

INTRODUCTION: CONGO AT WAR

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When the First World War broke out, the Belgian Government took a series of measures to ensure the defence of its colony against German attacks, in the border areas with Cameroon as well as in Katanga and Kivu. Initially, the colony's government attempted to maintain a strictly defensive position, in accordance with Articles 10 and 11 of the General Act of Berlin (1885) confirming the neutral status of the Congo Basin¹. The situation changed on 4 August 1914 when Germany invaded Belgium, leading colonial authorities to relinquish the colony's neutrality by helping the Allies' navy in the Congo Basin. On that same day, the Belgian government, trying at all costs to avoid spreading the conflict to African soil which might endanger its colonial possession, proposed to reaffirm the neutrality of all the colonies in the Congo Basin to the British, French and German governments in accordance with Article 11 of the Treaty of Berlin. This Belgian request was reiterated several times and remained on the table until 8 August, when the British bombarded the radio station in Dar Es-Salaam, the capital of German East Africa. This triggered German action in Kenya as well as against two Belgian outposts on the eastern border of Congo on the banks of Lake Tanganyika at Mokolubu on 15 August and at Lukuga seven days later. In quick response, the Belgian government ordered its colonial troops, the *Force Publique*, to go on the offensive to defend Congo's territorial integrity. On 28 August, Congo went to war.

The Centenary of the Great War has been an opportunity for numerous events, publications and exhibitions in European countries. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the global dimension has been widely underrepresented, when not completely absent or ignored, in Belgium. This assessment might sound too categorical, but it reveals the difficulty of imagining the war experience outside specific historical canons. This could be explained by a tradition developed mainly in the 1920s (the “trench experience”) and the broader adoption of first memory management under the leadership of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, second of the results of diplomatic negotiations and third of conflicting chronological frameworks. Commemorations shine a lot of attention on forgotten wars. The Congolese battlefields, the Congolese war contributions and their immediate and lasting effects on the shaping of the Belgian imperial project, cry for renewed appraisal.

Historical research has not neglected the First World War or its effects on Europe’s political landscape. Yet, understandably perhaps, given the imprint of the fighting on Western Europe, most of the literature produced since 1918 has focused on the events on the Western Front and their impact on metropolitan Britain, France, and Germany². Meanwhile, according to Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, “ethnic minorities, imperial troops, and East European or non-European theatres of fighting, conscription, and upheaval have remained at best sideshows in general history accounts of war and peace on the Western Front”³. In recent years, however, within First

World War studies, it seems that the African colonies and the role they played during the Great War have sparked renewed interest, both among European researchers and the Africans themselves. For some years now, studies have focused on the indigenous populations, on the geopolitical stakes of an “imperial” war, or on the consequences of the conflict on colonial societies. The recent works of Hew Strachan⁴ and Anne Samson⁵, Michelle Moyd’s work on East Africa⁶, Marc Michel on the former French colonies⁷ are perfect examples. Thanks to the Centenary of the Great War, more and more researchers have taken on detailing the participation of the empires in the First World War. Questions about the recruitment of the indigenous population into the Allied armies, but also the political, economic and geostrategic consequences of the participation of the colonies in a war that was not solely European, are at the forefront of this movement.

It is no different for the Congo and its involvement in the Great War. It is now clear that most of what we knew about events in Congo, its contributions and the consequences of the war on Congo’s future remained largely based either on 1980s historical research on archives and oral sources available at that time, or on the 1920s and 1930s printed material produced by the witnesses of the events. But in a very short time, the Centenary decisively enriched the historiography of the Congo during the First World War. Major historians such as Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem and Pamphile Mabiala directed scientific productions on the subject⁸. A couple of symposiums were

1. Declaration relative to the neutrality of the territories comprised in the Conventional Basin of the Congo. *Act of the Berlin Conference*, 26/02/1885, Chap. III, Art. 10, 11, p. 34. For further information, see Wm. ROGER LOUIS, *Ruanda-Urundi, 1884-1919*, Oxford, 1963.
2. See JAY WINTER AND ANTOINE PROST, *Penser la Grande Guerre. Un essai d'historiographie*, Paris, 2004.
3. ROBERT GERWARTH AND EREZ MANELA, “Introduction”, in ROBERT GERWARTH AND EREZ MANELA (eds.), *Empires at War: 1911–1923*, Oxford, 2014, p. 2.
4. HEW STRACHAN, *The First World War in Africa*, New York, 2004.
5. ANNE SAMSON, *World War I in Africa. The Forgotten Conflict among the European Powers*, London-New York, 2012.
6. MICHELLE MOYD, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa*, Athens (Ohio), 2014.
7. MARC MICHEL, *L'Afrique dans l'engrenage de la Grande Guerre*, Paris, 2013.
8. ISIDORE NDAYWEL È NZIEM AND PAMPHILE MABIALA MANTUBA-NGOMA, *Le Congo belge dans la Première Guerre mondiale (1914-1918)*, L'Harmattan RDC, 2015.

organized, namely, *Les Congolais et la Première Guerre mondiale 1914-1918 (Ambassade de Belgique en République démocratique du Congo et Ministère de la Défense Nationale, Sécurité du Territoire et des Anciens Combattants de la République démocratique du Congo)*, *Les oubliés de la guerre 14–18 : la Force Publique du Congo (Cercle d'Action Laïque Charleroi)* and *Une guerre oubliée? Les colonies d'Afrique Centrale dans la Première Guerre mondiale (Amandine Lauro - Université Libre de Bruxelles and Bérengère Piret - USLB)*. This last one is the point of departure of this special issue. Moreover, exhibitions, including *Loopgraven in Afrika* by Lucas Catherine, *Le Congo et la Grande Guerre* by the Institute of Veterans and *Les Congolais dans la Grande Guerre : inconnus à cette adresse* by the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA), the Institute of Veterans and Enika Ngongo (USLB) were organised thanks to the Centenary. Each of these initiatives has the merit of questioning one or the other facet of the Congolese involvement. Some highlight the participation of the Congolese troops of the *Force Publique* in multiple military operations, while others are interested in how this involvement was recognized in the post-war period.

Following their lead, this thematic issue reports on recent and innovative studies about Congo at war that go beyond strictly military operations. The studies are divided into two parts. The first is devoted to the experiences of combat. Using Belgian archival material, published memoirs, photographs and some sources of reported oral tradition such as school songs, Enika Ngongo reconsiders the crucial part played by Congolese troops and indigenous auxiliaries during the Great War in Africa and what their everyday reality might have been. It also considers the recognition they received from colonial authorities and the Belgian state during and after the Great War. By analysing the state's acknowledgment of the involvement of the Africans in the *Force Publique*, this article examines how Belgium seemed far more concerned by events within its borders than by its colony, except when societal changes meant finding a new balance to be able to live together.

In her contribution, Amandine Lauro then examines both Belgium's colonial perspective as a belligerent in the First World War and the importance of various anxieties linked to race, prestige and authority within the context of imperial comparison. Based on a set of under-exploited archival records, this article aims to retrace the history of these debates held by a variety of actors from the Belgian (colonial) sphere as they show socio-political tensions that both reflected and concealed concerns related to the same issues in other empires. This raises the question of Belgian-Congolese specificities well beyond the peculiar (absence of) "outcome" of these discussions. In his article, Lancelot Arzel offers another look at the war experiences of European and Congolese soldiers of the *Force Publique* in order to understand why this colonial army was still regarded as very violent on the battlefields by the enemy and local populations of the Great Lakes. Without in depth investigations into colonial archives but instead through the use of published memoirs and personal documents, it offers new insight into the meaning of colonial violence in the 1910s, during World War I combats in Cameroon, the defence of the Katanga-Rhodesia area and during the East African campaigns and early 1920s in the Kivu region as well as in the occupied territories of Rwanda-Urundi. To conclude the first part of this thematic issue, Anne Cornet explores the vast collections of photographs of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, which include about 3,000 photographs and negatives produced during the 1914-18 Belgian military campaigns in Africa (Cameroon in 1914–1915, Northern Rhodesia in 1914–1915, and two military campaigns in German East Africa in 1916–1917, respectively called the Tabora and the Mahenge campaigns). Most of the photos were taken by amateurs, but the collections also include propaganda photographs. As a prelude to a more systematic study, Anne Cornet chooses to favour two perspectives, namely a collective profile of the photographers and a selection of their preferred topics (e.g. soldiers, camaraderie at the front, on the periphery of the conflict, "enemy" and "ally", victories, death and suffering). Limiting herself to a qualitative analysis, Anne Cornet

makes initial assumptions about the significance of the practice of war photography in a colonial space, by trying to assess the extent to which the specific topics fall within a “war culture” or a “colonial culture”, or even a culture that would be specific to the war in Africa.

In the second part of this thematic issue, the authors discuss various legal aspects about Congo at war. Thomas Graditzky explores the British-Belgian occupation experience in Runda-Urundi alongside the evolution of international legal norms. Using this specific experience, approached mainly from a Belgian perspective, he highlights the way factors such as competing interests and war aims, ideological perceptions, and political and military balance of power influenced the development of legal notions and principles. It provides a focused analysis of three interconnected developments in the field of international

law: the application of the law of military occupation in the colonial domain, the disappearance of the right of conquest, and the emergence of the League of Nations’ mandate system.

Frederik Dhondt and Sebastiaan Vandenbogaerde end the thematic issue by discussing the international position of Belgium and Congo with regard to the neutrality clauses proclaimed in the 1839 London Treaty and the 1885 General Act of Berlin. The present contribution does not concern the question of the *violation* of Belgian (and a presumed Congolese) neutrality by Germany. It examines whether the legal and conceptual foundations of permanent neutrality were solid. Then, with unique insight into the *Journal des Tribunaux*, they analyse how national legal practitioners (e.g. attorneys-at-law, notaries and the like) perceived the Congo problem and its impact on the neutrality of both Belgium and Congo.