

AFTER RED RUBBER. VIOLENCE AND EARLY COLONIAL GOVERNANCE IN BELGIAN CONGO (1908-1914)

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When the Belgian government took over the Congo Free State in 1908, officials readily proclaimed a rupture with the atrocities committed under King Leopold II's "red rubber" regime. "Today, we do not colonize like we did in the past, by importing weapons and alcohol, and exploiting a country to excess – but by introducing more dignified customs sanctioned by Christian morality," King Albert I declared in 1910. Whether the Belgian *reprise* effectively improved the immediate situation on the ground was subject to debate even at the time, with E.D. Morel stating that "no change whatsoever" accompanied the transfer of sovereignty. Historians, too, have pointed to the sluggish pace of reforms that the first Minister of Colonies, Jules Renkin, implemented. Turning to episodes of violence that occurred in the densely forested Aruwimi District during the first years of Belgian colonial rule, this article probes the question of (dis)continuity between the two polities from the bottom up.

I. Introduction

"Today, we do not colonize like we did in the past – by importing weapons and alcohol, and exploiting a country to excess – but by introducing more dignified customs, sanctioned by Christian morality, to remote and primitive regions".

King Albert I at the opening of the Colonial Exhibition of Tervuren (20th April 1910).¹

At the time of Albert's grandiloquent speech, Belgium was still a young colonial power. Two years before, the country had inherited an immense colony that had been plundered during Leopold II's infamous personal rule.² The speech made by King Albert, who acceded to the Belgian throne in 1909, replacing Leopold, shows how state officials were readily claiming to have broken away from the noxious legacy of his predecessor. The Belgian takeover, or *reprise*, of the Congo Free State (1885-1908) would allegedly herald a new era of "civilization", marked by dignity and restraint.³ Dynamics in the field, however, were slower to change. Just three days before Albert spoke in front of a select audience in Tervuren, one public servant was massacring villagers who refused to collect wild rubber in the Aruwimi district, in the north of the colony.⁴ This violence echoed the scandals that had stained the previous regime. From the turn of the century onwards,

European agents' frantic quest for the sap of rubber vines (*Landolphia owariensis*) fuelled countless atrocities against the Congolese population, leading to well-documented cases of flogging, maiming, murder and rape. The international outcry against the so-called "red rubber" regime ultimately forced Leopold II into relinquishing his private colony to Belgium.

The discrepancy between the King's lofty words and the public servants' brutal killings is by no means surprising when it comes to early colonial Central Africa. Historians generally agree that the passage from the Free State's "King-sovereign" to the Belgian government did not bring about immediate, clear-cut and tangible changes in the field.⁵ Although the takeover was touted from the onset as an enterprise of "moral reform",⁶ scholars generally describe the Free State's immediate aftermath as a transition phase, with effective policy changes only occurring after the First World War.⁷ The sluggish pace of "moralizing" the colony did not escape contemporary observers either. In 1919, Edmund D. Morel, the spearhead of the Congo Reform Association, considered that "no change whatsoever" had accompanied the transfer of sovereignty.⁸

Between 1908 and 1914, forced labour would indeed be routinely practised in order to supply

1. "On colonise de nos jours, non pas comme autrefois – en important des armes, des liqueurs et en exploitant un pays à outrance, mais en introduisant dans les contrées reculées et primitives des mœurs plus dignes, sanctionnées par la morale chrétienne (...)" In: AUGUST COCKX and J. LEMMENS, *Les expositions universelles et internationales en Belgique de 1885 à 1958*, Brussels, 1958, 77.

2. GUY VANTHEMSCHIE, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885-1980*, Cambridge, 2012, 41.

3. GUY VANTHEMSCHIE, *Belgium and the Congo*, 41.

4. From 4-17 April 1910, Aruwimi district commissioner Lund led a military operation against the villages surrounding a military post in Lokilo, massacring a reported 167 men, women, and children. The affair is one of the cases discussed in this article, and is based on diverse reports and correspondence from ARA2-JC, AIMO GC, (1755)9563/III.

5. See for example FRANS BUELENS, *Congo 1885-1960: Een financieel-economische geschiedenis*, Antwerp, 2007, 98; JULIA SEIBERT, "More Continuity than Change? New Forms of Unfree Labor in the Belgian Congo, 1908-1930," in MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN, (ed.), *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations: The Long-Term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Leiden, 2011, 375; SAMUEL NELSON, *Colonialism in the Congo Basin, 1880-1940*, Athens OH, 1994, 112; MATHIEU ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA, *Veroverd, bezet, gekoloniseerd: Congo 1876-1914*, Gorredijk, 2019.

6. AMANDINE LAURO, "Maintenir l'ordre dans la colonie-modèle: notes sur les désordres urbains et la police des frontières raciales au Congo Belge (1918-1945)," *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés*, 15/2, 2011, 102.

7. FRANS BUELENS, *Financieel-economische geschiedenis*, 98.

8. EDMUND DENE MOREL, *Red Rubber: the Story of the Rubber Slave Trade which Flourished in the Congo for Twenty Years, 1890-1910*, Manchester, 1919, 218.

workers for capitalist ventures, in spite of its official ban.⁹ Belgian authorities also continued to rely on concessionary deals as a way to generate profits from Congolese natural resources.¹⁰ Concessions, which granted exclusive exploitation rights and sovereign duties to private companies over large swaths of land, were the very business model that nurtured the infamous “red rubber” system. Further, many public servants of the Free State remained in place after the *reprise*, which often hindered effective changes in governance.¹¹ In the field, tangible traces of Leopoldian dehumanization continued to haunt the new colony, not least through the looming presence of its amputated victims.¹²

However, the arc of violence bridging the late Congo Free State and the early Belgian Congo has rarely been studied from the bottom-up. This article counts among the first to analyse how the “transitional phase” between the two polities was deployed on the ground. We will shed light on three brutal episodes of everyday colonial life that all unfolded in the rubber-producing Aruwimi district in the early years of the *reprise* (1908-1914). The first episode concerns private forced rubber collection; the second one involves bloodshed perpetrated by state agents in the name of legitimate repression; and the third relates to sexual predation committed by a Belgian public servant.

Using the Aruwimi district as a vantage point enables us to explore a crucial yet overlooked dimension of Belgian Congo’s early history: the depletion of its rubber resources. If an ambition to stabilize policies and field personnel characterized the *reprise*, the rapid disappearance of the colony’s main source of income changed its pressure points and the deployment of its repressive apparatus. The first chapter of the Belgian takeover is thus a more complex story than one of sheer

continuity. Violence was now being deployed in order to bleed the last rubber vines dry in a context of increased scrutiny, where the new authorities had to arbitrate on which exactions were deemed compatible with their “moral” ambitions.

All of the cases discussed below left significant archival thicknesses in their wake, allowing us to study both continuities in brutal practices, and ruptures in the ways they came to be reported, handled and discussed within administrative circles. In addition, Aruwimi’s rubber resources were almost depleted by 1908. Extractive violence would thus take on a new guise, shaped by the exhaustion of local communities and dwindling rubber profits. Furthermore, the Aruwimi district offers a welcome counterpoint to the historiography of the “Congo atrocities”. The best-documented episodes of violence were perpetrated in the concessions of the *ABIR* and *Anversoise* companies, situated in the neighbouring Equateur and Bangala districts. Although Aruwimi was subject to a regime of brutal exploitation even more intense than the one of the Equateur district,¹³ it has remained, thus far, peripheral in the historiography of early colonial Congo.

A microhistorical approach allows us to study specific iterations of state violence in the immediate aftermath of the “red rubber” scandal, while weaving it back into ongoing historiographic debates. On the one hand, it contributes to the rich research on armed and police forces in early colonial Africa. On the other, stories from the Aruwimi help understand the frictions between “ethical” ambitions and continued exactions that traversed European empires at the turn of the previous century.

Historians tend to agree that practices of order were mostly shaped by personal affects, the challenges of the field and racial tensions, rather than by “legal-rational” principles. Writing about the

9. JULIA SEIBERT, “More Continuity than Change? New Forms of Unfree Labor in the Belgian Congo, 1908–1930”, in MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN, (ed.), *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations: The Long-Term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Leiden, 2011.

10. BENOÎT HENRIET, *Colonial Impotence: Virtue and Violence in a Congolese Concession (1911-1940)*, Berlin, 2021.

11. DAVID NORTHRUP, *Beyond the Bend in the River: African Labor in Eastern Zaire, 1865-1940*, Athens OH, 1988, 83.

12. NANCY ROSE HUNT, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies and Reverie in Colonial Congo*, Durham, 2016, 153-55.

13. DANIEL VANGROENWEGHE, *Rood rubber: Leopold II en zijn Kongo*, Brussel-Amsterdam, 1985, 22.

Landespolizei in German West-Africa, Marie Muschalek has highlighted the improvised nature of policemen's professional conduct. Mundane forms of violence and informal performances of masculine honour were instrumental in maintaining the hierarchies of race and rank that structured both the colony and its armed forces.¹⁴ Michelle Moyd has shown how Askari soldiers of German East Africa used their role as colonial intermediaries to consolidate the resources and networks that would strengthen their positions as "Big Men", thereby putting "imperial" means at the service of "vernacular" social mobility.¹⁵ For Joël Glasman, policing in colonial Togo was more a field of tensions than a bureaucratic endeavour, shaped as much by the disciplinary practices of European officers as by the restiveness of its African agents.¹⁶ Lastly, Michael Pesek argues that colonial actors used spectacular displays of military might to compensate for their limited presence on the ground.¹⁷

These examples all consider the tangible iterations of law enforcement, rather than focusing on its guiding principles. As such, they encourage us to embrace governance in early Belgian Congo in its different dimensions. In the field, actual brutality acts as a revealer of the fracture lines within and between race and gender, rank and institution, state and capitalism.

Studying armed violence in a still overlooked field also enriches the expanding historiography of (trans)imperial brutality and moral reform in the *fin de siècle*. Whether in Brussels, Paris or Amsterdam, politicians and opinion makers were increasingly vocal in demanding that empire

building would abide by "ethical" principles stemming from Christian, liberal or socialist values.¹⁸ However, they did so to little avail. In Aruwimi and beyond, the very nature of the colonial encounter did not leave room for benevolent engagements. On the upper bank of the Congo river for instance, similar political and economic parameters than those of the early Belgian colony fostered mirroring abuses. The outcry against the violence used to increase the dwindling extraction of forest resources also pressured French officials to legally curb trade monopolies in 1910 without triggering effective changes on the ground.¹⁹

In this light, our aim is thus not to engage in a debate about the supposed "gradual betterment" of people living under colonial rule, since racism and violence remain at the core of any colonial project. Within such a context, notions of "improvement" are meaningless. Instead, we wish to demonstrate how a regime change produces its very own articulations on the ground and within the administration, and to highlight tensions between the different actors involved in the shifting process of "colonizing" during this period.

This research is based on three distinct collections of colonial archives. The main one are the *rapports politiques* of the Aruwimi district.²⁰ In these monthly reports, the district commissioner informed the Governor-General about the state of his district according to a fixed template: the district commissioner outlined the situation in each of the district's field posts, the obstacles public servants met there, their relations with companies and Christian missions, as well as the repressive campaigns they ordered. If a noteworthy incident

14. MARIE MUSCHALEK, *Violence as Usual: Policing and the Colonial State in German Southwest Africa*, Ithaca NY, 2019.

15. MICHELLE MOYD, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa*, Athens OH, 2014.

16. JOËL GLASMAN, *Les Corps Habillés au Togo: Genèse Coloniale des Métiers de Police*, Paris, 2014.

17. MICHAEL PESEK, "Colonial Conquest and the Struggle for the Presence of the Colonial State in German East Africa, 1885–1903" in STEPHEN J. ROCKEL AND RICK HALPERN, (eds.), *Inventing Collateral Damage: Civilian Casualties, War, and Empire*, Toronto, 2009, 163–65.

18. ROMAIN BERTRAND, "La 'Politique éthique' des Pays-Bas à Java (1901-1926)", *Vingtième Siècle*, 1/93, 115–138.

19. CATHERINE COCQUERY-VIDROVITCH, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898-1930*, Paris, 1972, 105, 179, 184–185, 263, 272–279.

20. The following entries are concerned here: AimoGG(1766)9592, AimoGG(1755)9563/I, AimoGG(1755)9563/II, AimoGG(1755)9563/III and AimoGG(1741)9534.

occurred, the “political reports” were supposed to address it. The *rapports politiques* also exemplify the state’s progressive encroachment on the district, revealing how, at that time, the act of colonizing simultaneously meant both “policing” and “conquering”. Significant incidents, particularly those involving repressive operations, generated further exchanges of letters between the *chef de poste*, the district commissioner, and the local commander of the *Force Publique* (Congo’s colonial army), with additional annotations or responses from the Governor-General and the minister of colonies. Both the reports and their associated correspondence provide crucial archival thicknesses relating to tensions in the district, and how they were handled in the upper echelons of the administration.

The second collection consists of individual dossiers relating to colonial public servants. They generally provide basic biographical information and an overview of their career. If they were subjected to disciplinary measures or judicial prosecution, the relevant enquiries were also included in their personal files. These archives thus complement and give further detail to the cases that appear in the *rapports politiques*.

Finally, scattered documents in the archives of the *gouvernement général* offer revealing anecdotes and precious information about how public servants in the field experienced their mandate in Aruwimi. Medical reports and administrative dispatches evoke its challenging climate, the effective frailty of the state presence, or the endemic venereal diseases that afflicted the colony’s personnel. This collection of often haphazardly aggregated documents does not follow the strict templates of the *rapports politiques*. They offer therefore more opportunities for holding occasional yet informative vignettes on the exercise of administrative power from the bottom-up.

The following pages are divided in three sections. The first one offers an overview of the Aruwimi district at the time of the *reprise*. It covers its administrative structures, its main economic actors, the disappearance of the *Landolphia* and the tentative reforms brought about by the Belgian government. The second lays out, in depth, three episodes of colonial brutality. It discusses traces of continued concessionary violence, a ruthless military operation, and the repeated sexual violence committed by one civil servant. These microhistorical accounts of violent transgressions offer a bottom-up understanding of the ruptures and continuities that characterized field dynamics in the first years after annexation. In conclusion, we outline how these violent encounters can contribute to a better understanding of early colonial governance in Central Africa.

II. Colonising the rainforest

Aruwimi at the time of the reprise

From 1908 onwards, Belgian Congo was divided into provinces, each comprising several districts, led by *commissaires de district* (district commissioners). From the main post of Basoko, the Aruwimi district commissioner supervised a network of fourteen state posts, each managed by a European *chef de poste*. They were sometimes assisted by an *adjoint*, usually an officer of the *Force Publique*. From these posts, state agents carried out regular expeditions with a retinue of soldiers, to collect taxes, compile censuses, and repress alleged “rebellions”. Numerous reports indeed refer to the restiveness of the local population. In July 1908, the *chef de poste* of Mongandjo mentioned, for instance, the “intolerable situation” provoked by the “natives of Yambi”, who were “insulting, threatening, and even assaulting” Congolese messengers working for the state.²¹

21. “Situation intolérable que nous crée l’attitude de ces villages, insultant, menaçant et même se livrant à des voies de faits sur les indigènes de la r.d.” Letter from the *chef de poste* of Mongandjo to the Commissaire Général of Aruwimi, 3 July 1908, Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs (hereafter FPS-FA), African Archives (hereafter AA), GG 6674.

These territorial reforms built upon policy changes that had already been undertaken by the late Free State. In 1906, Congolese territory had been divided into *chefferies*, each led by a *chef indigène* who was appointed by the colonial administration to act as a link between the state and the local population. After Belgian annexation, *chefferies* became important linchpins of colonial governance. Since May 1910, *chefs indigènes* were involved in tax collection, in the maintenance of public order, and in the supply of “able-bodied men” for public works.²² They also served as informants: if anything noteworthy occurred in their *chefferie*, they had to report it to the *chef de poste*. Furthermore, every “native” was from then on obliged to belong to a fixed *chefferie*. Leaving the *chefferie* would require the assent of the *chef de poste*.

These policies were aimed at facilitating the state’s broader surveillance and mobilization of the population, whose movements and impermanent settlements had escaped the limited oversight of public servants. In addition, the same decree envisaged the creation of new *chefferies*: while there had been 55 *chefs* in the Aruwimi District in 1908, by 1912 there were a total of 293 appointed *chefs* and *sous-chefs*.²³ Vernacular power structures were thus progressively superseded by a new administrative grid, which generated interne-cine tensions and competition. Colonial officials, for example, reported several cases of *sous-chefs* competing with their *chefs* in order to consolidate their own power.²⁴

The Aruwimi district, roughly twice the size of Belgium, was located at the confluence of the Lomami and Aruwimi rivers with the Congo River (see map,

fig. 1). From 1885 to 1914, this region figured central in what Jean-Luc Vellut called “the long war of thirty years.”²⁵ During this time, the emerging colonial apparatus strived to violently consolidate its power over pre-existing authorities. Muslim merchants from the Swahili Coast were especially influential in the Aruwimi region and controlled major trading nodes like Isangi and Basoko.²⁶ They became a prime points of contention in the struggle for control over local resources, notably ivory. Under the pretext of combatting slavery, the Free State set up military campaigns against Arab-Swahili traders, forcing them to retreat before taking over the ivory supply chain. As a consequence, ivory imports to Antwerp skyrocketed from 60 tonnes in 1891 to 362 tonnes in 1895.²⁷

After conquering the existing settlements at Basoko and Isangi, Free State agents built thirteen more state post across the district. With the sudden “rubber boom” starting in the mid 1890s, these posts became bases from which surrounding villages were forced to collect wild rubber. Beyond these strategic enclaves, colonial sovereignty was nominal rather than effective. As Frederick Cooper and Lauren Benton each have noted, imperial power was unevenly distributed, and struggled to expand beyond the immediate reach of its agents.²⁸ This is particularly true of early 20th century Aruwimi. Field agents reported constant local unrest after the Arab-Swahili retreat, in particular among the people they described as “Topoke”. In 1892, these people managed to kill eleven Europeans working for a private venture, and again in 1905, they killed two European rubber agents.²⁹ Both events left a strong impression on European agents working in the region, and attest

22. *Bulletin Officiel du Congo Belge*, 2 May 1910, “Chefferies et sous-chefferies indigènes,” Brussels, 1910, 457-71.

23. On the basis of annual reports: Annual report from 1909, 20 June 1910, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1766)9592; Annual report of 1912, 19 March 1913, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

24. Letter from Governor-General to district commissioner, 16 November 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/II.

25. JEAN-LUC VELLUT, “La violence armée dans l’État indépendant du Congo,” *Cultures et développement* 3-4, 1984, 671-707.

26. JEAN OMASOMBO TSHONDA, *Tshopo: laborieuse construction politico-administrative coloniale muée en bastion nationalisme congolais*, Tervuren, 2020, 301-5.

27. JEAN-LUC VELLUT, *Congo: ambitions & désenchantements, 1880-1960*, Paris, 2017, 74-5.

28. FREDERICK COOPER, “Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History,” *The American Historical Review* 99/5, 1994, 1516-545; LAUREN BENTON, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900*, Cambridge, 2010.

29. NICOLE CEULEMANS, *Per steamer over de Congo: Carl van Overstraeten, logboek uit 1905*, Gent, 2010, 67 & 81.

to the lengthy, grinding process of “pacification,” which in the most isolated regions lasted until well into the 1920s.³⁰

Besides insurgent populations, control was further complicated by environmental factors. The district comprised many swamps and was covered with dense tropical vegetation. Navigable waterways constituted its main transport infrastructure, limiting the mobility of public servants. In October 1908, the *chef de poste* of Yahila remarked that the two pirogues at his disposal were “leaking from all parts” and needed to be replaced. He was therefore wholly dependent upon transport by land, which was “extremely slow”, due to the “ceaseless rains” and “the impracticability of the roads”.³¹

Aruwimi’s rainforests, humid climate and remoteness formed the background of many field accounts penned by public servants. Swamp-land, in particular, hindered their mobility and threatened their well-being. The district’s chief doctors noted in 1909 that “it is impossible to travel without having to repeatedly pass through water or mud that sometimes comes up the armpits”, an ordeal that could lead to bouts of dysentery.³² Another medical report of the same year provides a telling account of how the Aruwimi’s climate and landscape caused both physical and mental ailments:

“The swamps, the countless stagnant waters constitute multiple sources of infection. Tor-

nadoes and changes of atmospheric pressure are very depressing, variations of temperature morning and evening are driving morbidity, by provoking nervous breakdowns or common colds, [further reinforced by] the excesses of [state agents]”.³³

This grim picture echoes other accounts of colonial rule in the early 20th century. For historians, the daily grind of power in the field and its many physical and mental strains, fostered emotions akin to “nervousness”,³⁴ “impotence”,³⁵ or simply sheer “boredom”.³⁶ These affects influenced in turn the behaviour of public servants, sometimes fuelling outbursts of violence as a palliative for their frustrations.³⁷ In post-*reprise* Aruwimi, the stages and performances of such brutality were also determined by the rapid depletion of rubber vines.

The vines disappear

As early as 1904, *Landolphias* were increasingly hard to find in Congolese rainforests. Once cut, the vines withered. Consequently, harvesters needed to reach ever deeper into the forest, staying away for weeks or even months on end.³⁸ The exhaustion of naturally-growing rubber led to a spectacular decline in its export in the final years of the Leopoldian regime.³⁹ The vines’ over-harvesting also hampered Aruwimi’s profits in early Belgian Congo, as yields declined year on

30. LANCELOT ARZEL, “Fighting on the Equator: War Violence and Colonial Experiences among Congolese Troops during World War I,” *Journal of Belgian History* 48/1-2, 2018, 73.

31. Chef de poste of Yahila to Commissaire de district Aruwimi, 14 October 1908, SPF-FA, AA, GG, 6674.

32. “Il est impossible de faire une marche sans devoir passer plusieurs fois dans l’eau ou la boue, et cela parfois jusqu’aux aisselles”, Medical report District Aruwimi 1st semester 1909, ARA2-JC, GG HYG, 74.

33. “Le sol marécageux, les nombreuses eaux stagnantes, constituent des foyers multiples d’infection. Les tornades, les changements de pression atmosphérique très déprimants ici; les variations de température du matin et soir sont autant de causes morbides par les dépressions nerveuses ou refroidissements qu’elles occasionnent, et que renforcent les marches dans le marais ou au soleil ou les excès des agents”, Medical report District Aruwimi 2nd semester 1909, ARA2-JC, GG HYG, 74.

34. NANCY ROSE HUNT, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies and Reverie in Colonial Congo*, Durham, 2016.

35. BENOÎT HENRIET, *Colonial Impotence: Virtue and Violence in a Congolese Concession (1911-1940)*, Berlin, 2021.

36. JEFFREY AUERBACH, *Imperial Boredom: Monotony and the British Empire*, Oxford, 2018.

37. EVA BISSCHOF, “Tropenkoller: Male Self-Control and the Loss of Colonial Rule,” in MAURUS REINKOWSKI and GREGOR THUM, (eds.), *Helpless Imperialists: Imperial Failure, Fear, and Radicalisation*, Göttingen, 2013, 118.

38. TE MOBUSA NGBWAPKWA, “L’exploitation du caoutchouc par l’état indépendant du Congo dans le territoire de Banzyville, district de l’Ubangi (1900-1908),” *Civilisations. Revue Internationale d’Anthropologie et de Sciences Humaines* 41, 1993, 291-306.

39. ROBERT HARMS, “The End of Red Rubber: a Reassessment,” *The Journal of African History* 16/1, 1975, 83; TE MOBUSA NGBWAPKWA, “L’exploitation du caoutchouc par l’Etat Independent du Congo dans le territoire Banzyville, district de l’Ubangi,” 160. Wild rubber in the Congo basin came from rubber vines which, unlike the bark of rubber trees, could not regenerate when cut.

year (fig. 2). In January 1905, the Isangi concessionary company, which operated in the district, even started planting Hevea trees to alleviate the decline of wild *Landolphia*.⁴⁰

Whether harvested or planted, rubber remained a key fiscal asset before and after annexation. In 1892, the Congo Free State instated a system of tax collection in kind in the rubber-producing regions of the *terres domaniales*, the land under their immediate control.⁴¹ A regime of brutal extraction came into effect throughout the *Landolphia*'s habitats, enforced by public servants or by concessionary company agents, alongside their armed auxiliaries.⁴² As the red rubber scandal gained traction, a new arrangement made in 1906 allowed the Congolese to choose between paying their taxes in money or in kind. Given the limited monetization of the colonial economy, this had little impact on exploitation schemes in the field.⁴³

In March 1910, the Belgian authorities endeavoured to eventually phase out the Leopoldian rubber regime.⁴⁴ Zone by zone, the state would renounce its claim over natural products, so that by the 1st of July 1912, the entire colony would be, in principle, free from taxes in kind and the forced labour they involved. However, the rubber tax was not simultaneously abolished throughout Aruwimi. Areas bordering the former *ABIR* concessions had been exempted from the rubber tax as early as 1909.⁴⁵ The hinterlands around the

Mapalma and Mogandjoro posts paid the rubber tax until 1912.⁴⁶ Ultimately, Belgian authorities put an end to Free State exploitation practices only after Congo's wild rubber had been almost completely wiped out, and outcompeted in global markets.⁴⁷ What did effectively change was the limited diversification of rubber resources, the imperative for taxpayers to spend more time venturing further into the forest to fulfil their economic obligations, and a shift in the relations between state agents and concessionary companies.

At the time of the *reprise*, Aruwimi's main private player was the *Compagnie du Lomami*, a concessionary venture that had been extracting rubber and other "wild products" since 1898. Ten years later, the company still employed 43 commercial agents – more than the number of state officials in the entire district.⁴⁸ It operated six heavily armed trading posts (*factoreries*) and three police posts, manned by 125 *Force Publique* recruits. Several years after annexation, in 1911, the concession's territory was still not organised into *chefferies*, making it particularly difficult for colonial officials to oversee its activities.⁴⁹ At the time of the Belgian takeover, the company was in trouble. Due to the depletion of wild rubber, its share value fell, and from 1907 onwards it was running at a loss.⁵⁰ Besides the exhaustion of wild rubber, the company's power was further weakened by the 1906 policy reforms, which forbade the foremen and sentinels of private ventures to carry firearms.⁵¹ As we

40. Governor-General of Belgian Congo to District Commissioner Aruwimi, 26 January 1905, FPS-FA, GG, 6674.

41. SAMUEL NELSON, *Colonialism in The Congo Basin*, 89.

42. ALDWIN ROES, "Towards a History of Mass Violence in the Etat Indépendant du Congo, 1885-1908," *South African Historical Journal* 62/4, 2010, 639.

43. DAVID NORTHRUP, *Beyond the Bend in the River*, 65; *Bulletin Officiel de l'Etat Indépendant du Congo*, 3 June 1906, "Impositions directes et personnelles," Brussels, 1906, 230-36.

44. *Bulletin Officiel du Congo Belge*, 22 March 1910, "Récolte des produits végétaux dans les terres domaniales," Brussels, 1910, 334.

45. Annual report from 1909, 20 June 1910, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1766)9592.

46. Annual report from 1909, 20 June 1910, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1766)9592.

47. LEWIS GANN and PETER DUIGNAN, *The Rulers of Belgian Africa, 1884-1914*, Princeton NJ, 1979, 141; ROBERT HARMS, "The End of Red Rubber," 88.

48. Annual report from 1908, 31 December 1908, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1766)9592.

49. Letter from district commissioner Henrotin to the Governor-General, 28 July 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/II; Annual report from 1909, 20 June 1910, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1766)9592.

50. FRANS BUELENS, *Financieel-economische geschiedenis*, 173.

51. *Bulletin Officiel de l'Etat Indépendant du Congo*, 3 June 1906, "Port d'armes", art. 1, Brussels, 1906, 241; *Bulletin Officiel de l'Etat Indépendant du Congo*, 3 August 1906, "Port d'armes", Brussels, 1906, 402.

shall see, its commercial agents continued nevertheless to rely on other means in order to put pressure on the local population. Belgian Congo officials considered these methods to be problematic, and called for stricter control of the concession's activities by establishing new posts in its territory.⁵²

Colonial violence thus took on a new guise in early "Belgian" Aruwimi. On paper, the legal framework that constrained the Congolese population in order to maximise their rubber outputs progressively started to loosen up. In the field however, the increased scarcity of *Landolphia*, and the absence of viable economic alternatives contributed to an ongoing climate of coercion. Legal reforms did not jeopardize the last remnants of the rubber economy: sources tend to show that taxes were still to a large extent paid in kind, unfree labour was routinely practised, and the new *chefferies* tightened the administration's grip on local communities. The continuous arc of imperial violence elicited further frictions. In May 1908 for instance, inhabitants of "Topoke" villages around Isangi took up their shields and spears and declared to a lieutenant of the *Force Publique* that they would wage war on Europeans and never again collect rubber.⁵³

"Civilizing" on paper

As reports of the "Congo atrocities" emerged in European press and provoked public outrage, Leopold was compelled in 1905 to send an independent Commission of Inquiry to his colony to investigate the alleged abuses. By documenting systematic failures in the colony's administration, the Commission's published report intensified international condemnation and paved the way for a limited

program of reforms.⁵⁴ Beyond the partial attempts to regulate the rubber trade, the CFS brought forward a new series of rules aimed at streamlining the exercise of "legitimate violence". Their ultimate objective was to enshrine state brutality in a clear legal framework, ensuring that repression in the field would comply with lawful provisions and procedures. From June 1906 onwards, police and military operations thus became the two principal modes of legitimate state violence.⁵⁵ The former were defined as "passive" intimidation campaigns where gun use was permitted only for self-defence, while the latter involved outright offensive campaigns.⁵⁶ From then on, colonial agents first had to identify an alleged act of defiance perpetrated by "the natives". They then had to ask permission in order for the relevant public body to intervene, either through a show of force (police operation) or, at a later stage, through an armed offensive (military operation). These operations had to fulfil clear goals set out in advance, the administrative personnel had to be kept in the loop, and all troop movements and actions had to be meticulously reported.

The *reprise* was also marked by the promulgation of the 1908 "colonial charter", which acted as Belgian Congo's proto-constitutional text. This key legislation was designed to provide the colony with a normative "moral" framework. Its second article, for instance, prohibited the use of forced labour by private companies.⁵⁷ The sixth article created a permanent commission for the "protection of the native population", which was, on paper, obliged to report "abuses and illegalities of which the natives might be the victims."⁵⁸ Yet in spite of these legal initiatives, little changed in the field. New laws regulated rather than reformed existing practices of violence, while amendments to the rubber economy only marginally affected

52. Letter by district commissioner Henrotin to the Governor-General, 2 June 1911, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1755)9563/II.

53. Rapport sur la situation de la Région Topoke, 31 May 1908, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1766)9592.

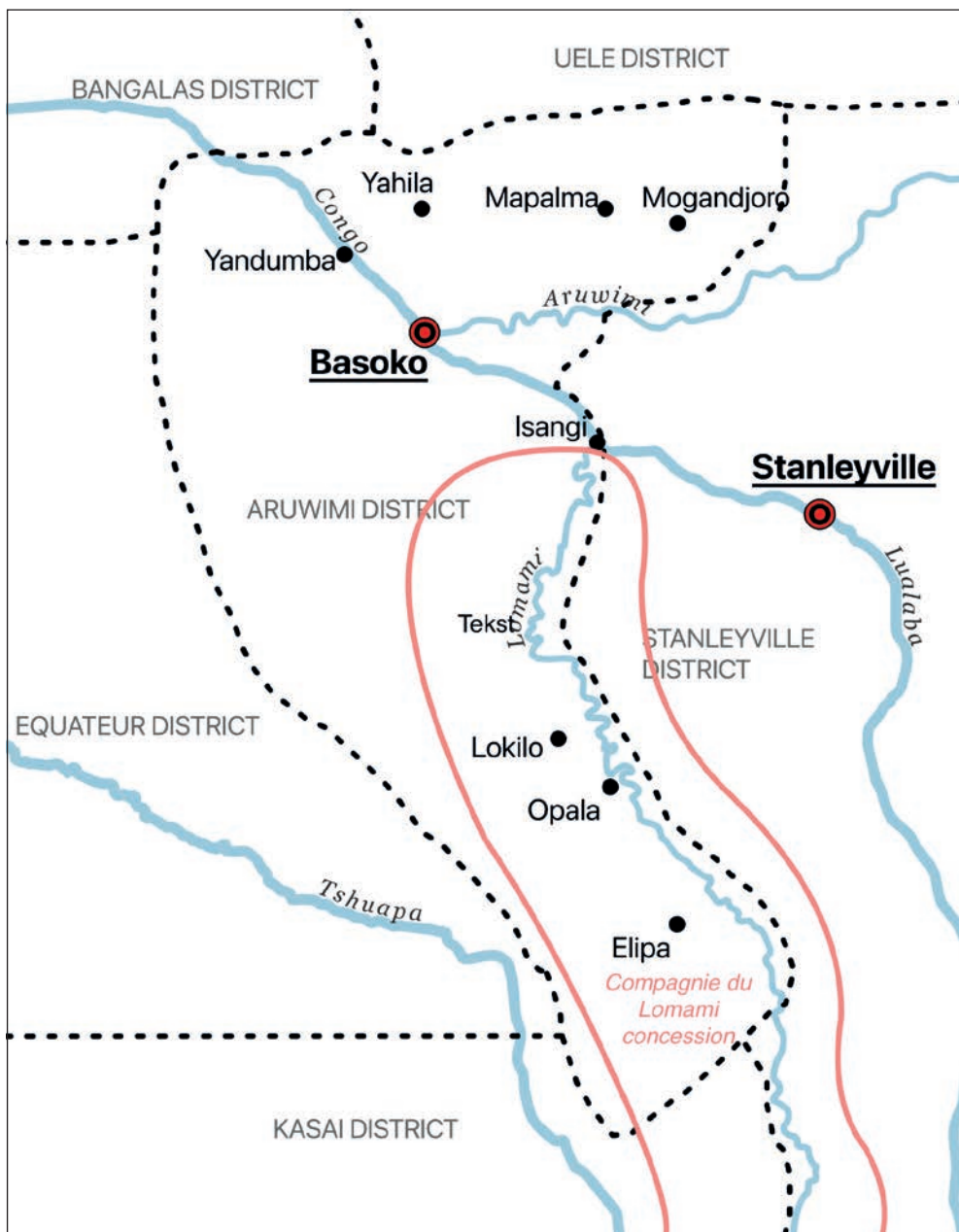
54. ROBERT BURROUGHS, *African Testimony in the Movement for Congo Reform: The Burden of Proof*, London, 2019, 75.

55. ALDWIN ROES, "Mass Violence," 641.

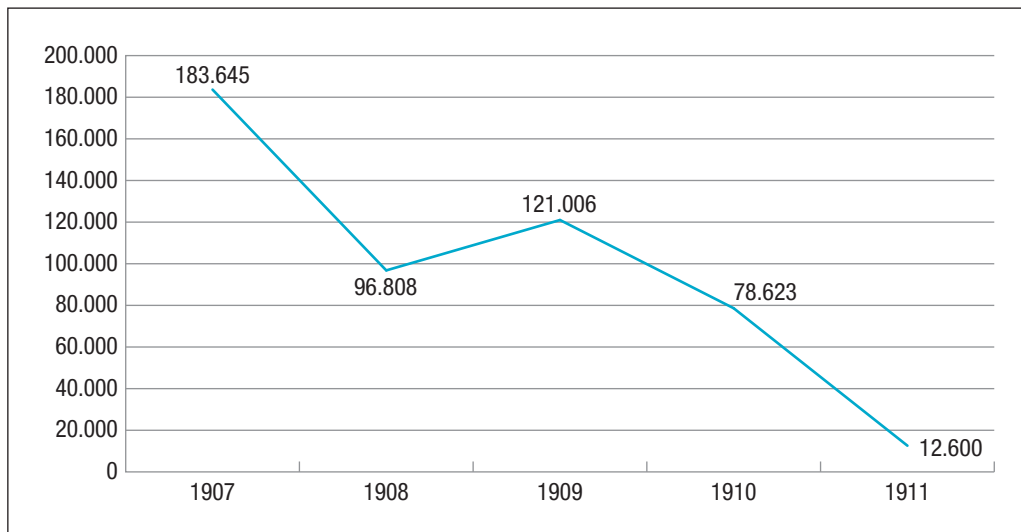
56. *Bulletin Officiel de l'Etat Indépendant du Congo*, 3 June 1906, "Opérations de police et opérations militaires" Brussels, 1906, 260-63.

57. *Bulletin Officiel du Congo Belge*, 18 October 1908, "Loi sur le gouvernement du Congo Belge," art. 2, Brussels, 1908, 66.

58. *Bulletin Officiel du Congo Belge*, 18 October 1908, "Loi sur le gouvernement du Congo Belge," art. 6, Brussels, 1908, 69.



Aruwimi district with principal state posts and Lomami Concession territory, ca. 1910. Source : made by author.



Annual yield of rubber taxes in the Aruwimi district, expressed in kilograms. The declining yield is due not only to the depletion of wild rubber, but also to the abolition of the domanial system in the district between 1907 and 1911. The data is retrieved from: annual report of 1909, 20 June 1910, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1766)9592; annual report of 1908, 31 December 1908, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1766)9592; annual report of 1910, 31 January 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/II; annual report of 1911, 27 March 1912, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/II.

the old Leopoldian model.⁵⁹ The next section will discuss the complex deployment of these fraught initiatives in the field, through a close analysis of three violent episodes.

III. Microhistories of colonial violence

On the eve of Belgian colonization, a *capita* (African village guard) complained that all the women in his village had been forcibly taken to collect rubber for the *Compagnie du Lomami*. In 1910, in the same concessionary territory, district commissioner Lund ordered a repressive military operation against the villages surrounding a police post, which led to over a hundred casualties, including women and children. In 1913, again in the same rubber concession, a civil servant was accused of sexual abuse, including the rape of multiple wives of *Force Publique* soldiers. Together, these violent vignettes of colonial life shed light on transfor-

mations and continuities in the field during this transitional period. They share similar testimonies of brutal violence, both “spectacular” and “mundane”, and include outraged comments made by the impotent authorities. The following section will dissect these testimonies and highlight the complementary bottom-up understandings they provide about the reality of colonizing in the field during the first years of Belgian rule.

State and capital

The *reprise* brought about new frictions between the continuing violence linked to private rubber exploitation and the new, supposedly “moral” principles championed by the Belgian government. Public officials disavowed the violent methods used by commercial agents. Consequently, they attempted to get a grip on the *Compagnie du Lomami*’s activities, and to increase state pres-

59. ALDWIN ROES, “Mass violence,” 641.

ence in the concession's territory. A bottom-up approach offers insights into the tensions between these private and public modes of power, and their competition and interactions on the ground. Fragments from the political reports reveal how private concessionary companies practised forced labour in a context of both dwindling resources and international outcry, thereby sparking anxieties among public officials who reacted with condemnation and tried to set up countermeasures.

For public servants employed by the colony, the unchecked exploitation methods of private enterprises were a source of concern. In their reports, field agents regularly denounced the violent recruitment campaigns that commercial agents undertook in the villages surrounding their heavily armed *factoreries*. Essentially though, the everyday workings of the company remain untraceable in state sources. Only some of the violent incidents involving commercial companies have left valuable archival traces behind. It is clear that these sparked anxieties among public servants in the field, who conceived of their duties of "controlling" and "pacifying" the district as being at odds with those of commercial agents.

One of the practices repeatedly criticized in state sources are the "commercial tours" (*tournées commerciales*) that Lomami agents undertook to secure their rubber. On these tours, escorts of armed African factory workers, usually accompanied by a European agent from the company, set out to force surrounding villages to provide rubber. These "visits" often involved violent abuse. In March 1908, an escort led by the European agent, Weinhausen, attacked the inhabitants of Bolanda, who then

violently retaliated and killed him.⁶⁰ The Governor-General subsequently retracted the escort permits of the European agents working in Weinhausen's *factorerie*.⁶¹ In August of that year, the head of the Likaka factory, Achille Suy, was accused of "constantly sending factory workers armed with Albinis rifles into the native villages without accompanying them".⁶² His factory also possessed twice the authorised number of bullets. As a result, agent Suy lost his right to bear arms, and the excess ammunition was confiscated. Around the same time, a village *capita* also reported company abuses by complaining that his village was unable to deliver their tax in *chikwangue* (cassava bread) because "the whites of the factory have taken all the women away to work".⁶³ While the head of the neighbouring factory denied that any coercion was involved and alleged instead that the women entered the factory voluntarily, the inquiring public servant noted that "it is self-evident that these people prefer delivering *chikwangues* to the *Force Publique* than rubber to the factory".⁶⁴ In other words, the collection of rubber would have been regarded as the most onerous and dreaded obligation among the many different forms of coercive colonial labour.

These archival fragments reveal a stark continuity in concessionary violence. Since 1906, several decrees had aimed to limit private brutality, for example by outlawing the bearing of arms by Africans working for private enterprises.⁶⁵ Despite these restrictions, the fragments discussed above show that commercial agents continued to rely on firearms to pressure local communities into collecting whatever was left of wild rubber. Sending out armed squads and abducting labourers,

60. Comments by the Commissaire Général on the political report of March 1908, 16 May 1908, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1766)9592.

61. Comments by the Commissaire Général on the political report of March 1908, 16 May 1908, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1766)9592.

62. "... qui avait pour habitude d'envoyer à tout instant des travailleurs de la factorerie armés d'Albinis [sic] dans les villages indigènes sans les accompagner." Letter no. 119 from commissioner-general of the Aruwimi District to Governor-General, 26 August 1908, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1766)9592.

63. "... les blancs de la factorerie ont pris tous [sic] les femmes pour travail [sic] à cet établissement." Monthly report from July 1908 of Elipa post, 31 July 1908, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1766)9592.

64. "... il est évident que ces gens préfèrent de fournir chikwangues pour la Force Publique que le CTC pour la factorerie." Monthly report July 1908 from the Elipa post, 31 July 1908, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1766)9592.

65. *Bulletin Officiel de l'Etat Independent du Congo*, 3 June 1906, "Port d'armes", art. 3, (Brussels, 1906), 241.

the Lomami Company employed its own violent means to extract the last possible yields of rubber.

In fact, rather than merely continuing, the brutal conditions of rubber collection and its associated violence may have in fact intensified in the earliest years of Belgian sovereignty due to the scarcity of rubber vines. Even during the Free State years, Africans working for the Lomami Company had come up with specific terms to describe their suffering: *wando wo limolo*, meaning “tax-induced weight loss”, evoked the bodily exhaustion resulting from rubber collection.⁶⁶ Dwindling vines required workers to reach deeper into the forests and stay away for longer periods of time, relying only on tender leaves of ferns and palms, wild berries and roots for nutrition.⁶⁷ Local communities were affected by malnutrition and emaciation, which acted as visual traces of the predatory exploitation that had begun under Leopold, but which continued under the Belgian authorities. Indeed, given that the rubber tax was only gradually phased out between 1910 and 1912, the first years of Belgian rule involved little change to the forced collection of rubber on the ground. This is what caused Edmund D. Morel to state that “some of the worst reports ever received from the Congo [were published] during the months immediately following annexation.”⁶⁸ Although forced labour and private coercive violence were officially banned, state sources thus reveal that commercial agents, operating from their remote factory posts far away from government oversight still resorted to Free State practices to satisfy their greed for rubber.

The company's violent campaigns in the pursuit of the little rubber that remained unleashed a spi-

ral of normalized violence that was reinforced by utter dehumanization and indigenous retaliations. The raids instigated by factories, for example, were met with counterattacks from a population that was already severely exhausted by years of forced rubber collection. “At the Likaka factory, time and again the commercial agents are met with arrows by the natives while they in turn use their weapons against them,” the district commissioner reported in September 1911.⁶⁹ He went on to say that the two civil agents in the region “claim that the cause of this state of affairs is the incompetence of Lomami agents in the region”.⁷⁰ In other turbulent incidents too, officials were quick to point the finger at the “mistreatment of the natives by the head of the factory and his staff”.⁷¹ The extent to which gun violence was normalized and rubber workers dehumanized is made starkly clear in a testimony by Ifulufulu from 1912. Commercial agent Duvieusart had tasked this villager with making sure all was quiet around the agent's house while he went to bed. When a child started crying in a nearby building, Ifulufulu shouted at the head of the village to move the child and its mother elsewhere. Duvieusart, woken by the noise, left his room and angrily fired at Ifulufulu's wrist and chest.⁷² The incident illustrates how gun violence, beyond merely facilitating “exceptional” raids, also characterized everyday interactions between commercial agents and their subjugated workforce.

If anything *did* change following the Belgian takeover, it amounted less to tangible transformations on the ground than to the attitudes and sensibilities of certain public servants. The instructions they received concerning the “pacification” of relations with the Congolese population were

66. OSUMAKA LIKAKA, *Naming Colonialism: History and Collective Memory in the Congo, 1870-1960*, Madison, WI, 2009, 90.

67. *Idem*, 90.

68. EDMUND MOREL, *Red Rubber*, 218.

69. “A la factorerie de Likaka, les agents commerciaux sont toujours reçus par les indigènes avec des flèches et emploient les armes contre ceux-ci.” Monthly report of September 1911, 19 October 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/II.

70. “Le chef de poste M. Séderlund, ainsi que M. Rodriguez, prétendent que la cause de cet état de choses est la maladresse des agents de Lomami dans la région.” Monthly report from September 1911, 19 October 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/II.

71. “... à cause de maltraitement des indigènes, de la part du chef de cet établissement et son personnel.” Rapport politique corps de police du Lomami, 31 March 1908, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1766)9592.

72. Procès-Verbal – Pro Justicia, 24 June 1912, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

often at odds with the everyday workings of commercial agents, who operated largely as they did under the Free State regime. In his 1912 annual report, the district commissioner of the Aruwimi district, for example, criticized the company's practices, which he regarded as incompatible with the new colonial state's goals:

"But this company, which is a true state within a state, opposes us with ill will; we face resistance from them; the company's agents have but one commercial goal, logical as it is; in the interests of their business, they care little about the well-being of the population and the material and moral conditions of their existence. What results is abuse, arbitrary acts [of violence], and even more serious wrongdoings."⁷³

The chief administrator's unequivocal criticism of the Lomami Company clearly reflects the tensions between private and public colonial powers. Concessions were essential for the colony's financial self-sufficiency, but commercial actors did not abide by the new colony's "moral" governance.⁷⁴

In an attempt to monitor the workings of the Lomami Company, the first administrators under Belgian rule tried to extend state control over the remote concession's territory, which had previously been left almost entirely up to commercial agents. A first step was to increase state presence: soon after Belgian annexation, each of the three posts in the Lomami territory were supervised by a civil servant (*chef de poste*) instead of having just one military commander in charge of all three, as was previously the case. Very quickly, these civil servants would require more staff, as well as the crea-

tion of new state posts. In 1911, the district's chief administrator asked the colony's Governor-General for extra personnel, "both to oversee the conduct of company agents and to encourage more positive sentiment in the natives."⁷⁵ As a result, in 1912, a *chef de secteur* – a higher-ranking civil servant tasked with the management of all three state posts in the Lomami concession – took office. Secondly, some action was taken against individual agents who had exceeded the limits of acceptable violence. As we saw in a previous example, one agent had his right to bear arms revoked, while others no longer had permission to organize escorts. In addition, five commercial agents were arrested in 1912 after British consuls had filed complaints against them in Stanleyville.⁷⁶ In the end, after the abolition of the rubber tax, the Lomami company would shift to plantation labour and mining, exchanging brutalities associated with rubber collection for new exploitation schemes, involving different forms of forced labour.⁷⁷

Colonial state terror

Lieutenant Rodriguez and First Sergeant Vleurinck did not want to kill the natives, but Commander Lund arrived and immediately began killing them. He then asked First Sergeant Vleurinck:

"Report to me on all the natives you have already killed."

And the first sergeant replied:

"I haven't killed any natives yet."

73. "Mais cette société qui est un véritable Etat dans l'Etat nous oppose de la mauvaise volonté; nous nous y heurtons à de la résistance; les agents de la société n'ont qu'un but mercantile, ce qui est d'ailleurs logique; dans l'intérêt de leurs affaires, ils se soucient bien peu du bien-être des populations et de leurs conditions matérielles et morales d'existence. Des vexations, des actes arbitraires, des méfaits plus graves en sont la conséquence." Annual report from 1912, 19 March 1913, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

74. *Bulletin Officiel du Congo Belge*, 18 October 1908, "Loi sur le gouvernement du Congo Belge," art. 2, Brussels, 1908, 66.

75. "aussi bien pour surveiller les actes des agents de la Société, que pour amener les indigènes à de meilleurs sentiments." Letter from district commissioner Henrotin to the Governor-General, 2 June 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/II.

76. Annual report from 1912, 19 March 1913, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

77. Cf. JULIA SEIBERT, "More Continuity than Change? New Forms of Unfree Labor in the Belgian Congo, 1908-1930," in MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN, (ed.), *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations: The Long-Term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Leiden, 2011.

The commander then said:

"How come you haven't killed any natives yet? Tomorrow morning, you will leave with your soldiers, go into the forest, chase down the natives, and kill them."

And the next day, the First Sergeant had some natives killed.⁷⁸

On the third of April 1910, Aruwimi district commissioner Lund ordered a military operation against the villages surrounding a police post in the Lomami concession. However, in his subsequent report, Lund omitted some important details, sparking suspicion among higher-ranking officials. The Governor-General thus decided to launch an investigation, which had startling results: Lund's military operation had ended in a bloodbath, leaving 167 dead – men, women and children alike.⁷⁹ The vivid description quoted above is taken from the testimony of a young soldier by the name of Getu, who testified before the lead inspector about Lund's cold-blooded instructions: "kill as many natives as you can".⁸⁰ What shocked the authorities most was that Lund, a district commissioner with a largely bureaucratic mandate, decided to take matters into his own hands: he travelled upstream to the police post, took over the military commander's role, and transformed the military operation into a ruthless massacre.

While colonial policymakers in Brussels may have believed that after the Leopoldian atrocities, an era

of peace and stability was possible, in practice, field dynamics were hard to control. As the previous case demonstrates, rampant violence committed by private companies was perceived as a threat to the anticipated "pacification" of tangible colonial relations. Public authorities' answer was to tighten state control: an increased number of civil servants were supposed to monitor both the activities of the Lomami Company and its relationship with indigenous communities. However, as this section will show, state control did not necessarily imply peaceful governance. Police and military operations became the designated tools for eradicating resistance and making communities comply with the demands of global capitalism, meaning that massacres could still be perpetrated – only this time within the framework of regulated bureaucratic procedure. The military operation conducted in the area around Lokilo in 1910 that we will go on to look at serves as an example of such extraordinary state violence, even though brutal repression campaigns were by no means exceptional in the early years of the Belgian Congo. Indeed, in that very same year, for example, another military operation in the north of the district left 258 dead – an event which the minister of colonies condemned as "a veritable hunt for people".⁸¹ The comparison to hunting may actually have been more accurate than intended: as Lancelot Arzel has shown, many Europeans involved in colonial conquest conceived of themselves as hunters who needed to "domesticate" or control populations they considered "savage".⁸² The punitive "military operation" that concerns us here,

78. "Le lieutenant Rodriguez et le premier sous-officier Vleurinck ne voulaient pas tuer des indigènes, mais le Commandant Lund est arrivé, et il a tout de suite lui tuer [sic] des indigènes. Alors il a demandé au premier sous-officier Vleurinck: 'Vous me ferez une note des indigènes que vous avez déjà tué.' Et le premier sous-officier a répondu: 'Je n'ai pas encore tué des indigènes.' Le Commandant a dit alors 'Comment vous n'avez pas encore tué des indigènes? Demain matin, vous partirez avec vos soldats, dans la forêt, vous courrez après les indigènes et vous les tuerez.' Et le lendemain, le premier sous-officier a fait tuer des indigènes." Copy of the interrogation of soldier Getu by State Inspector Collins, 14 July 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

79. Letter from Rodriguez to district commissioner, 7 June 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

80. "Vous tâcherez tuer autant d'indigènes que vous pouvez..." Letter from Sederlund to the minister, 9 January 1914, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – "métropole. 1918"*, 732.

81. "la lecture des rapports envoyés donne l'impression que les sous-officiers Vleurinck et Björk, chargés de ces opérations, se sont livrés à un véritable chasse à l'homme. Je lis à différentes reprises qu'on a poursuivi des indigènes, et que dans cette poursuite, plusieurs furent tués." Letter by minister Renkin to the Governor-General, 24 February 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

82. LANCELOT ARZEL, "Des 'conquistadors' en Afrique centrale: espaces naturels, chasses et guerres coloniales dans l'Etat indépendant du Congo (années 1880 - années 1900)," PhD dissertation, Centre d'histoire des Sciences Po, 2018.

then, took the shape of a blind hunt that made no distinction between man, woman or child.

The streamlining of state violence into legally defined and therefore legitimate categories of police and military operations created opportunities for both the colonial state and private capital. The goal of these operations was to make recalcitrant communities comply with colonial authority. They usually resulted in lists being compiled of all members of the communities under attack, in the prescription of a tax burden or of labour duties, and in the “regrouping” of their villages – that is, concentrating scattered settlements into one single village, or relocating remote villages to a place near an accessible road. As such, these violent operations also served the interests of private exploiters: they directly facilitated the creation of a labour force through the subjugation of local communities.

A clear example of this unofficial cooperation between private and public actors in the Aruwimi district was the “Lomami Police Corps”. As the only state presence within the Lomami concession, this special subdivision of the *Force Publique* was responsible for law enforcement inside the company’s territory.⁸³ Their commander, Rodriquez, blurred the lines between military and civil duties, both leading armed operations and recruiting or training troops, while also collecting taxes, taking censuses of the population, and completing civil registers – a blend of functions that was typical of the understaffed, militarized colony at the time.⁸⁴ The Lomami Company not only covered part of the Police Corps’s budget,⁸⁵ they also

closely exchanged information between them: company agents would alert the Police Corps commander to signs of local opposition, hinting that state intervention might be required. Such interventions eventually benefited both sides: the company could exploit the forests and mobilize local labour more easily, while the colonial state subdued recalcitrant communities and took a share of the company’s profits.

The military operation ordered by administrator-in-chief Lund against the communities surrounding the Lokilo police post, which he considered insubordinate, and which he suspected of conspiring against the police post, is in line with this approach. In April 1910, he deployed one hundred soldiers to attack five of the surrounding villages that had originally come under the command of three *Force Publique* officers.⁸⁶ In what was a very unusual move, Lund travelled in person to the police post to take direct command of the military operation. In his capacity as district commissioner, he was even authorized to instruct the commander of the police corps. Lund’s orders, as recalled by one officer some years later, left little to the imagination: “You will undertake to kill as many natives as you can, and you must send out patrols to pursue them or else you will not be able to achieve a satisfactory result.”⁸⁷ The officers obeyed these orders and Lund achieved the bloodbath he had commanded: 167 Congolese corpses.⁸⁸ Lund’s final instruction to the officers was to withhold any information relating to their improper conduct in the reports they later submitted about the military operation.⁸⁹

83. F. FLAMENT, A. GILLIERT and HENRY DE LA LINDI, *La Force Publique de sa naissance à 1914*, 92.

84. Letter from Rodriquez to the district commissioner, 12 July 1911, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1755)9563/II; Bryant Shaw, “Force Publique, Force Unique: the Military in the Belgian Congo, 1914-1939” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1990), 14.

85. NICOLE CEULEMANS, *Per steamer over de Congo*, 19.

86. Rapport sur la marche des opérations pendant l’opération militaire chez les Yalinas et Yapendus (Lomami), 8 June 1910, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1755)9563/III.

87. “Vous tâcherez tuer autant d’indigènes que vous pouvez et vous avez à envoyer des patrouilles à leur poursuite, sinon vous ne pouvez pas arriver à un résultat convenable.” Letter from Sederlund to the minister, 9 January 1914, ARA2-JC, *MINIKOL – Personeel in Afrika – “métropole. 1918”*, 732.

88. Letter no. 4377 from the Governor-General to the minister, 29 July 1911, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1755)9563/III; Police report of Rodriquez, 30 October 1911, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1755)9563/III; Letter no. 74 from Rodriquez to Inspecteur d’Etat, 24 July 1911, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1755)9563/III.

89. Letter from Sederlund to minister, 9 January 1914, ARA2-JC, *Archives du ministère des Colonies et des successeurs en droit. Administration métropolitaine. Personnel d’Afrique (MINIKOL – Personeel in Afrika) – “métropole. 1918”*, 732.

Despite Lund's attempt to manipulate reports, the authorities in Boma and Brussels noticed their inconsistencies, and quickly suspected irregularities. The State Inspector, whose job had been created to verify and ensure the correct application of the 1906 decrees, duly launched an enquiry. His investigation left behind richly detailed archival records, in which the different parties involved anxiously attempt to discover what had happened or else twist the truth to their advantage.

What emerges most clearly from this correspondence are the discrepant interpretations of the appropriate handling of a military operation – between colonial agents in the field on the one hand, and policymakers in Brussels and Boma on the other. New decrees had been designed by the ministry of colonies in Brussels, had then passed through the colonial capital of Boma, and were subsequently referred to the different district capitals, until they eventually trickled down to state posts manned by civil servants and military officers. Far from the gaze of the central authorities, these field agents, the enactors of everyday colonialism, at times deemed certain decrees ill-adapted to everyday realities on the ground and therefore reinterpreted, modified, or simply ignored them.⁹⁰ This field autonomy is reflected in their use of violence. This was also true for field agents in Belgian Congo. Commissioner Lund, for instance, saw violence as an effective means of establishing control over a population. Motivated by anxieties about losing control of a situation, he believed that an “example” had to be made of a population he considered rebellious.⁹¹ When the officers reported that they had killed villagers during the operation, Lund responded with satisfaction, referring to it as “a good result”.⁹² To field agents, a display of ruth-

less violence, much like Pesek has argued, served as a deterrent by instilling a fear of the colonizer's might, in spite of their limited *actual* control over any given situation.⁹³ Lund's aggressive handling of the military operation and his subsequent manipulation of reports also reflect the fact that field agents were able to leverage a certain amount of agency – an observation that Glasman has made about the colonial police force in Togo.⁹⁴ Rather than passively implementing a given policy, Lund decided to take matters into his own hands and oversee the military operation according to his own judgement. Lund believed that a reign of terror was an effective way of enforcing authority over a wide region with limited means. Despite the high number of fatalities, he insisted that he had acted appropriately: “I am convinced that this operation was conducted correctly and that there was no other way of doing it,” he said, in defence of his actions before the minister in Brussels.⁹⁵

The minister and the colony's Governor-General disagreed. They considered the manipulation of the original reports as an “attempt to deceive the government”.⁹⁶ They criticized Lund for omitting to conduct a preliminary police operation and instead directly launching a full-scale military operation. The resulting body count, and the fact that it included women and children, concerned the authorities. At a time when politicians like Emile Vandervelde and international pressure groups like the Congo Reform Association or the British Consuls who were touring the colony were all criticizing ongoing exploitation practices, the government was careful to avoid possible new scandals.

The government's attitude towards violence is strongly reflected in the advice that Lund's suc-

90. BENOÎT HENRIET, *Colonial Impotence*, 51.

91. Déclarations faites par Mr Lund à Bruxelles le 27 avril 1911, 27 April 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

92. “... un bon résultat...” Letter from Lund to Rodriguez, 9 April 1910, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

93. MICHAEL PESEK, “Colonial Conquest and the Struggle for the Presence of the Colonial State in German East Africa, 1885–1903” in STEPHEN J. ROCKEL and RICK HALPERN, (eds.), *Inventing Collateral Damage: Civilian Casualties, War, and Empire*, Toronto, 2009, 163–65.

94. JOËL GLASMAN, *Les Corps Habillés au Togo: Genèse Coloniale des Métiers de Police*, Paris, 2014.

95. Déclarations faites par Mr Lund à Bruxelles le 27 avril 1911, 27 April 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

96. “une intention de tromper le gouvernement.” Confidential letter no. 1616 from the Governor-General to the district commissioner, 29 July 1911, ARA2-JC, AIMO GG, (1755)9563/III.

cessor, Henrotin, gave to a *chef de poste* who had mistreated his subordinate villagers. "For the natives, the sight of a fez⁹⁷ is a nightmare,"⁹⁸ the new district commissioner expressed disapprovingly. He instructed the civil servant to bring about peace and reconciliation; the goal should be to "inspire not fear, but trust, and to pursue a policy of appeasement if necessary."⁹⁹ Accordingly, the violent events around Lokilo were condemned as having obtained "problematic results" and the Governor-General denounced the cold-blooded way in which the officers involved discussed the killing of the local population.¹⁰⁰

The investigation and ensuing correspondence about the Lokilo affair reveal a discrepancy between the ideals and the practice of colonizing. While the first Belgian colonial policymakers were determined to maintain good relations with the local population, they exercised little effective control over their civil servants, who had developed their own working methods on the ground amid the legacy of unchecked Leopoldian exploitation.

This conclusion raises a question: if field agents did not reject violence, why did they denounce the practices of commercial agents that were just as brutal as their own? Here, Marie Muschalek may provide us with an answer. In her study of colonial policing in German Southwest Africa, she states that police work did not involve limiting violence, but rather administering "correct" violence in the right context.¹⁰¹ She describes how German colonial police justified their violent practices through bureaucratic means, ensuring that reports attested to the correct application of regulations – even though these reports could easily be falsified or manipulated. In this respect, violence committed by commercial agents was

considered illegitimate and unlawful, even though its goals and methods closely resembled state violence. Unlike commercial agents, civil servants and military officers had to inscribe their violence within a legal framework, justifying their actions as legitimate thanks to their knowledge of various decrees and regulations. Consequently, they disapproved of private agents acting outside the law. Increasing state presence inside concessionary territory was therefore not intended to contain violence, but rather establish control over a territory that was otherwise outside of state control. In a Weberian sense, it is a development typical of a state attempting to monopolize violence and put an exclusive claim on the legitimate use of force in the process of its own consolidation.

The Dandoy affair

So far, the two cases we have discussed have provided examples of two different facets of violence in early Belgian Congo: ongoing violence related to forced labour for rubber exploitation and committed by commercial agents of a concessionary company; and a form of organized violence committed in the name of "legitimate" state repression by *Force Publique* soldiers under the command of civil servants and officers. A third case will now shed light on a form of violence that sits somewhere between the two previous cases: violent acts committed by state actors but outside of any legal framework. The violent sexual transgressions perpetrated by civil servant Joseph Dandoy, discussed in this section, certainly elicited anxieties among his superiors and resulted in a trial for rape, indecent assault, and the disregard of indigenous wedding customs. Despite the court's acquittal, an administrative investigation followed which led to his eventual discharge.

97. Hat worn by *Force Publique* soldiers.

98. "Pour les indigènes, la vue d'un fez est un cauchemar." Letter no. 49V by district commissioner Henrotin to the *chef de poste* of Yandumba, 3 September 1912, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1755)9563/III.

99. "... inspirer non la crainte, mais la confiance et poursuivre une politique d'apaisement si nécessaire dans cette région." Letter no. 49V from district commissioner Henrotin to the *chef de poste* of Yandumba, 3 September 1912, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1755)9563/III.

100. Letter no. 6141 from the Governor-General to the minister, 13 December 1911, ARA2-JC, *AIMO GG*, (1755)9563/III.

101. MARIE MUSCHALEK, *Violence as Usual*, 157.

Dandoy's misconduct first came to light on 23 January 1912, when a *chef agricole* (a European crop manager) wrote a letter to the Governor-General containing several accusations against his colleague, Joseph Dandoy, who at that time was on leave in Europe. The gravest accusation concerned the forced *concubinage* of a young girl called Bolusia and nicknamed Moké, Lingala for "little one":

"Captain Dandoy, passing through the village of Farumgu, whose chief Likoi [Likoye] depends on the post of Yandumba, noticed a very young indigenous girl named Moké. The captain took this young girl as his housekeeper, despite her explicit refusal. She was so young that she was still a virgin. Despite her tears, she had to accompany the captain and remain with him until the end of his term."¹⁰²

"Housekeeper" (*ménagère*) in the context of colonial Congo did not refer to someone who cleaned the house or prepared meals – so-called *boys* were employed to do those tasks. *Ménagère* was a euphemism for a female companion who lived with a colonial agent, offered him sexual services, and was supposed to take care of his mental and physical well-being.¹⁰³ Interracial concubinage, far from being controversial, quickly became a normalized aspect of colonial life in the early years of Congo's colonization.¹⁰⁴ Doctors at the time believed that the sexual companionship of a designated *ménagère* both alleviated men's sex-

ual urges and protected them against widespread venereal diseases which they could contract if they had multiple sexual partners.¹⁰⁵ For example, in 1909, a physician working in the Aruwimi district warned that gonorrhoea "constantly threatens whites who do not have a *ménagère* and are forced to take women at random".¹⁰⁶ Another medical report, this time from 1912, stated that gonorrhoea was endemic to the point that only a few colonial agents in the Aruwimi district managed to evade it.¹⁰⁷ Both medical reports attest not only to institutional recommendations about keeping a *ménagère*, but also to the prevalence of colonial agents' sexual activity.

Indeed, in Bolusia's case, the court judged that there was no doubt about the sexual nature of the relationship: "Bolusia, in agreeing to become the defendant's housekeeper, knew perfectly well that this role involved concubinage," the judge argued.¹⁰⁸ The sexual nature of Dandoy's relationship with Bolusia in itself was not problematized in court. Even her young age did not feature as an important factor in the criminal case. Estimated to be around twelve years old, the court judged that Bolusia was entering puberty and was therefore nubile, while the girl herself maintained that she was still a child.¹⁰⁹ The judge's line of reasoning may have been influenced by contemporary pseudo-medical discussions about African girls supposedly entering puberty at a younger age than European girls, and by the belief that child

102. "Monsieur le capitaine Dandoy, de passage dans le village Farumgu, chef Likoi [Likoye], dépendant du poste de Yandumba, y a remarqué une toute jeune femme indigène, nommée Moké. Le capitaine a pris cette jeune fille comme ménagère [sic], malgré son refus formel. Elle était tellement jeune qu'elle était encore vierge. Malgré ses pleurs, elle a dû accompagner et rester auprès du capitaine jusqu'à la fin de son terme." Extract from the letter from Body to the Governor-General, 23 January 1912, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand "Kolonie"*, 15662.

103. AMANDINE LAURO, *Coloniaux, Ménagères et Prostituées au Congo Belge (1885-1930)*, Loverval, 2005, 95.

104. *Idem*, 77.

105. *Idem*, 88.

106. "La blennorrhagie atteint quelques blancs; elle menace constamment le blanc qui n'a pas de ménagère et est forcé de prendre des femmes au hasard et qui font un peu ce métier clandestinement.", Medical report District Aruwimi 2nd semester 1909, ARA2-JC, GG HYG, 74.

107. Medical report Aruwimi 1912, ARA2-JC, GG HYG, 9.

108. "Bolusia, en acceptant de devenir la ménagère du prévenu, savait parfaitement bien que cette charge comportait un concubinage." Verdict of the court of first instance of Stanleyville, 28 July 1913, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand "Kolonie"*, 15662.

109. Letter from the public prosecutor to the substitute, 7 May 1913, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand "Kolonie"*, 15662; Verdict of the court of first instance of Stanleyville, 28 July 1913, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand "Kolonie"*, 15662.

marriages were widely practised among the indigenous population.¹¹⁰

What did cause a stir in the Dandoy affair, however, was the way in which he blatantly imposed his own will on the girl by pressuring her parents and the local *chef indigène* to hand over the child, despite her resistance. As Bolusia later testified, upon hearing about Dandoy's desire to take her with him, she fled to her parents' house. With her mother's help, she applied "ngula" to her face, a kind of red ochre made from wood, in the hope of scaring away Dandoy and changing his mind.¹¹¹ Dandoy then urged the chef Likoye to bring Bolusia back, threatening to arrest Bolusia's father if she did not come with him. Likoye, who "did not want to get involved with the white man because of her" therefore went to the house where Bolusia had taken refuge. Bolusia further testified:

"But at dusk, the chief [Likoye] came looking for me and asked me why I had fled. I replied that I was afraid of the white man and because "I did not know how to sleep with a man". He took me back to the white man, and the next day I went with him to Yandumba; I ran away once because the white man had hit me. When the white man took me, I was a virgin."¹¹²

A year and a half later, Bolusia escaped with the help of a *chef agricole*. His accusations against Dandoy dismayed the Governor-General, even

more so when the court later acquitted the civil servant of all charges. "This is foolishness," a high-ranking superior commented and underscored in the margins of one of Dandoy's written statements.¹¹³ Dandoy's misconduct was diametrically opposed to a policy that sought to stabilize relations with the local population, and which saw *chefs indigènes* as intermediaries who were supposed to have a reliable relationship with European authority figures. Now, once again, policy-makers saw their ideals thwarted by the violent and arbitrary behaviour of their field agents, who acted in their own interests and according to their own whims. Dandoy discarded indigenous customs by abducting a girl who had allegedly already been betrothed, and by threatening her father and the village's *chef indigène* with imprisonment.

The coercion that Dandoy inflicted on his victim highlights above all the violence that *concubinage* could involve. As the Vice-Governor-General stated, Dandoy chose Bolusia solely to satisfy his personal desires, using his authority to achieve his goals regardless of the victim's will. While Bolusia's story has survived as a unique and detailed account of a brutal *concubinage*, the practice of a white official visiting a village simply to choose a *ménagère* seems to have been normalized: district commissioner Henrotin ruled that Bolusia "had entered the service of Monsieur Dandoy in the same way that indigenous women enter the service of Europeans."¹¹⁴ In power relationships

110. AMANDINE LAURO, "De la puberté féminine dans les 'zones torrides': expertise médicale et régulations du corps des jeunes filles dans le Congo colonial," *Sextant. Revue de Recherche Interdisciplinaire sur le Genre et la Sexualité* 30, 2013, 33-45.

111. Déclaration de la nommée Moke, dite Bolesia, 30 October 1912, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika* – *Archiefbestand "métropole"*, 2444; Confidential letter from Vice-Governor-General to Dandoy, november 1913, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika* – *Archiefbestand "Kolonie"*, 15662; Verdict of the court of first instance of Stanleyville, 28 July 1913, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika* – *Archiefbestand "Kolonie"*, 15662.

112. "Mais à la tombée du jour, le chef [Likoye] vint me rechercher et me demanda pourquoi j'avais fui. Je répondis que j'avais peur du blanc et parce que "je ne connaissais pas dormir avec un male". Il me reconduisit près du blanc, et le lendemain je partis avec lui à Yandumba; je me sauvai une fois parce que le blanc m'avait frappée. Lorsque le blanc m'a prise, j'étais vierge." Déclaration de la nommée Moke, dite Bolesia, 30 October 1912, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika* – *Archiefbestand "métropole"*, 2444.

113. "C'est de l'inconscience." Letter from Dandoy, addressed to the Governor-General, s.d. [end of 1913], ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika* – *Archiefbestand "Kolonie"*, 15662.

114. "était passée au service de Monsieur Dandoy de la même façon que les femmes indigènes passent au service des européens." Letter no. 26 from district commissioner Henrotin to the Governor-General, 16 January 1913, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika* – *Archiefbestand "métropole"*, 2444. For the normalization of sexual violence in Belgian Congo, see also: AMANDINE LAURO, "Violence, Anxieties, and the Making of Interracial Dangers: Colonial Surveillance and Interracial Sexuality in the Belgian Congo," in DAGMAR HERZOG and CHELSEA SCHIELDS, (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism*, London, 2021, 329.

with white colonial officials, African women found themselves doubly oppressed as subjects of both racial hierarchy and patriarchy. Like the “private” violence of commercial agents or the “legitimate” violence of repression campaigns, sexual violence is another facet of the violent interactions that characterized everyday racial, capitalist, and patriarchal domination.¹¹⁵ Even after Bolusia’s refusal – her flight, her disguise, her tears – Dandoy left her with no choice. In this sense, one might wonder whether “sex slave” is not a more accurate term than *concubine* or *ménagère*.

While the court was investigating Bolusia’s forceful abduction, Dandoy returned from his vacation in Europe to begin his second term in the colony. This time, he would hold the position of *chef de secteur* over the Lomami concession. As already stated, this newly created position was part of developments that occurred in line with increased state presence in this territory formerly occupied only by commercial agents and their supporting police corps. Dandoy was supposed to monitor the workings of three state posts in the region – Lokilo, Elipa, and Opala. Seemingly unbothered by the transgressions he had committed in his first term, he quickly engaged in other cases of sexual misconduct. His mobility as *chef de secteur* allowed him to navigate between the three posts he was appointed to, enabling him to abuse the wives of soldiers who lived at those posts with their husbands. One of these women was named Nagbanda. When her husband was summoned to Basoko as a witness in a trial, she wanted to accompany him, but Dandoy commanded her to stay in Opala. “It was under these circumstances that Dandoy called for

the woman and abused her. Every time he passed through the post, he called for that woman,” one soldier testified, further indicating that the abuse went on for several weeks.¹¹⁶ In Lokilo, Dandoy was said to have summoned Mopeleke, the wife of a soldier, twice, “to abuse her”.¹¹⁷ When her husband protested, Dandoy threatened to punish him with twenty lashes. In Elipa, the third post in the Lomami concession, Dandoy allegedly assaulted the wife of soldier Evaloko when she came asking for salt. “No need to purchase it, come and sleep with me,” he had reportedly told her.¹¹⁸ After the assault, Dandoy allegedly “paid” the woman back with salt. Further allegations against him concerned the abuse of two other women, both married to soldiers, and the unauthorized whipping of his domestic servant.¹¹⁹

What antagonized authorities most about Dandoy’s case was not necessarily the interracial, sexual nature of his relations, but rather the fact that Dandoy completely disregarded existing local marriage customs. Dandoy’s victims were all married to *Force Publique* soldiers, and interrogations accordingly focused on determining whether Dandoy knew that his sexual partners were married women. As indicated in a circular letter from 1913, the Governor-General condemned sex between colonial agents and married Congolese women.¹²⁰ This stance can be situated within the broader context of the increased civilizing rhetoric that accompanied Belgian annexation, which was after all based on a set of moral commitments towards the Congolese population. Part of this moralizing discourse was an attempt to further discourage polygamy in favour of monogamous,

115. For a discussion about the pervasiveness of sexual violence in the Congo Free State, see: CHARLOTTE MERTENS, “In the Ruins of Empire: Historicizing Sexual Violence in Congo,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 25/3, 2023, 529-50.

116. “C’est dans ces circonstances que Dandoy a appelé la femme et en a abusé. Chaque fois qu’il passait par le poste, il appelait cette femme.” Declaration of Kilougosi, s.d. [April 1913], ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand “Kolonie”*, 15662.

117. “pour en abuser.” Enquête sur les agissements de M. le chef de secteur de 1e classe Dandoy, s.d. [December 1912], ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand “Kolonie”*, 15662.

118. “Pas nécessaire de l’acheter, viens dormir avec moi.” Enquête sur les agissements de M. le chef de secteur de 1e classe Dandoy, s.d. [December 1912], ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand “Kolonie”*, 15662.

119. Collection of interrogations by district commissioner Engh, s.d. [March-April 1913], ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand “Kolonie”*, 15662; Verdict of the court of first instance of Stanleyville, 28 July 1913, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand “Kolonie”*, 15662.

120. Lauro, *Coloniaux, Ménagères et Prostituées*, 125.

Christian marriages.¹²¹ Relationships between European agents and Congolese married women therefore became increasingly unacceptable, given that colonial officials were expected to embody a bourgeois sexual morality. Furthermore, these women were married to soldiers, meaning that the sexual violence they endured had consequences beyond their own bodily and mental integrity. Their husbands, for instance, interpreted the abuse of their wives as a personal affront to their honour and complained to the local *chef de poste*.¹²² As a result, the sexual misconduct of civil servants not only traumatized victims, but also undermined cohesion within the *Force Publique*, leading to conflicts between soldiers and the officers who raped the soldiers' wives. Rather than expressing concern for the female victims, authorities seemed concerned with maintaining good relations between soldiers and officers.

In Dandoy's case, an intimate matter thus became a question of state security, tying the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise to the sexual behaviour of its public officials.¹²³ The moral governance of the colony's new policymakers is reflected in efforts to prosecute and punish sexually transgressive behaviour of a field agent like Dandoy. When the court of Stanleyville acquitted Dandoy of all charges concerning the abduction and subsequent rape of Bolusia, the government appealed. To the minister's disbelief, the court ruled to uphold the acquittal because, reportedly, Dandoy did not use physical force, and because Bolusia did not suffi-

ciently express her reluctance and fear.¹²⁴ The government, on the contrary, had launched their own administrative investigation into Dandoy, and concluded he should be removed from service, which eventually happened in June of 1914.¹²⁵ To higher officials, it was important Dandoy be discharged because his misconduct exacerbated relations with the local population and created a tense climate that undermined the intended stabilization of affairs in the post-Leopoldian era.¹²⁶

Incidents of brute and illegal violence, whether rape, unauthorized whippings or mass slaughter, further stirred anxieties among higher officials because they exposed something fundamentally paradoxical about colonialism. Where Europeans propagated "civilization" and "pacification" as the moral premises of colonial rule, violence could still shape effective interactions in the field, either as a tool to force Africans into new colonial structures, or as a means for individual colonial agents to pursue personal interests. The European self-image of rationality and civilization was supposed to find its embodiment in the colonial officials on the ground, particularly civil servants.¹²⁷ Their use of violence was allowed as long as it followed "rational" bureaucratic procedure, as laid out in legal frameworks. The ideal colonial civil servant was ascribed qualities of reason and self-control – racialized qualities, drawn in opposition to those of indigenous people, who were deemed emotional, infantile, impulsive, promiscuous and aggressive.¹²⁸ In this way, colonial

121. NANCY ROSE HUNT, "Noise Over Camouflaged Polygamy, Colonial Morality Taxation, and a Woman-Naming Crisis in Belgian Africa," *The Journal of African History* 32/3, 1991, 471-94; AMANDINE LAURO, "'Le législateur n'envisage en l'espèce que le point de vue physiologique': régulations du mariage 'indigène' et politiques sexuelles au Congo Belge" in MARTINE SPENSKY, (ed.), *Le contrôle des femmes dans les empires coloniaux: empires, genre, et biopolitiques*, Paris, 2015.

122. For instances of abuse against women as an attack on the masculinity of their husbands, see also: OSUMAKA LIKAKA, *Naming Colonialism*, 116.

123. For the idea that the management of intimate spheres was central to colonial politics, see: ANN LAURA STOLER, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Oakland CA, 2010.

124. Verdict of the court of appeals, 14 November 1913, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand "Kolonie"*, 15662.

125. Ministerial decree, 4 May 1914, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personeel in Afrika – Archiefbestand "Kolonie"*, 15662.

126. This conclusion complicates the idea of widespread tolerance and impunity regarding sex crimes, as argued by TONI SMITH in "Liberators or Perpetrators? Co-Opting, Committing, and Condoning Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in the Early Belgian Congo," *Slavery & Abolition* 43/2, 2022, 366-93.

127. SANDRA MASS, "Welcome to the Jungle: Imperial Men, 'Inner Africa,' and Mental Disorder in Colonial Discourse," in MAURUS REINKOWSKI and GREGOR THUM, (eds.), *Helpless Imperialists: Imperial Failure, Fear, and Radicalisation*, Göttingen, 2013, 94.

128. *Idem*, 94.

agents practising arbitrary violence threatened to undermine the very distinctions that justified colonialism.¹²⁹ Civil servants who were incapable of restraining their impulses, whether sexual or merely sadistic, threatened to destabilize the colonial order of things. When married women were assaulted by civil servants, ordinary citizens were violently threatened, entire villages were massacred or houses destroyed under the guise of “military operations”, the colonial state ran the risk of losing its legitimacy. Time and again, reports of this kind of “irrational” behaviour reached the Governor-General or minister, who regarded these actions as contradictory to their colonial project and reacted with outrage.

The cases of Lund and Dandoy were followed by intensive correspondences, leaving behind significant archival thickness in their wake. The incidents involving these agents were major sources of concern to the highest echelons of the colonial administration, who endeavoured to get a grip on field dynamics by launching investigations led by the State Inspector. The fact that Lund and Dandoy occupied leadership roles as *chef de secteur* and district commissioner illustrates above all that colonial authorities were not a homogenous ensemble but could act in defiance of one another. This calls for a more layered approach to colonial power, in which continuities and ruptures that characterized early Belgian rule affected different echelons of the colonial administration in different ways, and where continued violence and dehumanization on the ground collided with new forms of governance.

The government’s decision to remove Dandoy from his functions was not motivated by questions of justice. It was a pragmatic move aiming to reduce the tension that characterized relations with the local population. Dandoy’s behaviours simply did not

fit the aspirations of moral rule, as boasted by king Albert I in the introduction. Strikingly, an internal report reveals how the minister’s cabinet seemed preoccupied with leaving Dandoy’s professional reputation in Belgium intact. When considering the most effective solution to Dandoy’s case, one member of the minister’s staff recommended:

“However, given the disastrous consequences that dismissal would have on Mr. Dandoy’s career in the metropolitan army, I cannot propose this disciplinary measure. I believe it would be more humane and reasonable to make him understand that it would be in his best interests to resign from his rank and position.”¹³⁰

Consequently, official documentation such as Dandoy’s personal career record stated that he had permanently left the colony due to illness, and had voluntarily relinquished his grades and functions. The government thus managed to remove the troublesome agent from the colony, while at the same time maintaining his reputation and avoiding further scandal. The same logic seems to apply to Lund and his officers, who in 1910 had led two military operations with a combined death toll of over 400 people, yet neither of whom were prosecuted after reaching Europe – possibly to avoid attracting attention and creating a public scandal.

IV. Conclusion

In 1908, when Belgium annexed Congo, new policymakers were eager to declare the end of the violent “excesses” of the Leopoldian era. Despite their civilizing rhetoric, the three vignettes discussed show that field practice in the early years of Belgian rule continued to be characterized by violence. The agents of the Lomami Company

129. This argument has been developed in relation to corporal punishment in colonial Africa in: STEVEN PIERCE and ANUPAMA RAO, (eds.), *Discipline and the Other Body: Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism*, Durham, 2006, 4.

130. “Et cependant, étant données les conséquences funestes qu’aurait la révocation sur la carrière de Mr Dandoy dans l’armée métropolitaine, je ne pourrais proposer cette mesure disciplinaire. J’estime qu’il serait plus humain, plus raisonnable, de lui faire comprendre qu’il y a utilité pour lui à demander la démission des grades et des fonctions qu’il occupe.” Note pour Mr. le Gouverneur Général (with copies of letters), 11 November 1913, ARA2-JC, MINIKOL – *Personnel in Afrika – Archiefbestand “Kolonie”*, 15662.

relied on a repertoire of coercion they had developed under Leopold's unchecked regime. Its progressive phasing out between 1910 and 1912 involved little change in the field. Archival fragments reveal stories of forced labour, violent recruitment campaigns, abductions at gunpoint, and routine dehumanization. To the new colonial state's officials, this arbitrary violence threatened the "moral reform" they advocated for after the Leopoldian atrocities. In an effort to impose a new colonial normality, they sought to tighten control over concessionary activity by increasing the number of civil servants and state posts responsible for overseeing the company's activities, while also taking selective action against abuses committed by several individual commercial agents.

Nevertheless, law enforcement retained a distinctly military and repressive character. State violence acquired legitimacy through the promulgation of decrees and the stipulation of procedures for "police" and "military" operations. In terms of their practical execution on the ground, these juridical categories still allowed for outright brutality. In 1910, two massacres took place in the Aruwimi district, leading to hundreds of casualties. Technically, these military operations remained within legal confines. However, the administration eventually discovered that doctored reports about them contradicted the moral framework of the *reprise*. Furthermore, the socialist opposition and the Congo Reform Movement were breathing down the government's neck and closely monitoring its "humanitarian" efforts. The "pacification" of relations between colonial actors and the Congolese population therefore constituted a crucial focal point of early Belgian governance. However, field agents had already developed their own *modus operandi*, motivated by a fear of losing control. Some considered spectacular violence as an effective means of enforcing their authority. Interpreting legislation on military operations as a licence to kill, they effectively turned law enforcement into an act of state terror.

As a result of these conflicting views, correspondence between Brussels, Boma, and Basoko

often took on the form of negotiation: questions such as "what amount of violence is legitimate in a certain context?" or conversely "what counts as excessive violence?" underlay inquiries conducted against "problematic" officials. On one end of these negotiations, the new administration anxiously attempted to keep the behaviour of their agents in check. On the other end, field agents maintained they acted in accordance with legislation, the orders of their superior, and their given situation on the ground. They circumvented difficult questions with lies, half-truths or excuses, and withheld sensitive information.

Dandoy's case serves as a striking illustration of the ways in which field agents leveraged their authority on the ground in order to further their own interests and satisfy their personal desires. Like Lund, Dandoy seemed oblivious to any wrongdoing. He defended his sexual predation as ordinary practice, and took it for granted that African women were at his disposal. What most alarmed authorities in his case was Dandoy's disregard for marriage customs and the extortion he used in securing Bolusia as his *ménagère*. In this way Dandoy's violent sexuality threatened to undermine the alleged moral distinctions between colonizers and the colonized that both defined and legitimized the colonial project.

Dandoy, Lund, and the Lomami Company agents all committed acts of violence that triggered a response from the new colonial administration. The minister and Governor-General acted as arbiters who determined where the line of permissible violence lay – a line that was the result of negotiations between the new moral ambitions in the metropole and the practices inherited from Leopold's red rubber regime in the field. It is precisely at the point of the emergence and recurrence of this friction that one can situate the dynamic that was characteristic of early Belgian Congo. Everyday practices on the ground did not change overnight. However, for officials in the field, the new colonial policy meant first and foremost that they had to increasingly justify their violent actions – on the one hand in the face of a growing body of legislation and regula-

tion, and on the other, against evolving views on the appropriate use of force. From the new government's point of view, any violent interaction that fell outside the codified scope of law threatened the legitimacy of the "civilizing mission", and therefore the very premise of the *reprise*. Any counteractions were subsequently aimed at saving face, avoiding scandal, and pacifying relations in the field – not at achieving justice for victims.

Ultimately, the paradigm of colonialism precludes discussions about a supposed "improvement" of

colonial governance over time. The question this article puts forward is not a normative one about the "gradual betterment" of colonized people, but rather one relating to tensions between different visions, practices and agents of empire as regimes shift. Even though the Belgian takeover eventually managed to blunt the sharpest edges of its predecessor, like all empires, it relied until its demise on the fiction of racial hierarchy. As such, even after 1914, one cannot speak of the "improvement" of colonial rule in Congo, but rather of slow shifts in racial segregation over time.

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