few historians would disagree that colonialism had a long-lasting, often disastrous impact on formerly colonized societies. However, historians differ over the degree of this impact, the way the colonial legacy interacts with postcolonial developments, and the responsibility of postcolonial Congolese/African elites for the current state of their countries. More subtly, however, the 'consensus' model also makes it more difficult to propose differing hypotheses or contrast different trends in the literature, where scholars may

[9]L. A. Stoler, 'Colonial archives and the arts of governance', *Archival Science*, 2 (2002), 87, 90.

[10]P. Lagrou, 'Het Srebrenica-rapport en de geschiedenis van het heden', *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*, 118:3 (2003), 325–36.

[11]See Chambre des Représentants, *Commission spéciale,* Doc 55 1462/001.

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disagree with each other but still have equally valid points. The demand for 'consensus' thus forced us into a procedural and epistemological straightjacket.

In the end, our synthesis of the literature brought out points we thought important, and with which only a few historians would disagree, emphasizing the long-term legacies of colonialism and the concept of coloniality. We also stressed the deep impact of colonialism: not merely in its most visible manifestations, as in the physical violence of colonial oppression, but also in its more subtle effects on the lives of the colonized, even to their most intimate relations. And we also contended that violence was not merely a by-product of colonialism, but central to its operation. Finally, we tried to give some insight into how historians do their work, and what sources they commonly use. Thus, rather than the 'truth seeking' mission that had been given to us, we focused on translating academic knowledge to an audience of parliamentarians within a societal context marked with struggles over the past and its consequences.

When does complexity become complicity?

Our immediate audience for this report were parliamentarians, not trained historians. Some of them were hostile to the aims of the commission itself, refusing, for example, to even consider the relevance of examining the links between contemporary racism and colonialism, or of demands for the removal of statues of Leopold II from the public sphere. Historians working in state-led commissions always have to deal with some form of a 'translation-struggle… in which existing historiography [is] "re-phrased" or "re-styled" in order to fit the procedure of parliamentary decision-making', but we worried about the way the information in the report would be used in parliamentary as well as public debates.[12]

Could complexity and nuance be weaponized to downplay Belgian responsibility for its colonial past? In the worst scenario, could it be used to blame the colonized for the violence inflicted upon them? For example, how should we address nineteenth-century violence in the region related to the trade in enslaved peoples as a contributing factor to longer histories of violence in the region, or the implication of Congolese chiefs' involvement in the extractive regime of the Congolese Free State and later in the Belgium Congo, without this being taken out of context to suggest the Congolese were responsible for their own condition?[13] While victim and perpetrator in such a context are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories, addressing this aspect of the colonial past also potentially provided openings for politicians to downplay or deny Belgian responsibility in the violence and exploitation of colonialism. It is of course a risk faced by any science that its findings and research could be appropriated and misused, but the context of this commission made this risk particularly worrisome. Ultimately, we chose to focus on the parliamentarians who were engaging in this process in good faith and tried to inform them as comprehensively as possible within the limitations of the forum offered to us.

Of course, those of us who are educators constantly grapple with this tension between complexity and clarity all the time in the classroom: in order to explain historical developments to our students, we often start with broader generalizations, focusing on the overall picture first, then gradually increasing the level of complexity and historical detail and challenging interpretations and received wisdoms. Historical interpretation is always about weighing the structural contours of a system

[12]B. Bevernage, 'History by parliamentary vote: science, ethics and politics in the Lumumba commission', *History Compass*, 9:4 (2011), 301.

[13]See for example: D. Gordon, 'Precursors to red rubber: violence in the Congo Free State, 1885–1895', *Past and Present*, 236:1 (2017), 133–68; G. Macola, 'Warlordism in the Congo Basin between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 56:1 (2023). The issue of the violence generated by the trade in enslaved peoples and ivory by East African Swahili Arab traders is particularly difficult to address because its so-called eradication was part of Leopold II's 'humanitarian' justification for the colonial conquest of the region, a piece of propaganda with a stubborn persistence in Belgian popular narratives about colonialism.

against people's individual agency. While a valuable and necessary approach, it is also a delicate balancing act since it can lead to a flattening of historical processes.

Our concerns about 'when complexity becomes complicity' thus remained at the forefront of our thoughts.[14] In the report, we choose to balance clarity with nuance. Where necessary, we addressed complexity, while also contextualizing our arguments sufficiently to safeguard them against abuse or misinterpretation. However, what we lost in terms of fine-grained analyses of complex processes on the ground, we gained in clarity. It was the best safeguard against potentially being mobilized as — unwilling — accomplices to the exploitation and violence of colonialism, or to those trying to deny or trivialize it.

In writing history for politicians and the public, we also felt it necessary to engage and respond to public debates. Critics might call this 'presentism', but present-day concerns about enduring consequences of colonialism were at the heart of this commission. As several scholars have pointed out, writing history from a seemingly neutral and detached viewpoint is not just a privilege, it is also an illusion.[15] Moreover, we also felt historians have a responsibility to contribute to public debates more actively. Maybe one of the reasons why imperial nostalgia is still present in Belgian society and elsewhere in Europe, is this tendency to hide ourselves behind this requirement of complexity. Of course, this is not a plea to abandon complexity. Nor are addressing complexity and taking a stance mutually exclusive. Yet, writing for non-academic audiences requires different strategies — something public historians understand too well. Knee-jerk reactions about the requirements of detached history-writing might be not so useful — and even counterproductive — in such contexts.

The question of 'complicity' also posed itself on other levels. From the beginning, the commission was criticized by decolonial scholars, as well as by diaspora activists, for a number of reasons. One of these was the inherent epistemic violence of such commissions. Olivia Rutazibwa, for example, asked questions about what kinds of 'truth' this commission would be able to establish, and wondered if it was really the 'truth' from the 'existing (academic) history books' that needed to be told first and foremost.[16] Secondly, she feared that the emphasis on past wrongs would impede addressing ongoing injustices. Third, she, together with other Afrodescendant scholars and activists, criticized the very narrow and racialized understanding of what constituted 'expertise' in these matters, and who was considered an authoritative voice to speak that truth. While this commission did in the end create a diverse group of experts, not all of whom were academics, issues remained with how consultations with diaspora groups were written into the resolution, and with the broader lack of consultation with those concerned by the commission in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. The selected organizations the expert panel was asked to consult with were neither compensated, nor could the content of the report be discussed with them ahead of its release. In other words, the commission failed to eliminate partially racialized hierarchies of 'expertise' and the frequently

[14]M. Ochonu, quoted in J. Lagae, '"Congo as it is?" Curatorial reflections on using the spatial urban history in the *Memory of Congo: The Colonial Era* exhibition', in A. E. Coombes and R. B. Phillips, *Museum Transformations: Decolonization and Democratization* (Hoboken, 2015), 157.

[15]D. Haraway, 'Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', in C. R. McCann, S.-K. Kim, and E. Ergun (eds.), *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (5th edn, London, 2020), 303–10; S. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2008). See also for a more recent debate: K. N. Blain, 'Black historians know there's no such thing as objective history', *New Republic*, 9 Sep. 2022, https://newrepublic.com/article/167680/presentism-history-debate-black-scholarship

[16]O. U. Rutazibwa, '"Congo" Commissie – why I will not participate in the expert group', blog entry, 21 July 2020, https://oliviarutazibwa.wordpress.com/2020/07/21/congo-commissie-why-i-will-not-participate-in-the-expert-group/. For similar critiques aimed at other commissions dealing with historical 'truth', see, amongst others, T. Madlingozi's work, summarized in this interview with L. Lambert, 'There is neither truth nor reconcilliation in so-called "South Africa"', *The Funambulist*, 29 June 2020, https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/reparations/there-is-neither-truth-nor-reconciliation-in-so-called-south-africa-a-conversation-with-tshepo-madlingozi. See also T. Madlingozi, 'Taking stock of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission 20 years later: no truth, no reconciliation and no justice' (3rd International Colloquium of the Instituto Humanitas, UNISINOS, São Leopoldo, Brazil, 16 Sep. 2015).

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criticized treatment of Afrodescendant communities as 'native informants' in the process of knowledge production and disciplining.[17]

Can the creation of such a commission be seen as an attempt to co-opt and neutralize claims of grassroots critical voices, thereby functioning as a kind of anti-politics machine?[18] The balance between such co-optation and genuine attempts at broadening public debates in a political context can sometimes be difficult to spot, especially in cases like these where different political parties might have different motivations for participating. In any case, if such co-optation and neutralization was part of the process, the failure of the commission likely achieved the opposite. As an exercise in soft power, this commission failed. Skepticism about the Belgian state's capacity and ability to engage with processes of decolonization is currently at a high.[19]

A mountain birthing a mouse: political failures or the limitations of public discourse?

Ultimately this commission was multiple things at once: for some an attempt at political co-optation; for others, a public process of reckoning; and for others still, a catalyst for other, more significant conversations. Unfortunately, from the perspective of a parliamentary democracy, it was a spectacular failure. In December 2022, the mandate of the Belgian parliamentary commission on the colonial past expired, despite the lack of immediately tangible results.[20] The members of the commission failed to agree upon a document with 128 suggested recommendations, composed by the chair of the commission but loosely based on those listed in the expert reports.[21] These recommendations were divided into three categories: 'History and Research', 'Reparations' (covering only symbolic reparations), and 'Colonialism and Racism/Discrimination'.

The biggest political problem was posed by recommendation 69, which stated that 'bearing in mind that many Belgians at the time gave the best of themselves while in Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda … the Chamber of Representatives offers its apologies to the Congolese, Burundian, and Rwandan peoples for the colonial domination and exploitation, the violence and atrocities, and the individual and collective human rights violations during this period, as well as the racism

[17]On such forms of 'epistemic impeachment' in the Congo Commission and the reactions that it has generated, see E. Mestdagh, 'Counter-Truth Telling From Below in the Face of Belgium's Congo Commission' (paper presented at AFROPEANS 2022, Brussels, 23 Sep. 2022). See also this podcast interview with J. Nijimbere, '"La montagne qui a accouché d'une souris": espoirs et échec de la commission parlementaire belge sur le passé colonial', *African Futures Lab*, 2:6 (6 July 2023), https://africanfutures.mit.edu/news/2023-07-06-saison-ll-episode-6-juliette-nijimbere-la-montagne-qui-a-accouche-dune-souris-espoirs-et-echec-de-la-commission-parlementaire-belge-sur-le-passe-colonial/

[18]On this point, see, for example, A. Jamar and A. N. Bisoka, 'Pacification du passé colonial belge: auto-érotisme et décentrement décolonial', *Le Club Mediapart*, blog entry, 10 Feb. 2022, https://blogs.mediapart.fr/plis/blog/100222/pacification-du-passe-colonial-belge-auto-erotisme-et-decentrement-decolonial. For similar issues raised in the context of Sierra Leone, see T. Kelsall, 'Politics, anti-politics, international justice: language and power in the Special Court for Sierra Leone', *Review of International Studies* 32:4 (2006), 587–602.

[19]G. Ponselet, 'Passé colonial belge: pourquoi la commission a dû ravaler ses excuses' *JusticeInfoNet,* 19 Jan. 2023, https://www.justiceinfo.net/fr/111342-passe-colonial-belge-pourquoi-commission-ravaler-excuses.html; and Nijimbere, '"La montagne"'.

[20]Some of the topics discussed in the commission were taken up by other cabinets and institutions, however. 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 Chambre des Représentants, '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', 3 Jul. 2022, https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=22-09-28&numac=2022042012. A law proposing automatic declassification also introduced significant changes to the accessibility of certain documents on Belgium's colonial past: see Archives de l'État en Belgique, 'Déclassification obligatoire: un grand pas dans la bonne direction', 13 June 2022, https://www.arch.be/index.php?l=fr&m=actualites&r=toutes-les-actualites&a=2022-06-13-declassification-obligatoire-un-grand-pas-dans-la-bonne-direction.

[21]For the full set of recommendations, see 'Recommandations de la Commission spéciale "Passé colonial"', 22 Nov. 2023, https://www.dekamer.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/pri/congo/20221122%20Aanbevelingen%20voorzitter%20def%20(004).pdf.

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and discrimination that accompanied them'.[22] This was directly followed by a statement (recommendation 70) explaining that apologies do 'not imply any legal liability and therefore cannot give rise to financial reparations'. Although this considerably dialed back the discussion of reparations in the expert report (where the option of financial reparations was mentioned) several right-wing and center-right political parties attempted to frame reparations in the media narrowly as financial burdens on the Belgian taxpayer. Other participants — notably the Walloon Parti Socialiste (PS) — insisted on recommendations that went *beyond* apologies. Yet others did not see the need for the Belgian government to apologize, since the Belgian king already expressed 'regrets' for the colonial past.[23] The flurry of disagreements meant that the commission's mandate passed without the approval of a single one of the other 126 recommendations. Public sentiment became even more enflamed when a public statement made by Wouter De Vriendt, president of the commission to the Belgian media referenced the interference from the monarchy in the final stages of the commission. Although hotly debated in the Belgian press, almost no international media reported on the debacle.[24]

Although ostensibly a political failure, for many of those who participated in the hearings it represented a human and moral failure, above all.[25] The *Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contra la Discrimination* (CMCLD) a long-standing anti-racist movement, called the commission 'a mountain who had birthed a mouse'. That even the minimum of publicly issuing apologies turned out to be impossible, notwithstanding the existence of an official report documenting the crimes and violence of this colonial system, was considered insulting by CMCLD, and by many others with them. For them, it showed that 'although Belgian colonization is historically and factually established, it is above all a political and ideological battle'.[26]

One could say that the failure had already started before its spectacular anticlimax. There was no real effort to publicize the work and public hearings of the commission, as they were buried in the maze that is the website of the Belgian federal parliament. The commission never managed, or even seriously tried, to create a sense of ownership among those affected by colonialism and its aftermaths. It is therefore no surprise that previous critiques of its top-down approach resurfaced, and that many organizations called for a renewed bottom-up approach.[27] For many Afrodescendant activists the amount of (lobbying) work put in, in contrast with the disappointing outcome of the commission has led to fatigue and even exhaustion. Some still push for change through the raising of public awareness and political engagement, while others have lost confidence in using established political channels in Belgium for structural change. Instead, they are shifting their focus to internal initiatives, like community building and mental health support for decolonial activists in Belgium.[28]

The effect of the commission's failure on bilateral relations between Belgium and Rwanda, Congo, and Burundi appear to be limited so far, possibly because some of the commission's recommendations have been successfully advanced by other branches of the government. This is the case, for example, with the recent law for the restitution of colonial collections from Congo, which was

[22]*Ibid.*

[23]B. Brinckman and H. Debeuckelaere, 'Congocommissie rijdt zich klem in verontschuldigingen en mislukt', *De Standaard*, 20 Dec. 2022, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20221219_97959942.

[24]L. Lecluyse, 'Kamercommissie Belgisch koloniaal verleden draait uit op mislukking', *VRT News*, 19 Dec. 2022, https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2022/12/19/kamercommissie-belgisch-koloniaal-verleden-draait-uit-op-een-sis/

[25]CMCLD, 'Du déni à la négation: la Belgique refuse de faire face à son sinistre passé colonial', n.d., https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/actualites/commission-speciale-passe-colonial-du-deni-a-la-negation-la-belgique-refuse-de-faire-face-a-son-sinistre-passe-colonial.

[26]*Ibid.*

[27]'Koloniaal verleden België: Congolese diaspora kwaad over uitblijven excuses', *Bruzz*, 21 Dec. 2022, https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/koloniaal-verleden-belgie-congolese-diaspora-kwaad-over-uitblijven-excuses-2022-12-21.

[28]E. Mestdagh, 'Shaping the future by reclaiming the past? A micro-history of decolonial memory activism in Brussels (2010 – 2022)' (unpublished PhD thesis, Ghent University, forthcoming in 2024).

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created by the office of the state secretary with responsibility for science policy.[29] For other recommendations it is unclear what, if any, uptake there will or can be by the government, even though the State Secretary of Equal Opportunities announced in October 2023 that she considered implementing some of the 128 recommendations, especially those on memorialization.[30]

The failure of the commission also included important practical elements. Current inequalities in the creation of knowledge about the colonial past should have been ameliorated by a commission like this one. For example, we gave strong signals about the need for the declassification of archival materials, as well as the broadening of access to archives which remain sealed. Access to many archives continues to be, especially for Congolese, Rwandan, and Burundian scholars, very difficult, and they face significant obstacles regarding funding, visibility, and mobility that lead to the kind of inequalities — academic and otherwise — visible today.[31]

Public debates about the colonial past will, however, not disappear anytime soon. The public discussion about the Congo Commission has made it hard for local authorities to neglect calls for decolonization, and the report can be an instrument for activists demanding change. Local initiatives, such as the working group for the decolonization of public spaces of the capital region of Brussels, appear to be more successful in effecting concrete changes.[32]

(How) should historians take responsibility?

Participating in the work for this commission came with a set of ethical quandaries. Why then did we accept the task? In the end, as historians and as Belgian citizens, we both believed in the need for Belgium to confront this past and its present-day consequences, as well as the need for a better-informed public debate, which is still heavily influenced by a rather apologetic framing. Since Belgium is a parliamentary democracy, such a commission is — despite its shortcomings — still one of the ways to do this.[33] Although such work of course would not put an end to public debates (nor is it intended to!), it might inform and widen them. We hoped the report would have a trickle-down effect: with other institutions and local governments paying attention to these proceedings and taking direction from both the findings of the commission and the criticisms of them. The report, too, is an official government document, as such it will remain a record that unequivocally describes the violence of colonialism and its long-term consequences. In a context where those are sometimes still disputed, it can be used as a form of leverage.

Even though our immediate audience were the members of the parliamentary commission, we also thought of the report as a document with the potential to draw a wider audience and provoke a broader public debate. The narrow focus of historians on academic debates is, after all, partially responsible for the disconnect between public and academic discourses about colonialism.[34] Perhaps the value of this report lies not so much with the role it played in parliamentary discussions, but rather with the wider circulation of the document, and the discussions it encourages

[29]See note 22 for details.

[30]H. Debeuckelaere, 'Aanbevelingen Congo-commissie krijgen nieuwe kans (minus excuses)', *De Standaard*, 26 Oct. 2023, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20231025_95907786.

[31]See also G. Mathys and S. Van Beurden, 'Archieven', in Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Bijzondere commissie belast met het onderzoek over Congo-Vrijstaat (1885-1908) en het Belgisch koloniaal verleden in Congo (1908-1960), Rwanda en Burundi (1919-1962), de impact hiervan en de gevolgen die hieraan dienen gegeven te worden: verslag van de deskundigen*, Doc 55 1462/003, 26 Oct. 2021, 349–50, https://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1462/55K1462003.pdf.

[32]*Vers la Décolonisation de l'espace public en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale : cadre de réflexion et recommandations*, Feb. 2022, https://cloud.urban.brussels/s/b624cNZqZy6XXNr. This is not to say the localized initiatives do not have their own set of challenges and problems.

[33]There are of course multiple other ways in which historians can address colonialism and its afterlives in public spheres and fora, but these are beyond the scope of this article.

[34]A. Lauro and B. Henriet, 'Carte blanche: "Dix idées reçues sur la colonization belge"', *Le Soir,* 8 Mar. 2019, https://www.lesoir.be/211032/article/2019-03-08/carte-blanche-dix-idees-recues-sur-la-colonisation-belge.

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and can help inform beyond the commission. Of course, this also comes with a danger that is inherent to all such commissions: because of the power structures in which it is embedded, the report could take on a more authoritative voice as the 'official' perception of the past — that is, exactly the kind of singular narrative we tried to avoid.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot so effectively explained, 'only in [the] present can we be true or false to the past'.[35] Understanding the present inevitably asks for an understanding of the past, and public mechanisms like this commission have a place in such a process — even if they cannot be the exclusive domain for it. This is a conversation that belongs to all. For us, this report is therefore not an endpoint. On the contrary, we hope it helps give new life to a broader public debate in Belgium, opening the way to tangible forms of reparative justice.[36] While it is often uneasy for historians to take part in such commissions — for the many reasons we have only been able to partially address above — these debates are too important for historians not to seriously engage with them publicly.

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[35]M.-R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 2015), 151.

[36]That being said, there are certainly a number of practical lessons we have learned which we would pass on to historians who decide to accept writing history 'in commission': document all agreements with the organizer carefully and push for reasonable deadlines at the start of the process. Politicians do not necessarily have a professional respect for the work you do and will approach your work as a political tool. Be sure to retain the right to approve translations, edits, proofs, etc.

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