

THE 'SETTLER MOMENT' IN BELGIAN AFRICA: EUROPEANS IN THE BELGIAN CONGO AND RUANDA-URUNDI DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

■ - *Guy Bud* -¹

The article argues that the unique circumstances of the Second World War allowed the white population of Belgian Africa to seek enhanced power and influence. Though ultimately unsuccessful, their experience is significant for several reasons, not least because it serves to illustrate a number of important longer term trends. These include the complex relationship between Europeans and both their own colony, at once dependent but resentful, and that with other European populations elsewhere in Africa. It does not aim to present a panoramic overview of the often disparate factions and political causes which emerged during the period.² Rather, it focuses on two particular themes. The first is the sense of political possibility which was created by new relationships, between the Congo and other African colonial societies—and in particular South Africa. The second examines their experimentation with new forms of political mobilisation—loosely based on trade unionism—which would characterise the period. Taken together, these themes show a colonial population intent on seizing real power and influence from the colonial administration rather than passively following it, as is sometimes assumed.

Studying the particularities of the ‘settler moment’ also helps to avoid the tendency, observed by Jan Vansina, to see the half-century of Belgian rule as a single, homogenous period.³ This idea is a natural corollary to the scholarly focus on the origins and collapse of colonial rule which has also shaped the perception of the Second World War. ‘To say that the Second World War was important’, noted two British historians in 1986, ‘is to make the last uncontroversial statement in African studies’, yet this importance has often been assessed in rather teleological terms.⁴ The bulk of studies of the Congo during the conflict, many written in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasised those aspects that could be linked to eventual independence, notably the first stirrings of mass nationalism and the apparent weakening of the colonial state under wartime conditions. Their argument was essentially that the conflict represented a kind of ‘hinge point’ between the era of colonisation and inevitable colonial collapse, paralleling wider trends in African historiography.⁵ In recent years, however, the limitations of this approach have become increasingly apparent.⁶ An emerging literature has tended to stress the distinctive nature of the wartime period as a ‘historical moment’ in its own right, examining how the distinctive circumstances of the period led to the emergence of new and often short-lived forms of political ideology and mobilisation.⁷ This contention remains largely

restricted to the literature on southern and West Africa, however, and has still to be applied to the Belgian Congo.

That the wartime period was distinctive can clearly be glimpsed in the concerns of Belgians in the metropolis in the aftermath of the Liberation in 1944–45. The years following the Second World War saw not only an upsurge of interest in colonial settlement in the metropolis, but also a wave of concerns which appears hard to reconcile historically. When one writer took to the *Revue générale belge* in 1947 to ask ‘whether a Congolese nation is in the process of becoming’, he was writing about the palpable transformation within the white population of the colony.⁸ Within a fairly limited group at least, such complaints were relatively common at a time when the post-war malaise in Europe appeared to herald a reversal of the balance of power between African colonies and their European metropolises. Oscar-Paul Gilbert, a socialist writer who visited the colony in 1946, was even moved to warn his compatriots about the emergence of a ‘second separatism’, analogous to that already established in Flanders.⁹

It is the basis for these concerns—a new kind of wartime political assertiveness among the European populations of Belgian Africa—on which this article focuses. In doing so, it touches on a sec-

1. The author would like to thank Professor Martin Conway (University of Oxford), Professor Guy Vanthemsche (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Dr. Oliver Coates (University of Cambridge) for their comments on the draft of this article.

2. For a more comprehensive account, see GUY BUD, *Belgian Africa at War: Europeans in the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, 1940–1945*, Univ. of Oxford M.Phil. thesis, 2017.

3. JAN VANSINA, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960*, Madison, 2000, p. 331.

4. DAVID KILLINGRAY and RICHARD RATHBONE, ‘Introduction’, in idem (eds.) *Africa and the Second World War*, London, 1986, p. 1.

5. For an example in the Congolese context, see MAURICE LOVENS, *Le système colonial belge à l’épreuve de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Contribution à l’histoire politique du Zaïre*, Catholic Univ. of Louvain-la-Neuve PhD thesis, 1974. For a general example of this trend, see ALI MAZRUI, ‘Africa and the Legacy of the Second World War: Political, Economic and Cultural Aspects’, in *Africa and the Second World War: Report and Papers of the Symposium organized by UNESCO at Benghazi [...] from 10 to 13 November 1980*, Paris, 1985, p. 13–26.

6. ASHLEY JACKSON, *Botswana 1939–1945: An African Country at War*, Oxford, 1999. This book exemplifies what might be considered this ‘revisionist’ school, often based on individual country-themed studies. See also DAVID KILLINGRAY and MARTIN PLAUT, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War*, Woodbridge, 2012.

7. See, *inter alia* PETER ALEXANDER, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: Labour and Politics in South Africa*, Oxford, 2000.

8. MAX HORN, ‘La naissance de la nation congolaise’, in *Revue générale belge*, Mar. 1947, p. 629; OSCAR-PAUL GILBERT, *L’Empire du silence. Congo 1946*, Brussels, 1947, p. 21–3.

9. For the idea of national dependence on colonies for political status, see ‘SOPHIE DEROISIN’ (pseudonym of MARIE DE ROMÉE DE VICHENET), ‘Dans notre Congo en guerre’, in *Revue générale belge*, dec. 1945, p. 133–42.

and area of importance within Congolese history. While much attention has rightly been devoted to unpacking the ostensibly homogenous 'colonised', the same is not true of the 'colonisers', either in the Congo or more broadly in the Africanist literature.¹⁰ The result is that 'non-official Europeans', to use the British terminology of the period, both as settlers and private individuals, remain a largely unknown quantity. Their political struggles are either ignored or dismissed as the narcissism of small difference. Indeed, many historians would probably subscribe to Bogumil Jewsiewicki's implicit conclusion that Congolese history has been marked more by the absence of settlers than by their presence.¹¹ Yet this is hardly how it seemed to contemporaries, as we have seen. By the mid-1930s, the Belgian Congo had the seventh-largest white population in the sub-continent and a larger European population, in absolute terms at least, than Kenya.¹² Beyond this inherent importance, the distinctive and often uneasy position that they occupied reveals much about the Belgian colonial state and society in the period. For its source material this study makes extensive use of the Congolese press which provides a day-by-day view of the political discussions within the European population, complemented by the personal papers of influential figures within the community.¹³

I. Europeans in Belgian Africa

It is essential to examine the context of white settlement in the Belgian Congo to understand why the wartime period proved such a fertile period for European political activism. At the time of the German invasion of Belgium, some 29,791 Europeans lived in the Belgian Congo, together with a further 1,404 in the neighbouring mandated territory of Ruanda-Urundi.¹⁴ They formed a tiny minority in the colony, comparable in absolute terms to the population of a small provincial town in the metropolis. Yet, though small, they also represented an increasingly consolidated population. A number of significant population centres had emerged during the interwar period, most notably Léopoldville and Elisabethville, in which large sections of the European population congregated, surrounded by their own associations, shops, and newspapers.

Importantly, however, only a minority—perhaps about 2,500 people in total—could be considered to be settlers (*colons*) in a strict sense, envisaging a long-term future in Africa as self-employed traders, planters, or members of the liberal professions. The vast majority instead thought of themselves as colonials (*coloniaux*) and were employed by the large private companies, by the state as civil

10. DANE KENNEDY, *Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1939*, Durham NC, 1987 is probably the most influential exception. The literature on settlers in Belgian Africa is small, but growing, eg. GUILLAUME LÉONARD, 'Un divorce belge. Expériences contrastées du planteur belge de café au Kivu (1945–1960)', in PATRICIA VAN SCHUYLENBERG et al. (eds) *L'Afrique belge aux XIXe et XXe siècles: Nouvelles recherches et perspectives en histoire coloniale*, Brussels, 2014, p. 207–28. Also worthy of a mention is FLORENCE GILLET, 'Congo rêvé? Congo détruit. Les anciens coloniaux belges aux prises avec une société en repentir. Enquête sur la face émergée d'une mémoire', in *Cahiers d'histoire du temps présent*, 19, 2008, p. 79–133. Though different in many ways, these studies share a common focus on the cultural rather than political history of colonials.

11. BOGUMIL JEWSIEWICKI, 'Le colonat agricole européen au Congo-Belge [sic], 1910–1960: Questions politiques et économiques', in *Journal of African History*, 20/4, 1979, p. 559–71.

12. Figures quoted in MALCOLM HAILEY, *An African Survey: A Study of Problems Arising South of the Sahara*, 2nd edn, Oxford, 1945, p. 109.

13. JEAN-MARIE VAN BOL, *La Presse quotidienne au Congo belge* (Paris, 1959) is the best introduction to the colonial press. For its sheer extent, see 'Périodiques publiés au Congo belge et au Ruanda-Urundi', in *Zaire. Revue congolaise*, Feb. 1947, p. 217–21 which lists 102 publications of various descriptions from the period.

14. *Rapport sur l'administration de la colonie du Congo belge pendant les années 1939 à 1944 présenté aux Chambres législatives*, Brussels, 1947, p. 248–9; *Rapport sur l'administration belge du Ruanda-Urundi pendant les années 1939–1944 présenté aux Chambres par le Ministre des Colonies*, Brussels, 1947, p. 45.

servants or by the various religious organisations as teachers and missionaries. Attracted both by a sense of vocation and by the high salaries on offer, the *coloniaux* came to Africa for employment but, unlike *colons*, always envisaged it as a temporary period of their lives after which, *fin de terme*, they would return to Europe.

Despite this distinction, both *colons* and *coloniaux* belonged to the class of what British contemporaries referred to as 'non-official Europeans', sharing a public sphere and sense of place. This was bolstered in the interwar period by the gradual consolidation of a colonial identity, supported by a sense of shared experience. Even back in Belgium, the image of the returned *colonial*—an unsympathetic figure combining nostalgia for the 'big life' in the Congo with clearly exaggerated accounts of its hardships—became an established part of the popular imagination, further serving to re-enforce the idea of *coloniaux* as a group apart.¹⁵ This distinct identity, argued a contemporary, was the inevitable product of their élite position in the colonial situation and impossible to shed: 'if they are 'Europeans' in the colony, in Europe they are 'colonials'.'¹⁶

This élite position, however, was always less élite than it appeared. Though certainly privileged in the colony's racial hierarchy, the position of the *coloniaux* within the colonial system was always ambiguous. The reason was twofold. Belgian colonial policy was, at least tacitly, premised on the idea of the 'colonial trinity' of State, Church, and Company interests. Though present within each of these institutions, the *coloniaux* occupied

a secondary position without any specific voice to advance their interests. Unlike the legislative councils present in some other European colonies in Africa, the *coloniaux* were excluded from any formal influence in the closed world of Belgian colonial decision-making.¹⁷ This worsened the latent antipathy between most *coloniaux* and the administration, symbolised by the Ministry of the Colonies and the state and corporate institutions in the Congo. A substantial attempt to challenge this administrative dictatorship was made in 1920 when white workers in Katanga's mines and railways attempted to form an illegal trade union. This movement was finally broken after a prolonged, bitter, and often violent strike which put an end to any hopes of representation within the colonial state. Their voice was further marginalised by the Great Depression and the centralising administrative reforms which accompanied it.¹⁸

Though the *coloniaux's* demands for political power were successfully rebuffed, their very existence posed a much more fundamental problem to the colonial authorities. As has been discussed elsewhere, anxiety about foreign threats to national sovereignty in Africa permeated Belgian colonial thinking.¹⁹ These concerns affected the way that the administration related to the *coloniaux*, a third of whom were not Belgian nationals by 1940. The presence of so many foreigners was seen as a threat to national sovereignty, but also to the notion of colonisation by an 'élite'. In response, the administration chose to limit all white immigration and maintained tight legal controls on those already present.²⁰ This policy, com-

15. A classic example is HENRI DRUM's *Ces coloniaux...!*, Brussels, 1931, p. 197–8. HERGÉ's *Tintin in the Congo* (1931) is perhaps the most famous example of this genre.

16. *Les coloniaux: Quelques traits de leur psychologie*, Leuven, [c.1941], p. 7–8.

17. For the closed nature of colonial policy-making, see JEAN-LUC VELLUT, 'Hégémonies en construction: Articulations entre Etat et entreprises dans le bloc colonial belge (1908–1960)', in *Revue canadienne d'études africaines*, 16/2 (1982), p. 313–30. The article is reprinted in JEAN-LUC VELLUT, *Congo. Ambitions et désenchantements, 1880–1960*, Paris, 2017.

18. White civil servants were more fortunate, acquiring the right to form a professional body in 1919. ROBERT POUPART, *Première esquisse de l'évolution du syndicalisme au Congo*, Brussels, 1960, p. 11–4.

19. PAMPHILE MABIALA MANTUBA-NGOMA, 'Bula Matari et son Congo (1885–1960): Coloniser dans la peur', in *idem* and MATHIEU ZANA-ETAMBALA (eds.) *La société congolaise face à la modernité (1700–2010): Mélanges eurafricains offerts à Jean-Luc Vellut*, Paris, 2017, p. 33–60. Also GUY VANTHEMSCHÉ, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885–1980*, Cambridge, 2012, p. 106–20.

20. VITA FOUTRY, 'Belgisch-Kongo tijdens het Interbellum: Een immigratiebeleid gericht op sociale controle', in *Belgisch tijdschrift voor nieuwste geschiedenis*, 3–4, 1983, p. 461–88.

bined with widespread re-emigration to Europe (or to other areas of the non-European world) during the Great Depression, meant that the *coloniaux's* position in the colony was being constrained in a number of ways during the 1930s.

This explains the strength of the reaction to the outbreak of war, and more especially to the defeat of the Belgian armies in Europe in 1940. Seen from Africa, the defeat was a moment of rupture, both emotional and political. Yet it was also a moment of great opportunity, when the balance of power between the *coloniaux* and the state shifted decisively in their favour. The political response in the Congo to the defeat has, of course, received significant scholarly attention and the broad political context is quite well known.²¹ The collapse of communications with the Belgian government meant that, from May to July 1940, the Congo was effectively governed from Léopoldville. During this crucial period, the colony followed a curiously detached political trajectory at the instigation of the Governor-General, intended to avoid antagonism between the Congo and its British and Vichy French neighbours. It was only at the end of October that the government had sufficiently consolidated its position in London to begin the secondary process of re-asserting its primacy over the colony. This culminated in a personal visit from the Minister of the Colonies in December.²² In this period of uncertainty the *coloniaux* were more than mere spectators. As we shall see, the experience of 1940 began a prolonged search for a new political order in the colony. Though initially restricted to the balance between the colonial state and the European population, this soon grew into a much more ambitious examination of the entire colonial structures of rule.

II. Becoming 'Africa Conscious'

For contemporaries, one of the more obvious effects of the war on the *coloniaux* was to prompt them to re-assess their sense of place. For the first time, Sophie Deroisin and others argued, they had been forced to reach beyond their political and emotional dependence on the metropolis, making them 'Africa Conscious' for the first time.²³ Much of the discourse on the emerging 'Congolese nation' reflected a similar concern that *coloniaux* were beginning to identify more with the colony, and the opportunities which it might provide in the post-war world, than with their home country. For the most part, these fears were entirely overstated: 'We Are Not Revolutionaries', proclaimed an entirely accurate headline in *L'Echo du Kivu* in 1942.²⁴ At the same time, however, the war years did lead many *coloniaux* to look beyond the Congo's borders for the first time, and to seek new links with other white populations in southern Africa.

The new sense of intercolonial solidarity was made possible by the sense of belonging to a common Allied cause. It was thus a product of the wartime moment. While they never abandoned distinctively national identities and objectives altogether, Belgian *coloniaux* developed a peculiar type of wartime internationalism, believing their own *effort de guerre* to be a seamless part of a single Allied war effort. Propaganda further encouraged this view; as the Governor of Kenya proclaimed in a typical speech in June 1941, 'Collaboration between the Belgian Congo and Kenya is absolute, not only in view of final victory over the Nazis but also as a result of our desire to form a new world; a desire which, like a flame, illuminates these hard but glorious days and which, now more than ever, guides us, our

21. JACQUES VANDERLINDEN has written a number of notable studies on the topic. Of particular interest are: *Pierre Ryckmans, 1891-1959: Coloniser dans l'honneur*, Brussels, 1994, p. 422-58; and 'L'Appel du 18 juin et le Congo belge' in *De Gaulle, la Belgique et la France libre. Journée d'étude organisée le 20 juin 1990*, Paris, 1991, p. 79-88.

22. The definitive account of the Belgian government's activities in 1940 remains JEAN STENGERS, *Léopold III et le gouvernement: Les deux politiques belges de 1940*, 2nd edn, Brussels, 2002.

23. 'SOPHIE DEROISIN', 'Dans notre Congo en guerre', in *Revue générale belge*, Dec. 1945, p. 137.

24. *L'Echo du Kivu* (23 Jan. 1942), 'Nous ne sommes pas des révolutionnaires', p. 1-3.



Léopoldville's anciens combattants commemorate the Force Publique's participation in the First World War at the Monument du souvenir congolaise, 1942. Source : Cegesoma/State Archives Belgium. Collection Cauvin nr. 143104.



Governor-General Ryckmans (right) and his entourage pictured around Albert De Vleeschauwer, Minister of the Colonies, at the latter's departure from Léopoldville on 16 October 1942. Black-and-white photo. Source : Cegesoma/State Archives Belgium, nr. 133898.

allies and the great American people.²⁵ Sympathy for the Anglo-Saxon powers, particularly the British, was an integral part of this vision. Already widely admired after the Summer of 1940, Britain was increasingly believed to represent a model for future social change, emphasising state planning and welfarism, both of which were well-received in the Congo.²⁶

Belgian *coloniaux* were thus pre-disposed towards an openness to 'Anglo-Saxon' ideas at exactly the moment that they were coming into closer contact with British colonies in Africa. This was particularly true of the Anglophone settler societies to the South, especially the Union of South Africa which became particularly important, both economically and socially, after 1940. It provided a market for Congolese primary products and an alternative source of consumer goods previously sourced in Belgium. Between 1939 and 1941, the value of trade between the two increased almost twenty-fold.²⁷ Yet it also substituted for Belgium in another way, providing a venue for holidays in a non-tropical climate. The importance of this should not be understated. Contemporary medical wisdom emphasised the harm of prolonged exposure to the Congolese climate; the regular vacation outside the colony was thus an established part of colonial life, also enshrined in most employment contracts.²⁸ The possibility of spending holidays in South Africa—especially at the Cape—had origi-

nally been raised in 1939, but became popular for the first time after the defeat. By December 1940 it had already become an established destination, praised for the 'affable' nature of its authorities and the ease of communicating in Afrikaans.²⁹ Assessing the volume of Belgian travel is difficult, but a February 1942 estimate put the number of Belgian tourists currently in the Cape at 850.³⁰

South Africans were not indifferent to these new contacts with the Belgian Congo. Indeed, the 'Pan-African' ambitions of the Union would loom ominously over the new relationship. Though northward expansion had long been discussed in South Africa, its revival too was a product of wartime changes and especially the rise to power of Jan Christian Smuts in 1939. Having outflanked his Afrikaner opponents by bringing the Union into the war, Smuts rapidly consolidated not only his personal pre-eminence in South African politics but that of his United Party. He also hoped to capitalise on the economic assertiveness in South Africa, generated by the wartime commodity boom, to revive his ambitious political programme.³¹ The most significant element of this, at least from the Belgian perspective, was Smuts' cherished 'Pan-African idea' which envisaged a federation of African colonies south of the equator, inevitably led by South Africa as the dominant regional power, forged after a period of deepening economic and technical co-operation.³²

25. *Centre-Afrique* (19 June 1941), 'Allocation prononcée par Sir Henry Moore', p. 3.

26. Particularly in relation to the Beveridge Report which was widely discussed in the Congo after December 1942, see: *Vaincre!* (Dec. 1942), 'La nouvelle révolution en Grande-Bretagne' by C. BAGOT GREY; *L'Echo du Katanga* (2 Dec. 1942), 'Un document évolutionnaire en Grande-Bretagne'; *L'Avenir Colonial Belge* (22 Jan. 1943), 'Le rapport de Sir William Beveridge' by ARTHUR WAUTERS.

27. Calculated from data in JEAN-CLAUDE WILLAME, 'Le Congo belge dans la guerre: La coopération économique belgo-alliée de 1940 à 1944', in *Le Congo belge durant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale: Recueil d'études= Bijdragen over Belgisch-Congo tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, Brussels, 1983, p. 252.

28. On the intertwined nature of fear of disease and colonial identity, see PIERRE HALEN, *"Le petit Belge avait vu grand". Une littérature coloniale*, Brussels, 1993, ch. 4.

29. Archives africaines (henceforth AA), RUDI (259)2226: 'Quelques conseils utiles à ceux qui se rendent en Afrique du Sud', 17 Jan. 1941; *Le Courrier d'Afrique* (3 Jan. 1940), 'Les congés en Afrique du Sud' by A. De Lachainée.

30. *L'Essor du Congo* 4 Feb. 1942, 'Les relations du Congo belge et l'Union sud-africaine' by ANSELME VISEZ.

31. See, notably: SAUL DUBOW, 'Introduction: South Africa's 1940s', in idem and ALAN JEEVES (eds.) *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities*, Cape Town, 2005, p. 1–19.

32. Smuts set out this vision in his 'Greater South Africa' speech of April 1940, see: JAN CHRISTIAN SMUTS, *Toward a Better World*, New York, 1944, p. 212–22. For the context of South African annexationism, see: RONALD HYAM, *The Failure of South African Expansionism, 1908–1948*, London, 1972.

By 1941, Belgian *coloniaux* were certainly more willing to consider South Africa positively than had been the case before the war. Even Pierre Ryckmans, the Governor-General of the Belgian Congo, cautiously extolled the benefits of closer economic co-operation in an interview with the South African press and that he 'was sure that Africa will become an economic unit' even if, in the privacy of his diary, he attacked what he saw as a 'South African co-prosperity sphere'.³³ Enthusiasm was strongest on the political left in the Congo where personal connections to the Union's established white socialist and communist parties offered the most obvious sectional advantages.³⁴

Leading this faction was the Decoster family who ran the Elisabethville-based *L'Echo du Katanga* newspaper.³⁵ Positioned rather idiosyncratically on the left, it could nonetheless claim to speak for a substantial section of Katanga's *petit colonat* in a region traditionally dominated by company interests. As early as October 1940, *L'Echo* had proclaimed the arrival of a 'New Order' on the continent which, for the first time, would allow the Congo to shed its 'colonial mentality' and embrace its own interests without the constraints of metropolitan interference.³⁶ In the following months, Jean Decoster travelled to South Africa on business to forge connections with left-leaning organisations while, in Elisabethville, his paper published a stream of enthusiastic articles about the politics and culture of the Union. He was well

received in South Africa and was hailed by Johannesburg's *Sunday Express* as an 'ardent supporter of Pan-Africanism'.³⁷

The extent of the Decosters' enthusiasm for the European Pan-African cause was clearly exceptional. It certainly won them few friends in Katangese society. Always quite idiosyncratic, Jean Decosters pre-war political activities had already won him the loathing of Elisabethville's Catholic establishment which viewed his new South African enthusiasm with particular horror.³⁸ Jean Sépulchre, editor of the right-leaning *L'Essor du Congo*, had actually made his journalistic debut in 1922 with an attack on South African expansionism and particularly resented Jean Decoster's new campaign. He launched a number of vitriolic personal attacks on 'the ambassador of the Red Congolese masses to the all-powerful South African Union', accusing him of pursuing a subversive political agenda which risked the very future of the colony.³⁹ Nonetheless, while few Belgians were willing to follow the Decosters to the same extent, the polemical attacks of *L'Essor du Congo* failed to resonate as much as expected. In June 1941, *L'Essor* published a series of articles with an unusually conciliatory tone entitled 'The Pan-Africanism of Marshal Smuts and the Belgian Congo'. Accepting that closer economic ties to South Africa were both inevitable and desirable from the colonial perspective, they argued that the *coloniaux* nonetheless had a patriotic duty to maintain the Bel-

33. *L'Echo du Katanga*, 20 Oct. 1941, 'M. Ryckmans et le Pan-Africanisme'. Archives générales du Royaume, Pierre Ryckmans papers: Ryckmans diary, 4 Dec. 1943.

34. On the wartime boom in left-wing and labour movements in South Africa, see: Alexander, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid*.

35. See: JEAN-LUC VELLUT, 'Albert Decoster (1916-1989)', in *Biographie belge d'outre-mer*, Brussels, 1998, viii, col. 80-88.

It is notable that Albert, son of the then-director Jean Decoster, had actually been born in South Africa during the First World War.

36. *L'Echo du Katanga* 29 Oct. 1940, 'Le "Nouvel Ordre" en Afrique. Congo, éveille-toi!' by 'Tenax'.

37. Quoted in *L'Echo du Katanga* 16 Jan. 1941, 'Un interview'. Decoster's attention was focused on South Africa, but not beyond extolling the benefits of 'the young and progressive nation' of Southern Rhodesia, another settler society: *L'Echo du Katanga* 19 Aug. 1941, 'Le tourisme en Rhodésie du Sud' by JEAN DECOSTER.

38. Indeed, Jean Decoster would break with the rest of Elisabethville's left-wing milieu in August 1942 by condemning the misplaced radicalism of the emergent trade unions. The National Archives (Kew, henceforth TNA), CO 975/123/7: Shaw to Shepherd, 20 Aug. 1942.

39. *L'Essor du Congo* 24 Oct. 1942, 'Un ouvrier de portes bien peu pressé' by JEAN SÉPULCHRE. See also *L'Essor du Congo* 5 July 1941, 'La politique intérieure et étrangère de M. JAN [sic] DECOSTER'.

gianness of the colony so that the metropolis could be reborn after the liberation.⁴⁰ The articles, widely reprinted across the colony, helped to reshape the Pan-African debate by accepting the possibility of maintaining dual, and mutually compatible, Belgian and colonial identities. 'To be Pan-Africans is fine', commented *L'Echo du Kivu*, 'but we want to remain Congolese Belgians above all'.⁴¹

The debate about South Africa after 1941 was indicative of a new willingness to regard the country as a possible example for the future Belgian Congo, rather than a potential threat to national sovereignty. Tourists visiting the Union were advised to use their visits to study the country and its political development, and clearly did so.⁴² For most, South Africa presented a vision of the ultimate settler state. In it, economic development and political autonomy could combine to create a new sense of power and self-confidence, refashioning its link with the metropolis as one of affinity rather than dependence. It was presumably this that Sépulchre had in mind when he published an entire book on the subject of South African history, society, and politics for a Congolese readership in 1945.⁴³ Fitting neatly into the *coloniaux's* self-image and their reading of the Allied rhetoric of self-determination contained in the Atlantic Charter, the appeal of this vision was certainly widespread. It was, as Senator Robert Godding wrote to a colleague in London, partly responsible for the clear sense of 'accelerated evolution' within the wartime Congo.⁴⁴ Indeed, it was partly responsible for the growing calls for Congolese 'self-government' during the last years of the war.⁴⁵

III. Political mobilisation

The outbreak of war created an entirely new political landscape for the *coloniaux*. With many of the pre-war constraints on political activity lifted, they embraced new forms of mobilisation with great enthusiasm. The South African example, again, was clearly influential. According to one of the first Congolese trade unionists, Fernand Quenon, the realisation that 'syndicalism [was] not incompatible with the colonial spirit' came while he was on holiday in South Africa in July 1940.⁴⁶ The increasing sense of a shared identity and of common economic and political interests clearly underpinned the *coloniaux's* willingness to challenge the authority of the *trinité coloniale*, and the colonial administration in particular. In this respect, as we shall see, the increasing assertiveness of the *coloniaux* was primarily a product of the wartime moment, explaining both its sudden rise, changing forms, and subsequent collapse.

News of the German invasion was, as might have been predicted, the immediate trigger for political organisation in May 1940. Even from the comparative safety of the colony, this was a traumatic moment to which much of the subsequent antipathy between the *coloniaux* and the administration can be traced. In the days following the German invasion of Belgium, the *coloniaux* rallied to patriotic initiatives. On 14 May, for example, the population of Elisabethville flocked to the town's cathedral where they sang the national anthem *Vers l'Avenir* with 'rare enthusiasm', before attending a parade of *Force publique* soldiers, *anciens combattants* of

40. *L'Essor du Congo* 18 June 1941, 'Le Pan-Africanisme du Maréchal Smuts et le Congo belge' by JEAN SÉPULCHRE and the follow-up article of the same title published in the issue of the following day.

41. *L'Echo du Kivu* 19 Feb. 1943, 'Pan-Africanisme' by 'DOMINO ROSÉ', p. 1.

42. *L'Avenir colonial belge* 2 Mar. 1943, 'Une allocution de M. Moulart', p. 5.

43. JEAN SÉPULCHRE, *Gens et choses de l'Afrique du Sud*, Elisabethville, 1945.

44. LA, Godding Papers: Robert Godding to Victor de Laveleye, 12 Jan. 1942.

45. The extent to which British settler colonies served as the inspiration for this debate is evident in the acerbic comment of a metropolitan post-war critic who noted that 'self-government', in its English usage, 'aims to allow the natives of these colonies to govern themselves': *La Revue coloniale belge*, 1 Dec. 1945, 'Pour faire le point', by Maurice Robert, p. 8.

46. *L'Essor du Congo*, 12 July 1944, 'Notre boîte aux lettres' by FERNAND QUENON.



Robert Godding, Liberal senator, pictured with his wife at their house in Avenue Strauch, Léopoldville in 1943 together with two of their five children. Source: Liberaal Archief/Liberas, Ghent.

the First World War, scouts, and the other patriotic institutions of Katangese society. 'Belgium can count on all its children and the Belgians of Africa are ready to do their duty where the nation needs them most', concluded the report in *L'Essor du Congo*.⁴⁷

It was not long before the *coloniaux's* patriotic zeal clashed with the inertia of an administration cut off from its political leadership in Europe. After the surrender of the Belgian forces under the leadership of Leopold III on 28 May 1940, there was a public outcry against the decision of the government-general to remove the official portraits of the King from its buildings. They were subsequently replaced.⁴⁸ A more serious confrontation concerned the treatment of the approximately 1,500 Italians living in the colony. Francophile by tradition, most *coloniaux* assumed that Italy's invasion of France on 10 June also meant that Belgium was at war with Italy. The looming threat from Italian East Africa made the issue of particular importance and many apparently believed that Italian aircraft might arrive at Stanleyville at any moment.⁴⁹ Yet the administration, unsure of the government's policy and reluctant to provoke Italian belligerence, wavered. On the day of the Italian invasion of France, many administrators across the colony had detained local Italians on their own initiative but, after a period of uncertainty, most were released to a public outcry.⁵⁰ It was only in November 1940 that the administration turned full circle and decreed their re-arrest, though many continued to accuse the administration of being lax.⁵¹

The perceived lethargy of the administration when confronted with important policy decisions showed the *coloniaux* how far its authority had been weakened by the events of May-June 1940. There were two distinct groups who attempted to use this new situation to their advantage. The first comprised high-placed individuals with genuine influence in the colony, often personally acquainted with the Governor-General. Indeed, the British diplomatic mission to Léopoldville under Lord Hailey could also be interpreted in this light, as could the pro-neutralist and quasi-secret 'camarilla' led by the Vicar-Apostolic of Katanga in Elisabethville. Though always fairly small, this group was swelled by the arrival of colonial notables fleeing from occupied Belgium during the summer of 1940. The most important of these 'dry-season tourists' was undoubtedly Robert Godding, a Liberal senator in the Belgian parliament, whose status guaranteed him privileged access to the Governor-General.⁵² While certainly less élite, the second group was far more numerous. It comprised respected local figures from different areas of the colony, often aristocrats or newspaper owners, and especially those associated with the local associations of *anciens combattants*. Over the following months, they were responsible for the considerable number of short-lived associations and organisations across the colony, including a *Comité des Patriotes* and a *Ligue pour la Défense de la Colonie* formed in Léopoldville; an *Association de Colons et Résidents belges au Katanga* in Elisabethville; and a *Comité de Défense* in Stanleyville.⁵³ Predominantly local in outlook, these organisations demonstrated just

47. *L'Essor du Congo*, 14 May 1940, 'Manifestation patriotique à Elisabethville'.

48. VANDERLINDEN, *Ryckmans*, p. 439-40.

49. Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika (henceforth KMMMA), Max Herry Papers: 'Nous étions ainsi' (unpublished autobiography), p. 195.

50. RENÉ BOURGEOIS, *Témoignages: Fonctionnaire territorial (1931-1961)*, Tervuren, 1987, i/2, 28.

51. LUFUNGULA LEWONO, 'Exécution des mesures prises contre les sujets ennemis pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale dans la région de l'Equateur (Rép. du Zaïre)', in *Annales æquatoria*, 9, 1988, p. 219-31.

52. Godding was also a notable colonial businessman and would subsequently become Minister of the Colonies from 1945 to 1947. For a general summary of his background and career, see: ERNEST KRINGS, 'Robert Godding (1883-1953)', in *Nouvelle biographie nationale*, Brussels, 2007, ix, p. 191-8.

53. *L'Avenir colonial belge*, 17 Aug. 1940, 'Les entretiens d'Eusèbe et de Polydore' by 'MÉPHISTO', p. 2; *L'Echo du Katanga*, 22 Aug. 1940, 'Association de colons et résidents belges au Katanga'; KMMMA, Godding Papers: Edouard Orban de Xivry to Godding, 31 Jan. 1942.

how far the *politique des notables* evident in German-occupied Belgium had also penetrated into the colony.⁵⁴

Both of these groups shared similar objectives, specifically to influence the policy of the colonial administration. Godding, for example, used his position to advance his long-held beliefs in the need for administrative reform in the colony. Writing to Ryckmans almost daily during October 1940, he argued that the weakness of the colonial administration could only be countered by allowing the *coloniaux* to participate in the governance of the colony, which 'would fortify that which might be fragile in your position from a legal point of view'.⁵⁵ Less coherently, similar ideas were also advocated by local associations which published an almost constant stream of open-letters and telegrams to the Governor-General over the course of 1940, often accompanied by declarations of patriotism and loyalty. Yet to their frustration, the colonial administration failed to make attempts to integrate the *coloniaux* in the conduct of public policy. The Governor-General's refusal to make important policy decisions without instructions from the Belgian authorities in Europe was hugely frustrating to the notables who considered their proposed changes to be the bare minimum necessary for the survival of the colony.

These feelings of impotence were evident in the belligerence of local groups, and crystallised in an entirely new experiment in political organisation. On 10 November, the Léopoldville-based *L'Avenir colonial belge* printed a 'manifesto' agreed at a recent meeting of Belgian patriots, many associated with Léopoldville's association of *anciens combattants*, on behalf of a new *Ligue d'action patriotique*. The novelty of the Ligue certainly did not lie in its objectives, vacuously defined as to ensure they 'put everything towards the war and

do so in full agreement with our government'.⁵⁶ Instead, the *Ligue* was intended to be a single colony-wide institution incorporating all the local groups, open to all sympathetic Belgian nationals on payment of five francs. Its popularity was both obvious and rapid. Within a week, several hundred *coloniaux* had become paying members and new local sections had been founded across the west and north of the colony at Thysville, Matadi, Bumba-Alberta, Aketi and even Nian-gara some 1,500 kilometres from Léopoldville.⁵⁷ The potential power of the new group was clear to the colonial authorities. Exploiting the suspected involvement of the *Ligue* in the abortive military 'putsch' at Stanleyville, the Governor-General effectively destroyed the organisation by banning civil servants from joining it. The *Ligue* collapsed, despite attempts to rebuild it as a less controversial grouping. As we shall see, however, the *Ligue* represented something entirely new in colonial politics—a political association that could reach beyond a local base of power into different regions of the colony. The organisation's collapse, however, coincided with the end of this first phase of political activity. The Belgian government's re-establishment in London and subsequent declaration of war on Italy, combined with the Minister of the Colonies' visit to the Congo in December 1940, served to reinforce the administration's authority within the colony and dampen the increasingly volatile political tone. In the first months of 1941, news of Belgian military successes in Abyssinia also helped to sustain a period of relative calm as the patriotic attentions of the *coloniaux* turned to officially sanctioned participation in the *effort de guerre*.

This period of relative calm came to an abrupt end with the sudden emergence of an entirely new political idiom, apparently borrowed from the white mineworkers across the border in

54. For the 'temps des notables' in occupied Belgium, see: JULES GÉRARD-LIBOIS and JOSÉ GOTOVITCH, *L'An 40: La Belgique occupée*, Brussels, 1971, p. 167–99.

55. KIMMA, Godding Papers: Godding to Pierre Ryckmans, 16 Oct. 1940.

56. *L'Avenir colonial belge* (10–12 Nov. 1940), 'Important réunion patriotique à Léopoldville', p. 1–2.

57. LOVENS, 'Le système colonial belge à l'épreuve de la Seconde Guerre mondiale', i, p. 199.

Northern Rhodesia.⁵⁸ Chance played a large role. On 13 October 1941 a wildcat strike broke out among the white workers at a plant of the *Union minière du Haut-Katanga* (UMHK) in Jadotville. The cause of the strike appears to have been local in nature, protesting at the employment of an Italian Jew in the plant. Shocked by this first strike in two decades, the UMHK management immediately bent to the workers' demands and suspended the foreigner in question. The strikers' delegation, probably taken aback by their success, 'decided to profit from the occasion to submit their other demands', notably the creation of a pension scheme.⁵⁹ When the company refused, the workers chose to continue their strike which was soon joined by white workers in other UMHK installations in Jadotville and the Prince Léopold mine in Kipushi. Representatives of the strikers met in secret to form a 'strike committee' on 21 October and soon received guarantees from the company that their demands would be examined if they returned to work. On 24 October, they declared the creation of a formal trade union, the *Association des Agents de l'Union minière et Filiales* (AGUFI).⁶⁰

News of the apparent success of the UMHK strike spread rapidly across the colony and met with a favourable response. Since as early as February 1941, wartime inflation fomented unrest among white workers for whom accumulating savings had been an important reason for accepting a colonial placement.⁶¹ Even the massacre of African strikers at Lubumbashi on 9 December 1941, also apparently inspired by AGUFI's example, could not prevent the rapid spread of the idea. The same month, the workers at the *Office des Transports du Congo*

in the Bas-Congo came together to form their own *association professionnelle*. Others soon followed. Altogether some 37 new associations emerged in the period 1942-44, particularly once it became clear that the state did not intend to repress the new movement.⁶²

The new organisational structure bequeathed by AGUFI had certain important advantages. It was versatile and potentially extremely powerful. Based on the precedent set by AGUFI, the new associations emerged from the white workforce at a single company and its subsidiaries, rather than from specific occupational groups. This was in part a practical response to the dispersed nature of the white communities of workers. Yet it also reflected an increasing sense that the interests of the *coloniaux* had become sufficiently homogenous to transcend division of class or status. The *association professionnelle* at *Forminière*, for example, boasted that it had 'successfully grouped within it the most diverse elements of the company's workforce, from mechanics, technical workers, accountants, prospectors, assistant mechanics, sanitary workers, administrative workers up to and including 10 engineers and 6 medical doctors'.⁶³

This model of recruitment, however, also imposed constraints. AGUFI's early success, for example, was partly a reflection of the huge size of the UMHK which had allowed it to recruit a membership of some 850 from its installations across Katanga. In other companies it was impossible to reach a similarly hegemonic position. According to their published membership figures, the unions beyond Katanga ranged in size from 350 members to

58. For the wartime militancy of the Rhodesian trade unionists, see DUNCAN MONEY, 'The World of European Labour on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt, 1940-1945', in *International Review of Social History*, 60/2, 2015, p. 225-50.

59. *L'Echo du Katanga* 16 Oct. 1941, 'Une grève à Panda'.

60. For a narrative of the strike, see: 'ANDRÉ CORNEILLE' (pseudonym of A. POORTMAN), *Le syndicalisme au Katanga*, Elisabethville, 1945, p. 27-36.

61. See, for instance, an enigmatic reference to agitation among the workers of the *Sucrerie Congolais*: 'VLADI SOUCHARD' (pseudonym of VLADIMIR DRACHOUSOFF), *Jours de brousse: Congo 1940-1945*, Brussels, 1983, 22 Feb. 1941.

62. R. NTIBAZONKIZA, *Le syndicalisme congolais sous l'administration coloniale belge, 1920-1960*, MA thesis, Catholic Univ. of Louvain-la-Neuve, 1973, p. 63.

63. *Droits et Devoirs* Sept. 1943, 'Faut-il une orientation politique?' by CHARLES DE BECKER, p. 8.

just eight, with the average union having approximately 46.⁶⁴ Collaboration between unions was therefore a matter of necessity. In April 1942 the three associations already active in Léopoldville came together to create a federation, the *Union générale des Associations professionnelles du Congo* (UGÉAPROFCO). Though initially far from 'general', the new federation was soon joined by new associations from around the colony. By September 1943 UGÉAPROFCO claimed an impressive membership of 2,000 from around the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi.⁶⁵ The geographic shift towards Léopoldville, however, was not universally welcomed away from the capital. In Katanga, where UGÉAPROFCO had made few inroads, the unions responded by creating their own regional federation, the *Fédération des Associations syndicales du Katanga* (FESYNKA) in July 1943. The two federations existed for some time in uneasy collaboration, despite signing a co-operation agreement in November 1943. Eventually, however, the temptation to create a single political force proved too great and a unified *Confédération générale des Syndicats du Congo belge* (CGS) was created at an emotionally charged *Congrès du Travail* in Elisabethville on 1 July 1944.⁶⁶ By January 1945 it could boast nearly 4,000 members.⁶⁷ These new organisations were unprecedented in Belgian colonial history, both because of their sheer size and their ability to mobilise *coloniaux* from across Belgian Africa. Yet, the size of the federations and the coalitions of interests within them created a sense of brittleness. This became particularly clear after 1943 when political issues came to the fore.

Initially at least, the trade-union leadership had been cautious about engaging with more explicitly political agendas, worrying that this might disrupt their own cohesion. This did not mean

that the organisations themselves had ever been free of ideological baggage. As civic institutions, they automatically inherited the political rhetoric originally popularised by the groups of notables who preceded them. In the first months of 1942, for example, AGUF's leadership repeated the same declarations of loyalty to the Allied cause and calls for national unity that had become common in 1941. As the public discourse in the colonial press evolved, its leadership was prompted to denounce, in similar terms, the perceived crisis of authority in colonial governance.⁶⁸ Yet, as the unions increasingly focused their attention on the state rather than the employers as the expected source of social legislation, it became harder to avoid the emergence of political divisions. By the time of the foundation of the CGS in July 1944, the quasi-communist ideology of the union was becoming increasingly evident. This represented the result of a long-term drift towards politicisation and, possibly, an awareness that the union would have to situate itself within a much changed Belgian political landscape after the anticipated liberation of the metropolis. A small Katangese faction did walk out of the CGS in protest at this evolution in August 1944, creating the explicitly apolitical *Union syndicale du Congo belge* (USY-COBEL).⁶⁹ Its unexpected failure to provoke mass defections from the CGS, however, illustrated how cohesive the Congolese trade-union movement had become.

The rapid success and increasing belligerence of the trade-union movement also served as a trigger for sectional interests in other parts of the colony to organise politically on the same model. Less than two weeks after the creation of UGÉAPROFCO, seven local veterans' associations met to create the *Confédération congolaise des Associations*

64. All membership figures from *Droits et Devoirs* Sept. 1943, 'Chronique des associations', p. 18.

65. *Droits et Devoirs* Sept. 1943, 'Chronique des associations', p. 18.

66. JEAN RYCKBOST, 'Essai sur les origines et le développement des premières associations professionnelles au Congo (1940-1944)', in *Notes et documents*, Université Lovanium No. 2/4 (1962), p. 29-30.

67. Membership figures from *Droits et Devoirs* Sept. 1943, 'Chronique des associations', p. 18 and *Le Front du Travail* 1 Jan. 1945, 'La vie syndicale', p. 3 respectively.

68. 'CORNEILLE', *Syndicalisme au Katanga*, p. 40 and 49-51.

69. *L'Essor du Congo* 3 Aug. 1944, 'Union syndicale du Congo belge'.

belges des Anciens Combattants in May 1942. Like UGÉAPROFCO it was hoped that this new colony-wide structure would enable the *anciens combattants* to achieve the intermediary status between state and *coloniaux* that they had originally hoped to gain during the crisis of 1940.⁷⁰ Colonial civil servants also embraced the new spirit by re-invigorating the long-dormant *Association des Fonctionnaires et Agents coloniaux* (AFAC) with their own demands for improved pay and conditions, as well as threats to join forces with the private-sector trade unionists if their demands were ignored.⁷¹

Most significant, however, were the unions which emerged from within the *colonat*. They would, ultimately, become the longest lasting and most politically significant of all of the wartime interest groups. Though clearly inspired by the organisational model developed by the trade unionists, much of the impetus behind the new organisations appears to have come from the belief that failing to do so would compromise *colons'* interests in the new political climate.⁷² The first of the new unions, the *Association professionnelle des Colons individuels* (APROCOLIN), was founded in Léopoldville in October 1942 and, as its name suggested, was explicitly modelled on the syndicalist model of *associations professionnelles*. It was soon joined by other regional groups in Ruanda-Urundi and Kibali-Ituri.⁷³ For the *colons*, as for the *coloniaux*, the formation of these sectional groups was only a first stage in the emergence of an increasingly

radical movement with a more overtly ideological agenda. In May 1944, the *Union pour la Colonisation* (UCOL) was founded in Elisabethville by figures from the newspaper *L'Informateur* who had also been active in the early trade-union movement.⁷⁴ Unlike APROCOLIN which had campaigned on specific grievances, UCOL represented a kind of nascent political party for *colons* which did not hide its objectives. Though various APROCOLIN sections deserted to UCOL in the months after the Liberation of Belgium in September 1944, there was a notable harmonisation of approaches between the two during the final months of the war.⁷⁵

As we have seen, therefore, the political landscape of Belgian Africa changed profoundly in the period between 1942 and 1944 as sectional interest groups successfully mobilised across substantial geographic and ideological boundaries. Yet coordination of these movements proved to be an enduring challenge. Those associated with the old *politique des notables* were clearly suspicious of the objectives being pursued by the new associations, especially their increasingly grandiose plans for post-war economic and social reform. Godding, for example, castigated the new populist politics among well-paid workers as a kind of 'inverted rexism'.⁷⁶ Senior figures in the colonial state, the Governor-General included, also had little sympathy for the movement, accusing it of having deliberately provoked the clash between troops and black workers at Lubumbashi in 1941.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, it is possible to discern

70. *L'Essor du Congo* (11 Mar. 1942), 'Association des anciens combattants de Léopoldville répond à la lettre ouverte aux anciens combattants'; *L'Avenir colonial belge* (12 May 1942), 'Chez les anciens combattants', p. 2.

71. *afac* (*Comité central de Léopoldville*) (nd. [c.Nov 1943]), 'Compte-rendu de l'entrevue accordée par M. le Conseiller d'Etat Tschoffen [...] à la délégation du Comité régional de l'AFAC d'Elisabethville'. This periodical survives in the Godding Papers at the KMAA.

72. *L'Avenir colonial belge*, 26 Aug. 1942, 'Association des colons de Léopoldville' by F. MIGNON, p. 2.

73. Respectively *L'Echo du Kivu*, 6 Aug. 1943, 'Echos et nouvelles', p. 8; *L'Avenir colonial belge*, 21 Nov. 1944, 'Chez les colons de l'Ituri-Kibali', p. 2.

74. LOVENS, 'Système colonial belge', i, 278–84; TNA, FO 371/38880/13696: Peter S. Stephens to Allen Williams, 22 Sept. 1944.

75. For the dissensions between the movements and desertions respectively, see: *L'Avenir colonial belge* (10 Nov. 1944), 'Communiqué APROCOLIN', p. 2 and (18 Nov. 1944), 'UCOL', p. 2.

76. LA, Godding Papers: Godding to Camille Huysmans, 25 Nov. 1943. Rex had been a populist political movement of the extreme right in Belgium in the 1930s.

77. *Droits et Devoirs*, July 1944, 'Compte-rendu de l'entrevue de la délégation Ugéaprofco-Fesynka avec M. le Gouverneur Général [...] le 10 juin 1944 à 10h15', p. 31.

a coherent strand of political thought within the activities of the group. While certainly rooted in the socio-economic grievances of particular strata, all increasingly saw the current configuration of the colonial state as the chief obstacle to progress towards a modern white-led colony.

Perhaps the most significant attempt to pull these ideas together into a single strand of colonial activism was the work of the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme et de la Démocratie nouvelle*. First founded in Costermansville in May 1943, the Ligue was originally conceived as a liberal reaction to news of the establishment of a branch of *Action catholique*. When the expected confrontation between the two groups failed to materialise, the *Ligue* transformed seamlessly into a political organisation for the examination of post-war reform. In this, the group was helped by its professed affiliation to the New York-based League of the Rights of Man and for the New Democracy.⁷⁸ This gave the organisation a sense of being connected to wider ideological debates beyond Africa and its regular articles in the colonial press—measured and fairly scholarly in tone—apparently confirmed this. Within months, the *Ligue* had opened new sections in Léopoldville, Stanleyville, Butembo, Elisabethville, and Jadotville and its members had become an influential part of local society. Importantly, the *Ligue* was able to channel the political thinking of the *associations professionnelles* towards more political objectives, such as the representation of *coloniaux* in the colonial administration or economic democracy.

Even the attempts to combine these sectional interests in the pursuit of a reforming ideal could not overcome the most fundamental obstacle,

namely the resistance of the state. In many respects, the relationship between the two groups was ambiguous. Many senior figures within the colonial administration, the Governor-General included, had a certain personal sympathy for the *coloniaux's* aspirations, especially in the economic field. The initial refusal of the employers, especially the UMHK, to make any concessions to their workforce was clearly felt to be counterproductive.⁷⁹ Despite the clear antipathy of their Minister, the governor-general was also able to offer some compromise in the form of *de jure* recognition of rights of association. He was also able to allow trade union delegates onto the advisory *conseil de gouvernement* at the end of 1942.⁸⁰ Anything further, especially where this threatened to intrude into the sphere of *politique indigène*, was blocked vigorously. 'The Governor-General [...] is happy to deal democratically with the working masses, as with the patrons, traders, colons, civil servants and the representatives of any interest group', he observed during a meeting with trade union representatives in May 1944, 'but he will not create a new dictatorship, that of any committee whatsoever which tries to dictate, forcibly, legislative acts.'⁸¹ For this reason, the *colon* associations found the administration particularly unsympathetic to their demands and became increasingly radical as the war progressed.

The second barrier faced by the new political movements was simply one of power. Because of their narrow base of support, they inherited many of the problems originally encountered by the *coloniaux's* earlier attempts at political mobilisation. Contemporaries were well aware that the liberation of Belgium and ultimate Allied victory, seen as inevitable by 1943, would bring the wartime

78. A precursor of the International League for Human Rights. For a detailed study of its activities in the Congo, see: MAURICE LOVENS, 'La Ligue des Droits de l'Homme et de la Démocratie nouvelle (Congo belge, 1943-1945)', in *Etudes africaines du crisp* No. 103, 1970.

79. VANDERLINDEN, *Ryckmans*, p. 508.

80. For the rather acerbic comments of the British consul on this 'pallid ghost of representative government', see Francis Shepherd to Foreign Office, 21 Dec. 1942 reprinted in *British Documents on Foreign Affairs—Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*. Part III: From 1940 through 1945. Series G: Africa. PAUL PRESTON and MICHAEL PARTRIDGE, eds., Bethesda MD, 1998, ii, 192-3.

81. *Droits et devoirs* July 1944, 'Service de la mobilisation civile du travail et de la prévoyance sociale', p. 9.

period of political tolerance to an end. By November 1944, the CGS's official newspaper was warning that the capitalists were planning 'to liquidate us all' in order to rebuild a more malleable colonial workforce; indeed, certain local organisers had already been fired.⁸² In broader terms, it was also clear that the pressure which the unions could exercise was severely limited, despite their large membership and broad public support, because they did not pose a genuine threat to the administration. The contrast with African political mobilisation was stark: even the relatively small military mutiny by African forces at Luluabourg in February 1944 had been sufficient to induce in the colonial administration a kind of existential crisis.⁸³

Strikes remained the most effective way of achieving their objectives and became increasingly important over the course of the conflict. But they were also a risky strategy. The limitations had been effectively demonstrated by AGUFI over the course of 1942. Following its initial success in October 1941, AGUFI had remained unusually belligerent and tensions between the company and the union remained far greater than in other firms. The tension finally broke in July 1942 with a second wildcat strike. In the aftermath, the state stepped in and prosecuted its leadership for defeatism. In response, the union planned a massive regional strike for August with the support of sympathetic British trade unionists across the frontier in Northern Rhodesia. Ultimately this proved to be a failure; it was condemned by all parts of the colonial press and failed to achieve its intended size. Frustrated, AGUFI tried to stage a final strike in September 1942 but this failed even to spread beyond Jadotville. The September strike fatally weakened the union, exposing splits within its ranks and allowing the company finally to

regain the upper-hand.⁸⁴ The rise and fall of AGUFI served as a reminder that the freedom allowed to these new associations was always limited, further circumscribing the extent to which the *coloniaux* could genuinely translate their new-found political conscience and organisation into power.

IV. The 'settler moment'

The period from 1940 to 1945 was, as we have seen, an exceptional moment. It created the external and internal dynamics within Belgian Africa necessary to foster a new kind of assertive and politically confident mood among the white population. Inspired by new visions of a white-ruled colonial society from South Africa, the *coloniaux*'s political organisation can also be seen as an attempt to demand a political status within the existing regime. This was very much the perspective of Evelyn Baring, governor of Southern Rhodesia, who visited the Congo in mid-1944 and later reported that, 'whatever else may differ in the Congo and Southern Rhodesia, the views of non-official Europeans do not.' Their political causes and discourse, he observed, were practically identical. In Elisabethville he was buttonholed by a reporter from *L'Informateur* who 'spent his time trying to persuade me to say that the Congo in general and Katanga Province in particular was a "white man's country"'.⁸⁵

The extent to which the new politics was a product of the wartime moment can be illustrated by how rapidly the entire order collapsed as the war came to an end. 1945 saw the re-assertion of metropolitan power, paralleling the reconstruction of the Belgian state at home.⁸⁶ Travel between the Congo and Belgium took some time to re-es-

82. *Le Front du Travail* 1 Nov. 1944, 'La relève', p. 4.

83. See: JEAN-LUC VELLUT, 'Le Katanga industriel en 1944: Malaises et anxiétés dans la société coloniale', in *Le Congo belge durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale=Bijdragen over Belgisch-Congo tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Brussels, 1983).

84. TNA, CO 975/123/7: Tom Shaw to Francis Shepherd, 28 Sept. 1942.

85. TNA, FO 371/38880/17021: Baring to Eric Machtig, 15 Oct. 1944 and 'Memorandum on Visit to the Belgian Congo' (15 Oct. 1944), also by BARING. Given his liberal outlook, this was not intended to be a compliment.

86. For this argument, see: MARTIN CONWAY, *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944-1947*, Oxford, 2012.



Anglo-Congolese amity celebrated by the display of the British flag at a Léopoldville ceremony commemorating the First World War, 1942. Source : Cegesoma/State Archives Belgium.



View of the South African city of Johannesburg in 1940 which was visited by many Belgian coloniaux travelling to the Cape by rail. A mining and industrial centre, the city nonetheless exemplified the possible advances of settler society to its visitors. Source: Cegesoma/State Archives Belgium.



The seaside around the Cape in South Africa, pictured in 1940. In the aftermath of the defeat, it became a popular holiday destination for many coloniaux from Belgian Africa. Black-and-white photo. Cegesoma/State Archives Belgium.

tablish, but by the end of the year, thousands of *coloniaux* had returned to the metropolis. Equally significant was the large number of new metropolitans who arrived to replace them as part of the *Relève*. In fact, the realisation that the colonial political movements would fail to reach their 'breakthrough' in the colony had become widespread long before this process had begun.

Responding to the increasingly high-handed policies of the government, the tone of political discourse over the course of 1944 had become increasingly violent. The government's decision to disband the Congolese *corps expéditionnaire* in the Middle East was interpreted as a snub to the colony but what really aroused fury was the imposition of a new 70 percent tax on excess profits made during the course of the war. Mainly affecting *colons*, opposition to the tax radicalised their fledgling political groups.⁸⁷ The reaction was fiercest in eastern Congo where a *Comité de défense des contribuables* pledged not to pay, and triggered the foundation of a short-lived political party, the *Union démocratique congolaise*, in September.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, in December, the CGS declared a general strike in sympathy for the *résistants* killed by the Belgian authorities in Brussels during the 'November crisis'.⁸⁹ This final bout of activism was short-lived. Within months, it became clear that the locus of political activity was moving to the metropolis and many colonial groups, notably the CGS and UCOL, despatched delegates to Belgium to defend their interests but found the metropolitan reaction broadly unsympathetic.⁹⁰ Gradually, many of them faded away. The *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme*, it appears, did not survive 1945 and

the CGS had also collapsed by 1949, superseded by metropolitan unions. Only the *colon* movement—APROCOLIN and UCOL at its head—survived intact and profited from increasing white immigration through the late 1940s and 1950s.⁹¹

Seen in this way, the war years did indeed prove to be exceptional; a parenthesis in colonial history prompted by events elsewhere in Europe. As we have seen, few of the *coloniaux's* gains would be particularly enduring. Yet, in other respects, the period reflected a shift in the balance of power within the Congo itself, and in particular the coming of age of a new mentality among the white population of the colony. Instead, understanding the period as a 'settler moment' has potential to yield a new insight into the Second World War in Africa and the wider span of Congolese history.

Though little research has been dedicated to the subject, it does seem that similar signs of a 'settler moment' can be discerned elsewhere in wartime Africa. In Kenya, for example, wartime demands for production made the colonial state increasingly reliant on settler agriculture; a reliance which the settlers themselves ruthlessly exploited to enhance their waning political influence.⁹² A similar picture emerges from studies of the Rhodesias.⁹³ The same trend can also be discerned in French Africa where, in certain cases, European settlers appear to have actually made the breakthrough that eluded them in the Congo. In the French mandate of Cameroun, for example, the tiny number of *colons* would succeed in gaining a foothold within the colonial state. Their increasing assertiveness, clashing with a similar trend among African

87. TNA, FO 371/38880/11994: C.K. Ledger to Foreign Office, 29 Aug. 1944.

88. LOVENS, 'Système colonial belge', i, 288–9.

89. *Le Front du Travail*, 1 Jan. 1945, 'La vie syndicale', p. 3.

90. *Le Front du Travail* 15 Apr. 1945, 'La vie syndicale', p. 5; *L'Avenir colonial belge* 21 Mar. 1945, 'M. Cloquet parle du colonat à Bruxelles', p. 2; *Belgique—Congo* Jan. 1945, 'Confédération générale des syndicats', p. 11.

91. See 'Organisation et action des colons au Congo. La Fédération congolaise des classes moyennes (Fédacol)', *Courrier hebdomadaire du crisp*, no. 25 (3 July 1959), p. 4–7.

92. IAN SPENCER, 'Settler Dominance, Agricultural Production and the Second World War in Kenya', in *Journal of African History*, 21/4 (1980), p. 497–514.

93. RICHARD HODDER-WILLIAMS, *White Farmers in Rhodesia, 1890–1965: A History of the Marandellas District*, London, 1983, p. 158–83; DAVID JOHNSON, 'Settler Farmers and Coerced African Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1936–1946', in *Journal of African History*, 33/1 (1992), p. 111–28.

workers, would culminate in a violent confrontation during the Douala riots in September 1945.⁹⁴ Just as in the Congo, Cameroun's *colons* seem to have been influenced by exposure to South African ideas.⁹⁵ Together, these observations suggest a very different understanding of the Second World War, and one that does not fit the understanding of the war as a mere prelude to decolonisation.

There is also a more general significance for the way in which we approach Belgian colonial history, not least as a reminder of its internal complexities. In particular, it serves as a reminder of the historical importance of the *coloniaux* who num-

bered more than 100,000 by 1959 and remained a visible presence, in Africa or Europe, for decades afterwards.⁹⁶ Their influence, both within the colonial society and back in the metropolis, offers rich insights into the cultural, social, and political histories of Belgium and its colony. Many aspects of this remain unexplored, especially in the political field. Their responses to the spectre of African nationalism in the 1950s, as well as their attempts to shape certain nationalist organisations, represents a particularly underexplored subject. Though certainly neglected in the past, there is a good case for bringing the *coloniaux* back into the sphere of historical discussion.

Guy Bud (°1994) is an associate researcher at the Centre d'Études et Documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines (Ceges) in Brussels. His dissertation, submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy at the University of Oxford in 2017, is entitled 'Belgian Africa at War: Europeans in the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, 1940–1945'. He is currently working on a monograph about the Belgian Congo during the Second World War.

94. The difference between the response of Cameroun's *colons* to the Douala riot of September 1945 and that of the Belgian *coloniaux* to the Matadi riots in November 1945 is instructive. RICHARD A. JOSEPH, 'Settlers, Strikers and *Sans-Travail*: The Douala Riots of September 1945', *Journal of African History*, 15/4, 1979, p. 669–87.

95. EMMANUEL TCHUMTCHAOUA, 'Les échanges entre le Cameroun et l'Afrique du Sud pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale', *Outre-mers*, 102/382–3, 2014, p. 215–36.

96. VANTHEMSCHE, *Belgium and the Congo*, appendix 4. See notably GILLET, 'Congo rêvé? Congo détruit'.

