

REVIEWS

MATTHEW G. STANARD

Selling the Congo. A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism

Lincoln/London, University of Nebraska Press, 2011, 387 p., illustrations, figures, notes, bibliography

GUY VANTHEMSCHE

Belgium and the Congo, 1885-1980

Cambridge University Press, 2012, 289 p., figures, notes, index

Two recent monographs make the history of Belgian colonialism and its impact on a European society more accessible to English-speaking scholars. Joining a new literature on the Belgian Congo and the effects of imperial experiences on European metropolises, both examine how a colony can influence a metropolis. Stanard focuses on cultural history, while Vanthemsche carries out an exploration of economical and political areas. The two books are complementary, but different in their approach and methods. Stanard gives a good overview of Belgian pro-empire propaganda, while Vanthemsche produces a very systematic and detailed piece of research on the impact of the Congo on Belgian society. Both will be useful to specialists of European and imperial history, but also to a wider audience.

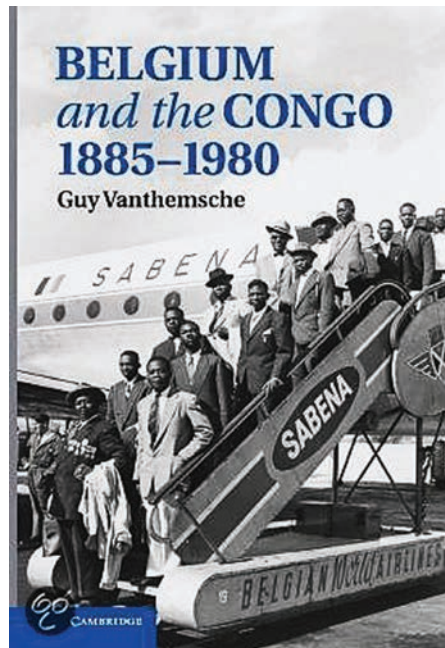
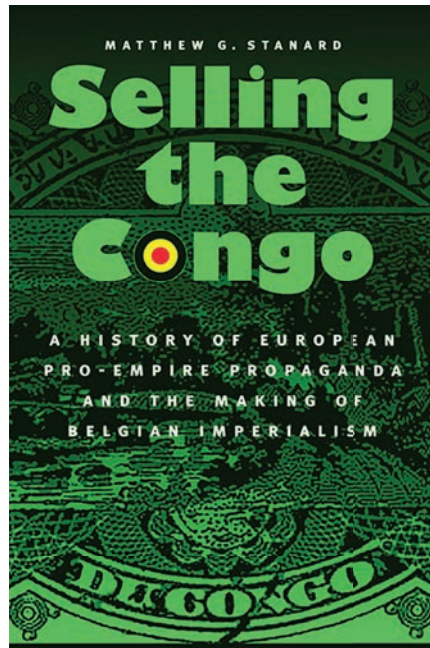
The analysis of Matthew G. Stanard, professor of History at Berry College (Mt. Berry, Georgia, USA), complements the output of many researchers who have already considered the question of European colonial culture, although most of them concentrate on the French or British empires, and connect colonies with their metropolis. Stanard examines the Belgian case (seldom discussed by the English-language literature) and focuses on the metropolis itself, arguing

that the Belgian case was characterized by “an important metropolis-colony dichotomy” (p. 31), the Congo and Belgium being two segregated areas.

His book is built on the hypothesis that Belgians were not “reluctant colonialists”, as the literature often asserts (p. 7). The author claims that, on the contrary, the enormous weight of pro-empire propaganda proves that the indifference of the Belgian population to the colony is a myth, and that there was “a surprising number of people cheering on the empire in the metropolis” (p. 6).

Stanard thus sets out to understand the making of imperialistic propaganda, and how it affected the Belgian population and nation during the colonial period (1908-1960). His book is divided into six chapters. In the first, Stanard sets up the context, beginning with the foundations of Belgian colonial propaganda laid by Leopold II at the end of the nineteenth century to convince the Belgian population and elites of the value of the Congo Free State. Although Leopold II's strategy largely failed, Belgian authorities pursued the method during the colonial era, striving to create popular enthusiasm for the Belgian Congo by a strong and multiform pro-empire propaganda.

Chapters 2 to 6 explore five kinds of pro-empire propaganda: exhibitions, museums, education, monuments and colonial cinema. Stanard takes several actors who tried to “sell” the colonial project: the state, missionary organizations and private companies. His approach is telling: the Belgian colony was based on cooperation between the state, the Catholic Church and several large companies. To understand how the Belgian people finally



became interested in the colony certainly requires a complete picture of both official and unofficial pro-empire propaganda. In any case, Stanard demonstrates that propaganda media of all kinds bound to a specific actor were very often sustained, developed or controlled by the state. The mounting of exhibitions and creation of museums enlisted the support not only of the state but also some private initiatives. The education sector was widely supported by missionary organizations. Colonial veterans, small circles of private colonial enthusiasts, and local Belgian authorities initiated the creation of monuments (the local dimension is one of the strengths of the book). Private companies, missionary societies and the state were involved in cinematographic projects. It is surprising that the author neglects photographs, which constituted a large part of official, economic and missionary propaganda.

From Stanard's point of view, the five chosen media placed the "emphasi[s] on nation and dynasty", the benefits of European technology, and educational work among Congolese populations (p. 88). His analysis is correct, but tends to isolate the imperial question from the social and political context of Belgium, divided by other questions and fractures (e.g. clericals and anticlericals, royalists and antiroyalists). For example, the central place of Leopold II in Belgian propaganda cannot be understood only from an imperial point of view after the Second World War. Stanard's analysis is also inclined to exaggerate the role of tensions between Flemish and Walloons in the motivation of Belgian imperialistic propaganda, without distinguishing different periods within the era of colonization.

Indeed, there is sometimes too little attention given to the changes and dynamics of Belgian colonialism and metropolitan life.

Stanard's conclusion, asserting that "Belgium's reluctance has been overstated and that there was an important level of support for the imperial enterprise" (p. 269), seems a little hasty. Indeed, can we say that the importance of Belgian pro-empire propaganda during the whole colonial period proves that Belgian citizens were not "reluctant colonialists"? Might it not rather reveal the population's indifference, or even reservation, to the imperial project? Were there criticisms of this imperial propaganda during the colonial period? In any event, Matthew Stanard's book is certainly a very stimulating and useful overview of Belgian colonial propaganda.

The second monograph is written by Guy Vanthemsche, professor of Contemporary History at Free University Brussels (*Vrije Universiteit Brussel*) and secretary of the Royal Commission of History in Belgium. The author explores numerous sources (produced by the state and private companies) and completes his original research with a solid overview of the historiography.

His book studies the marks left by the Congo on Belgium and the transformation of the metropolis by Belgian colonial activity, especially in politics and the economy. Indeed, the author wants "to re-integrate the colonial factor into the Belgian history corpus and curriculum" (p. 11).

The book is divided into five chapters, successively dealing with the origin of the

colonial phenomenon in Belgium, the impact of the Congo on three main sectors in Belgium (domestic policy, external position and economy), to end with the relations between Belgium and the independent Congo. Chapters 2 to 4 (devoted to the questions of economy, international and domestic affairs) are organized chronologically, from the Leopoldian Congo to the post-colonial period. Vanthemsche takes into account not only the relations between the Congo and Belgium, but also questions exclusively related to Belgian society. He demonstrates how the tense relations between Flemish and Walloons, or the clerical-anticlerical rivalry, have lately emerged in debates in the former metropolis. Guy Vanthemsche's solid synthesis also demonstrates that the Congo's influence on Belgium was not remarkably strong in any domain : weak on domestic affairs (with the exception of two special moments : the beginning of Belgian administration of the Congo, and the events of decolonization), higher on the international stage, partial in the economic field. In those three spheres, Vanthemsche estimates that Belgians were never colonial enthusiasts, except for some elites. He gives us a very enlightened view on the lack of enthusiasm, or even hostility, of Belgian society towards the creation of a colonial empire. On one point, Vanthemsche meets Stanard : he notes that, by then, the question at the heart of debates over the colony was mainly the issue of the Belgian state's identity and imago.

Vanthemsche fully achieves his purpose, giving a better comprehension of the Belgian past and the colonial past of the Congo, and showing how important it is to place colonial

history back at the center of the study of Belgian national history.

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(Royal Museum for Central Africa)