

'TO OUR COLONIAL TROOPS, GREETINGS FROM THE FAR-AWAY HOMELAND'

■ *Race, Security and (Inter-)Imperial Anxieties in the Discussion on Colonial Troops in World War One Belgium*

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During the First World War, King Albert I made sure that his “greetings from the far-away homeland” were sent to the Congolese troops fighting in Central and Eastern Africa, with the unanimous approval of the Belgian government. Whether the metropole should really remain “far-away” for colonial soldiers was a much more heated debate: while both Great Britain and France recruited soldiers from their colonies for the European theatre of war, Belgian authorities showed little enthusiasm for this prospect. The history of these debates offers nevertheless a fascinating standpoint to question all together the importance of imperial anxieties in a comparative context, the colonial dimension of Belgium as a belligerent in the First World War, and the specificities of Belgian-Congolese racial economies at large.

I. Introduction

In 1918, just after the liberation of Belgium, Pierre Daye, a young Belgian journalist who was on the path to becoming a specialist in colonial affairs¹, published a book entitled *Les conquêtes africaines des Belges* (The African Conquests of the Belgians) in a French collection entirely devoted to the history of the First World War². As the title suggests, the book discussed the 'glorious' military victories of Belgian colonial forces in Central and Eastern German Africa. More interestingly, it also provided an opportunity for the author to return to a far less glorious episode of (short) Belgian colonial history, namely the 'Red Rubber Scandal' and the international humanitarian campaign condemning the violence of Leopold II's colonial regime in what was then known as the Congo Free State³. The campaign had forced the king to yield 'his' colony to Belgium in 1908, but the *reprise* barely curtailed international criticism: on the eve of the First World War, the legitimacy of Belgian rule in Congo was still doubted by many⁴. However, in this regard as in many others, the war was about to bring changes generating a radical shift in Western opinions and contributing to the "recasting of Belgium as a legitimate colonial power"⁵, to quote historian Matthew Stanard. The 'rape of Belgium' narrative that followed Germany's invasion transformed a 'guilty

nation' associated with Leopold II's atrocities into a 'victim nation'⁶. In this sense, the war clearly contributed to the new reputation of Belgium not only as a respectable nation, but also as a respectable imperial power able to fulfill its 'civilizing mission' in the Congo⁷.

In the work of the young journalist, this shift also meant a new re-interpretation of the Red Rubber Scandal, which managed to render the old and the new regime of guilt attached to the international reputation of the country surprisingly compatible. Indeed, this "hideous crusade whose aim was to stigmatize the so-called 'Belgian atrocities'"⁸ was presented by Pierre Daye as having been designed by Germany from the start. Before then, it was the British who had been accused by Belgium of having orchestrated the 'Congo Question', notably through the *Congo Reform Association*, and the journalist now talked about a "campaign of lies and slander engineered by Germany, supported by Germany and paid for by Germany". His argument was based on a variety of pieces of alleged evidence, among which was the condemnation during the war of two of the main leaders of the Red Rubber Campaign: Roger Casement - the former British consul of the Congo Free State who was condemned and executed in 1916 for treason against the Crown on the grounds of his

1. A veteran of the Flanders Fields, Pierre Daye (1895-1960) volunteered for employment in the Congolese *Force Publique* and participated in the Eastern African campaign, apparently as an embedded journalist. He then developed a career as a journalistic traveller that led him to work for numerous publications in the Belgian Congo (i.e. a 670-page book titled *L'empire colonial belge* published in 1923). In the 1930s, he joined the Rexist movement and remains mostly known for his involvement in Nazi collaboration during the Second World War. For more on Pierre Daye's activities as a reporter, see DAPHNÉ DE MARNEFFE, *Pierre Daye et l'entre-deux-guerres: du récit de voyage à la réflexion politique*, Master's Thesis in Roman Languages and Literatures, ULg, 2001.

2. PIERRE DAYE, *Les conquêtes africaines des Belges*, (Coll. Pages d'Histoire 1914-1918), Paris, Nancy, 1918.

3. Aldwin Roes and Matthew Stanard have recently provided useful (historiographical) overviews on this highly debated issue (ALDWIN ROES, "Towards a History of Mass Violence in the Etat Indépendant du Congo 1885-1908", in *South African Historical Journal*, no. 62, 2010, p. 634-670 and MATTHEW STANARD, "Violence and Empire: the Curious Case of Belgium and the Congo", in *The Routledge History of Western Empires*, New York, 2014, p. 454-467).

4. See GUY VANTHEMSCHÉ, *La Belgique et le Congo. Empreintes d'une colonie 1885-1980*, (coll. Nouvelle Histoire de Belgique - 4), Bruxelles, 2007, p. 106 & foll., and MATTHEW STANARD, "Digging In: The Great War and the Roots of Belgian Empire", in *Empires in World War One: Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict*, London, 2014, p. 23-48.

5. MATTHEW STANARD, "Digging in...", p. 25.

6. In spite of troubling lexical and thematic continuities, notably in denunciations of 'atrocities' and of severed hands. On this last point, see JOHN HORNE & ALAN CRAMER, *German Atrocities, 1914. A History of Denial*, Yale, 2001, p. 221-225.

7. MATTHEW STANARD, "Digging in...", p. 28 & foll.

8. PIERRE DAYE, *Les conquêtes africaines...*, p. 9.

contacts with the German enemy⁹ - and Edmund D. Morel - the British journalist who had led the campaign against King Leopold and who had been condemned and jailed in 1917 for his pacifist positions and activities¹⁰. In the book, as in many other Belgian publications of the time, those condemnations were presented as proof of both the duplicity of these men and of Germany's involvement in the Red Rubber Campaign, in sometimes very dramatic terms: Pierre Daye stated for instance that "the war gave indeed to the name of Edmund Morel a renewed popularity: a Germanic, gloomy, blood-stained popularity"¹¹.

What the young journalist didn't know at that time - and what Belgian authorities were never going to admit - was that during the war, the Belgian Ministry of Colonies had carefully collected a series of articles that opposed the deployment of African soldiers on European battlefields¹², some of them based on the writings of Edmund D. Morel

who championed the cause¹³, in order to draw inspiration from their arguments. In an interesting piece of historical irony, Belgian colonial authorities used the arguments of one of their fiercest opponents to justify their decision not to recruit soldiers from the Congo for the European theatre of war. Indeed, although other European imperial powers (and even the USA) mobilized hundreds of thousands of colonial and/or non-white soldiers and workers, Belgian authorities showed little enthusiasm for this prospect and made a different choice. Disregarded by the historiography of the First World War in Belgium (and the Congo) as being of little relevance¹⁴ and neglected by the international literature that has mainly focused on colonial troops from the British and French Empire (and German reactions to them)¹⁵, the non-presence of Congolese soldiers on the Western Front and the debates that surrounded it are, nevertheless, not negligible. They entailed almost three years of discussions and investigations that were

9. Roger Casement (1864-1916) was an Irish-born diplomat who served as British Consul in the Congo Free State in the first years of the 20th century. His eyewitness reports on the abuses of the Leopoldian regime played a key role in the Red Rubber Campaign. During the First World War, he sought German support in connection with his Irish activism against British rule. For a recent and in-context reappraisal of his career, see MARY E. DALY (ed.), *Roger Casement in Irish and World History*, Dublin, 2005.

10. Edmund D. Morel (1873-1924) was a British journalist and politician and the central figure in the Red Rubber Campaign. After the war and his imprisonment in 1917, he became more directly involved in formal (Labour) politics. See DONALD MITCHELL, *Politics of Dissent: A Biography of E.D. Morel*, Bristol, 2014.

11. PIERRE DAYE, *Les conquêtes africaines...*, p. 9.

12. See for example the newspaper clippings collected in AA (African Archives, FPS Foreign Affairs, Brussels) FP (Collection Force Publique) (2665), file 1229.

13. While the engagement of Morel against "The Black Shame" and France's use of colonial troops in the Rhineland is well-known, he denounced the participation of Africans in European theatres of war during the war itself, with (a bit) less racist arguments than in the 1920s. DAVID KILLINGRAY, "The Idea of a British Imperial Army", in *Journal of African History*, n°20/3, 1979, p. 426-427 and ROBERT C. REINDERS, "Racialism on the Left: E.D. Morel and the 'Black Horror on the Rhine'", in *International Review of Social History*, no. 13, 1968 (1), p. 3. See also CHRISTIAN KOLLER, "Military Colonialism", in DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN & PIET CHIELENS (eds), *World War One: Five Continents in Flanders*, Tiel, 2008, p. 11-21.

14. These debates are briefly discussed in JEANNICK VANGANSBEKE, "Afrikaanse verdedigers van het Belgisch grondgebied, 1914-1918", in *Belgische Bijdragen tot de Militaire Geschiedenis*, 2006, p. 123-134; ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA, *Présences congolaises en Belgique, 1885-1940: exhibition, éducation, émancipation, paternalisme*, Thèse de Doctorat en Histoire, KUL, 1989, p. 287-289; GRIET BROSENS, *Congo aan den Yser. De 32 Congolese soldaten van het Belgisch leger in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Antwerp, 2013, p. 3 and DICK VAN GALEN LAST, *Des soldats noirs dans une guerre de blancs (1914-1922). Une histoire mondiale*, Brussels, 2015, p. 46.

15. The two most ambitious studies on the topic are CHRISTIAN KOLLER, 'Von Wilden aller Rassen niedergemetzelt': *Die Diskussion um die Verwendung von Kolonialtruppen in Europa zwischen Rassismus, Kolonial- und Militärpolitik (1914-1930)*, Stuttgart, 2001 and DICK VAN GALEN LAST, *Des soldats noirs...*. See also ERIC STORM & ALI AL TUMA (eds), *Colonial Soldiers in Europe 1914-1945: 'Aliens in Uniforms' in Wartime Societies*, New York, 2016. Colonial *tirailleurs* in the metropole have become quite a fashionable topic in French historiography, but RICHARD FOGARTY, *Race and War in France. Colonial Subjects in the French Army 1914-1918*, Baltimore, 2008 remains the most complete reference. For the British Empire, see DAVID KILLINGRAY, "The idea of..." - On the Belgian side, see also DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN & PIET CHIELENS (eds), *World War One: Five Continents in Flanders...*, and DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, "Living apart together: Belgian civilians and non-white troops and workers in wartime Flanders", in *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, Cambridge, 2011, p. 143-174.

carried out not only in the metropole and in the colony but also on a trans-imperial level (as they included evaluations of the French and British ways of dealing with colonial troops on European battlefields). They appear as interesting standpoints that can be used to question both the colonial dimension of Belgium as a belligerent in the First World War (a dimension that has been largely ignored)¹⁶ and overall the importance of anxieties linked to race, prestige and authority in a context of imperial comparison.

These questions are situated at the heart of this article, as they underpinned the preoccupations of the decision-making actors of the time. Indeed, these debates were never limited to military strategic considerations, contrary to the traditional explanation that has until now prevailed in interpreting Belgian reluctance towards the use of colonial troops in Europe, in a somewhat determinist fashion that contributed to regarding all these debates as 'non-events' and disregarding their importance. This article thus aims to retrace the history of these debates as they were carried out by a variety of actors in the Belgian (colonial) spheres and as they reflect sociopolitical tensions that both paralleled and dissembled concerns related to the same issue in other empires, driving the question of Belgian-Congolese specificities well beyond the peculiar (absence of an) "outcome" of these discussions.

From a methodological point of view, it might appear revealing to note that the main corpus of archival records used for this analysis, which have been under-used, is built on "classical" political and military discussions and correspondences (issued by both the metropolitan and the colonial administrative poles) that have long been accessible to historians. The press coverage of

these debates also shows that these issues have never quite been "taboo". In this regard, the minimal visibility of these sources testifies to the positivist paradigm that has until recently dominated the (already limited) narratives of the history of the First World War in the Belgian empire (and beyond). This article does not contest the fact that discussions about the deployment of Congolese troops on Belgian soil led to a "non-event" in terms of effective military operations, but rather proposes to embrace it. Indeed, the energy and time that the Belgian colonial authorities put into these endeavors testify to the shared importance, in practices of colonial governance, of "irrelevant failed proposals, utopian visions, and improbable projects"¹⁷ and of what they can reveal about the logics, anxieties and (ir)rationalities that were also part of imperial rule in times of war and crisis - and beyond. It is also in this regard that this article concludes in examining (some of) the long-term echoes and reverberations of these debates and anxieties in terms of projects concerning the inclusion of Congolese troops in metropolitan commemorative military parades from the 1920s to the 1950s, as they expose the catalytic role played by the First World War in definitions of Belgian-Congolese racial economies and their impact on circulations between the metropole and the colony.

II. A "Colonial Brigade" to the Aid of Belgium?

For the European powers, the first months of the First World War were especially deadly. They contributed to an insatiable demand for soldiery and manpower, a demand that intensified from 1915 onwards as death tolls increased and the perspective of attrition warfare strategies appeared to be

16. From Henri Pirenne to Sophie De Schaepdrijver, it is surprising to note that narratives of the First World War in Belgium seemed to almost completely ignore the colonial dimension of the country (and of the conflict at large) and its consequences. It confirms the marginality of colonial history in Belgian historiography, reflected again in 2008; the volumes of the *Nouvelle Histoire de Belgique* dealing with the War and the post-war negotiations made almost no mention of the African territories under Belgian rule (MICHEL DUMOULIN et al., *Nouvelle Histoire de Belgique, 1905-1940*, vol. 2, Brussels, 2005).

17. ANN LAURA STOLER, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance", in *Archival Science*, 2002 (2), p. 101.

the one that was going to be privileged by European armies' high commands. As Western military leaders and politicians searched for solutions to counter the decreasing number of soldiers and contemplated resorting to their colonial empires in greater proportions, Belgian commanders could hardly ignore the possibility of capitalizing on their access to African recruits in the Congo. In September 1915, Pierre Orts¹⁸, the head of war operations in the Ministry of Colonies headed by Jules Renkin¹⁹, officially raised the question, asking the Prime Minister and the government for their opinion regarding the creation of a Congolese "expeditionary force" or "colonial brigade" of approximately 8,000 men²⁰.

Two of the Entente powers were also the most important colonial empires on a global scale, and both had already chosen to deploy soldiers and workers from the colonial world on European soil. Great Britain mobilized 150,000 Indian soldiers on the Western front starting in the autumn of 1914, while France deployed North and West African units in the same timeframe, leading *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* to suffer heavy losses in the Battle of Ypres for instance. These first experiences were met with mitigated enthusiasm by military leaders, especially as loss rates were very high. They led to various re-arrangements in the organization of the deployment of colonial troops, whether as regards battalions' management, fighting and weaponry strategies, or battleground choices. But they did certainly not slow down the recruitment of colonial soldiers, notably from the African continent.

The French in particular made extensive use of African troops, recruiting massively (and coercively) until the beginning of 1918. Altogether, approximately 440,000 African soldiers were shipped to European battlefields during the War, alongside about 268,000 workers engaged to serve the war effort behind the lines²¹.

On the Belgian side, there might be several explanations for why no one seemed to have thought of organizing migrations of Congolese soldiers to Flanders Fields before September of 1915. Besides the metropolitan circumstances of territorial occupation and their military implications, the *Force Publique*, the colonial army that had been in charge of the maintenance of law and order in the Congo since the 1880s and was still a military police force rather than an offensive army, had a poor reputation²². Its (image of) amateurism and brutality led the Belgian Ministry of Defense to rate its military capacities as "weak"²³. As Bryan P. Shaw has underlined, when in the summer of 1914 the *Force Publique* was ordered to observe a "strictly defensive" attitude towards German armed forces on the East-African border, "militarily, there was little else that could be done"²⁴. This did certainly not entice Belgian decision-makers to counter the legal obstacles that could have potentially been raised by the presence of the *Force Publique* on metropolitan soil given the legal and organizational separation of the colonial and metropolitan army. Belgian authorities were also very wary of Africans travelling to the metropole; fears that

18. Pierre Orts (1872-1958) was a diplomat and a high-ranking official with solid colonial experience. He was appointed as the Secretary of the Ministry of Colonies in 1914. WALTER GANSHOF VAN DER MEERSCH, "Pierre Orts", in *Biographie belge d'outre-mer*, vol. VII, 1973, col. 367-380.

19. Jules Renkin (1862-1934) was a Belgian Catholic lawyer and politician. He occupied the position of Minister of Colonies from 1908 to 1918. On his actions during the war, see GUY VANTHEMSCHÉ (ed), *Le Congo belge pendant la Première Guerre mondiale. Les rapports du ministre des Colonies Jules Renkin au roi Albert Ier, 1914-1918*, Brussels, 2009.

20. Secretary of the Ministry of Colonies to Minister of Colonies (transmitted to Minister of War/Prime Minister), 21 September 1915, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

21. CHRISTIAN KOLLER, "The Recruitment of Colonial Troops in Africa and Asia and their Deployment in Europe during the First World War", in *Immigrants and Minorities*, no. 23, 2008 (1-2), p. 111-133.

22. See the contribution of Lancelot Arzel in this volume.

23. As quoted in BRYANT P. SHAW, *Force Publique, Force Unique: The Military in the Belgian Congo 1914-1939*, PhD Thesis in History, University of Wisconsin, 1984, p. 66.

24. *Idem*, p.66.

exposing colonized subjects to outside elements would undermine colonial authority were rooted in a series of experiments with bringing Congolese to the metropole in the late 19th century that were stopped - and prohibited as much as possible - starting in the early 20th century²⁵. Overall, colonial troops were quickly sent into action in the African territories following German attacks; the Belgian Congo joined Britain and France's war efforts in campaigning in Cameroon at the end of September 1914, and in Rhodesia a few months later and prepared actively for a yet-to-come major offensive in German East Africa. The military priorities of the *Force Publique* thus appear to have been primarily tied to African soil.

The proposal of the Ministry of Colonies to set up a Congolese brigade for the metropole in September 1915 was not conceived to be realized with immediate effect. Orts suggested the deadline of May 1916 to organize the deployment of troops even though he was aware that even that was a short timeframe to "complete their education, to organize them, to train them, to equip them and to transport them to Europe"²⁶. His proposal also made clear that the *Force Publique* had to be reserved for the African campaigns and that the brigade was to be the product of additional enlistments. But before the issues that such a project raised (in terms of supervision, equipment and supplies and of course of armaments) could be examined, the request was rejected by Prime Minister Charles de Broqueville on the grounds that there was a shortage of white officers to oversee Congolese soldiers and overall that "we must before all ensure our success over there [in Africa]"²⁷.

III. National Insecurities, International Pressures and Logics of Imperial Comparison

It was not until a few months later in June of 1916 that the question resurfaced. While the Eastern German Africa offensive was still in full force, it appeared to be on its way to success. Overall, increasing demands for men on the Western Front and Belgium's limited access to new recruits made the question a crucial one: in the correspondence exchanged between the ministers involved in the discussion, the Belgian manpower crisis is clearly presented as a threat for the prestige of Belgium (as a nation and as an imperial power) as well as for its credibility in the eyes of its French and British allies, especially in light of the postwar peace arrangements. As Pierre Orts put it, "you need an army to fight, but you also need an army to negotiate"²⁸.

Comparisons between France and Great Britain, both of which had by the time started turning to their overseas territories to fill the ranks of their armies, ran extensively through these debates. Already in 1915, the initial proposal of a colonial brigade was explicitly motivated by the necessity "to anticipate that a time will come when we will be asked why Belgium could not also take advantage of additional military forces from its colony"²⁹. It was a major source of concern for the Belgians, clearly related to their long-lasting perception that their sovereignty in the Congo was under threat, that the Great Powers remained skeptical about Belgium's ability to succeed as an imperial power and that there was an urgent need to demonstrate

25. ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA, *In het land van de Banoko: De geschiedenis van de Kongolese/Zairese aanwezigheid in België van 1885 tot heden*, Leuven, 1993.

26. Secretary of the Ministry of Colonies to Minister of Colonies (transmitted to Minister of War), 21 September 1915, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

27. Prime Minister to Minister of Colonies, 30 September 1915, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

28. Secretary of the Ministry of Colonies to the Minister of Colonies, 1 June 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

29. Secretary of the Ministry of Colonies to the Minister of Colonies (transmitted to the Minister of War), 21 September 1915, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge". See also the Note for the Minister of War, 9 September 1916 in the same file and the discussion launched by the Minister of Colonies at the Council of Ministers on 1 June 1916, AGR (State Archives of Belgium), Papers de Broqueville, 381.

LES CONGOLAIS BELGES VONT VENIR EN FRANCE



ASKARIS OPERANT CONTRE LES ALLEMANDS DANS L'EST-AFRICAIN

Un télégramme, que nous avons publié d'autre part, annonce que les noirs du Congo belge, qui, sous la conduite des officiers belges, ont vaincu les Allemands, vont venir se battre en France. Ils sont engagés pour neuf ans, et ce sont d'excellents soldats.

"Les Congolais belges vont venir en France", in *Excelsior. Journal illustré quotidien*, 28 décembre 1917.
Collections KBR.

that Belgium was up to the task and not just a minor nation that could be evicted from the circle of important European countries. Even the less enthusiastic supporters of the project agreed that it was an important concern. As the prime minister stated, "At least, I wish that we will then be able to reply [to French and British allies] that the question has been thoroughly considered and to produce the reasons why it was ruled out"³⁰. Ironically, the military efficiency (and predicted success) of the Belgian engagement in Eastern Africa made this preoccupation even more acute, as they demonstrated the capabilities of Congolese troops - and left 15,000 trained and experienced men unoccupied³¹: "The Allies already reproach us for being self-stationed on our front without taking action. Let's be careful so that now they do not reproach us to shrink away from using our Congolese forces", warned a member of the government in November 1916³². In the meantime, the victory of Tabora (19 September 1916) had also made the perspective of the negotiations with the British more concrete. While discussing whether the Belgians should yield to British demands to pursue with them the offensive in German Africa, the government was fully aware that a positive answer on this point "would allow us to defer the possible request of a colonial contingent either on the Belgian front, either in Thessalonica"³³.

The logics of comparison that informed these debates were multiple. The historicization of the "politics of colonial comparisons" (i.e. the ways in which and the reasons why agents of empire were "invested in selective comparisons") advocated by Ann Laura Stoler in a groundbreaking article³⁴

has shown that colonial powers constantly compared themselves - and their techniques of governance - to each other. References and allusions were used to assert, legitimate or contrast different colonial styles as well as to justify or discredit policy options. They were also central to rhetorical processes of imperial self-definition. In the Belgian case, such comparisons often played into the service of discourses of best-ness and exemplarity. Comparisons of the qualities of Congolese soldiers (and Belgian military training) to those of the French and British empires were certainly no exception to that rule. Discussions about the possibility of creating a colonial brigade involved evaluations of the respective value of colonial troops that all alluded to the alleged 'superior' qualities of Congolese soldiers. That constituted a strong point in favor of the project as it meant it would be possible to surpass other imperial powers. Ironically, no argument seemed stronger than the testimonies of French and British military experts. Belgian reports basked in statements made by allied colonels and generals praising Congolese troops. In this regard, even the German opinion was suddenly valuable - as long as it confirmed that "our native soldier is the best fighter in all Africa"³⁵.

But it was the French *tirailleurs* who offered the main comparative references. While the British did not deploy any African troops on the Western Front (preferring to mobilize them in the Middle East or in ancillary roles), the French did extensively, and the Belgians turned, logically, to their experiences and expertise to evaluate the opportunity and organizational demands of a similar

30. Secretary of the Ministry of Colonies to the Minister of Colonies, 1 June 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

31. The note for the Minister of War, 9 September 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge", shows that the Belgian authorities were expecting a (victorious) end to military operations in East Africa for the last term of 1916.

32. Intervention of Eugène Goblet d'Alviella at the Council of Ministers, Report of the session 10 November 1916, AGR, Papers De Broqueville, 381.

33. Report of the session of the Council of Ministers, 16 November 1916, AGR, Papers de Broqueville, 381.

34. ANN LAURA STOLER, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post)Colonial Studies", in *The Journal of American History*, no. 88, 2001 (3), p. 829-865.

35. "Rapport sur l'emploi éventuel de troupes du Congo", undated [1916], unsigned, AA FP (2649), file "Rapport sur l'emploi éventuel des troupes du Congo", p. 3.

deployment among their ranks. In the summer of 1916, an official military investigation committee was set up to study the French experience with *Tirailleurs sénégalais*³⁶. While the main objective was to draw inspiration from expertise that could potentially lead to circulations of good practices in the management of colonial soldiers, comparisons were always lurking at the forefront. The report of the Belgian visit to the Headquarters of French colonial troops stated proudly that “from all I have been able to see, I have the impression that our Congolese troops are of better quality than the Senegalese troops, their instruction more careful and more complete. Our soldiers have a more resolute air [*une allure plus décidée*]; for most of them, they have an average of five to six years of service, and two years of campaigning in a very cold region. [...] Our colonial army would unquestionably be likely to offer better performance than what the Senegalese troops engaged on the French front have done until now”³⁷. When asked about their opinions, the colonials could not but agree on that point: “Since I arrived in France, I have been given the opportunity, not really to examine in detail the French coloured colonial troops, but at least to compare - even superficially, I have to confess - the French coloured soldier and my conviction is that our Black is by far superior. My conclusion on this point is formal: from a military point of view, our troops from Africa, who are well-led, have morale, a state of mind and all the qualities necessary to be used on other fronts aside from Africa”³⁸, stated a former captain of the *Force Publique*.

The rejection of the project by the *Conseil des Ministres* in November 1916 was not final. When the question came up again at the end of 1917, the idea that the Allies might rightly blame Belgium for having neglected its colonial source of recruitment was more acute than ever and even decisive in the re-launch of political debates on the topic. In the context of ending military operations in Africa, and with the perspective of a forthcoming massive offensive on the Western front that “would necessarily be realized throughout 1918”, officials from the Ministry of Colonies wondered: “Are we going, for the second time and in the middle of a war, to give an order for demobilization? I cannot help but to draw the attention of *Monsieur le Ministre* on this point, because it would be a serious fact in the future that the opinion would not fail to be used to reproach us. [...] The note that I ask [...] to send to the members of the Government would aim at [...] anticipating the potential reproach that we would face later, when it will be known that our colonial forces, battle-hardened and well-organized, have been demobilized twice in a raging war”³⁹. Another leading figure from the ministry⁴⁰ explicitly qualified the project as a “compensation”, “to be able to ask without blushing to our allies to restrict our front”⁴¹ in the face of the diminishing volume of recruits from metropolitan Belgium: “Politically and militarily, we should not cease to deliver as much service as possible to the Allies. [...] We cannot be the *parents pauvres* of the Entente”⁴².

This concern became more pressing as some newspaper articles published in the European (and espe-

36. See the exchanges in AA FP (2649), file “Projet de formation d’une division coloniale belge”.

37. Report of the Visit to the Camp of French Colonial Troops by Captain-Commandant A. Couche, 24 September 1916, AA FP (2649), file “Projet de formation d’une division coloniale belge”.

38. The Captain-Commandant of the *Force Publique* Beernaert is thus quoted in the “Rapport sur l’emploi éventuel de troupes du Congo”, undated [1916], unsigned, AA FP (2649), file “Rapport sur l’emploi éventuel des troupes du Congo”.

39. Note for the Minister of Colonies [illegible signature], 30 November 1917, AA FP (2665), file “1228 – Corps expéditionnaire colonial”.

40. Paul Crockaert (1875-1955) was a Belgian lawyer and Catholic politician. His appointment in the Ministry of Colonies during the war marked the beginning of a (more formal) political career that led him to become Minister of Colonies in 1931.

41. Report “Objections faites par le Gouverneur Général à l’envoi d’un corps de troupes noires. Conversation de Mr. Henry avec Mr. Crockaert”, 18 December 1917, AA FP (2665), file “1227 - Troupes noires”.

42. “Corps expéditionnaire colonial. Projet de note pour le Conseil des Ministres (Approuvé le 1^{er} décembre 1917)”, undated [November 1917], AA FP (2665), file “1227 - Troupes noires”.

cially the French) press⁴³ openly asked why the Belgians could not follow the French in their use of black troops on the Western Front, seeming to give serious grounds to these concerns. Already in 1916, rumours had leaked not only in well-informed political Belgian *milieux*⁴⁴ but also in the European press, with Swiss, German⁴⁵ and British newspapers reporting on (and in the last case, pushing for⁴⁶) the possibility of the arrival of a Congolese contingent on the Western front. In 1917, the mediatic echoes reached another level, following a tribune published by a Belgian military commander in the metropolitan (and Catholic) journal *Le XX^{ème} siècle*⁴⁷. All made extensive use of (imperial) comparative arguments and of barely veiled warnings about the post-war negotiations, stating that “the time of mental restrictions and bargaining that we once considered to be the cutting edge of diplomacy has passed. It is certain that everyone will benefit from the fruits of victory according to the effort and sacrifices made. The Belgium of tomorrow will be all the more great and strong because she will have let herself act without restrictions”⁴⁸. However, the colonial drawbacks of the deployment of Congolese troops in Europe were significant enough to overcome these major concerns. At the end of the war, as the Belgian government had clearly stated that such a deployment would never happen⁴⁹, its officials were asked to prepare irrefutable arguments to justify the decision in front of the Allies as the perspectives on the peace negotiations became more sharply defined.

IV. Racial Boundaries, White Prestige and Security Anxieties: The Dangers of Imperial Circulations in Times of War

Beyond diplomatic preoccupations, the final Belgian decision to not authorize the presence of Congolese soldiers (or even workers, as this perspective was also discussed in 1916 and 1917⁵⁰) on its soil cannot be dissociated from anxieties linked to the colonial situation in the Congo itself, as the extensive investigations launched in 1915 made clear.

First, logistical issues were of course important - and numerous. There was, for example, the question about the number of Congolese soldiers to transport to Belgium, as well as the organization of their transport and the specific equipment they might require (in terms of weaponry and in terms of clothing). Their supervision and training only raised concerns in the first months of the project, as the African campaigns quickly ‘solved’ these issues by allowing Congolese recruits - and their white officers - to gain concrete war experience. The most controversial points concerned the climate and the military capacities of colonial soldiers (with their corollary, namely the military use that could be made of these men). Could Congolese soldiers stand the cold climate of the Western front, even in the eventuality of a stay limited to the spring and summer? What kinds of specific equipment would this require? What was the “temper-

43. See the numerous press clippings in AA FP (2665), file 1229, notably from *Le Petit Journal* (30 January 1918), *La Libre Parole* (14 January 1918), *La Croix* (29 December 1917), *Le Petit Parisien* (26 December 1917), *Basler Nachrichten* (16 January 1918), *Neue Freie Presse* (30 December 1917), *La Dépêche Algérienne* (28 December 1917) and *The Globe* (24 December 1917).

44. See for instance Representative of the Belgian Red Cross [illegible signature] to the Secretary of the Ministry of Colonies, 16 November 1916, AA FP (2665), file “1228 - Corps expéditionnaire colonial”.

45. I.a. through the columns of the *Waldenburger Bezirksblatt* (14 October 1916) and the *Tägliche Rundschau* (14 October 1916), both carefully collected in AA FP (2665), file “1228 - Corps expéditionnaire colonial”.

46. See especially DEMETRIUS C. BOULGER, “A Congolese Contingent for Europe”, in *The Graphic*, 4 November 1916.

47. WILLY BRETON, “Après nos victoires d’Afrique, notre armée coloniale peut-elle encore remplir un rôle?”, in *Le XX^{ème} siècle*, 16 December 1917. The similarities (in arguments and turns of phrases) with the notes and reports of the Ministry of Colonies are too striking to be a mere coincidence.

48. In the words of the Belgian journalist and essayist Louis Dumont-Wilden (1875-1965) published in a French journal, “Les troupes noires du Congo belge”, in *L’Homme Libre*, 26 December 1917.

49. Report of the Minister of Colonies to the King on the activities of the Department of Colonies in January and February 1918, February 1918, in GUY VANTHEMSCHE (ed), *Le Congo belge pendant la Première Guerre mondiale...*, p. 181-182.

50. See the discussions in AA AI (Collection Indigenous Affairs) (1416), file “Recrutement de main d’œuvre noire pour la Belgique”.

ament"⁵¹ of Congolese soldiers? Would they be able to fight properly in a European war and be used as shock troops? In search of expertise on these questions, Belgian authorities addressed a series of national and international figures. Eugène Henry⁵², the governor general of the colony and the commander in chief of the *Force Publique* Charles Tombeur⁵³ were the first to be solicited by the government. They were asked to collect opinions from other colonial military officers and medical specialists. Minister of Colonies Jules Renkin, who had taken refuge in the French port city of Le Havre, also quickly announced that he was going to ask the French government "the conclusions of its experiment with the use of black troops at the beginning of the war"⁵⁴. A few weeks later, a Belgian commander had already been sent to a Senegalese *tirailleurs* acclimation camp in Southern France⁵⁵. Missions to other French camps and meetings with French generals in Paris' military headquarters were later organized⁵⁶. Employees of the Ministry of Colonies also carefully collected French parliamentary documents⁵⁷ and international press articles related to the topic (especially those from British journals).

Lessons were drawn: Belgian officers were convinced of the necessity of acclimation camps in southern France allowing Congolese soldiers to adapt progressively to the climate of Flanders. They confirmed tropical doctors' opinions stating that Congolese soldiers were likely to be able to bear the harshness of northern climates as long as their mobilization was limited to the spring and summer and on the condition that they would be "well-chosen and well-prepared, well-fed, well-dressed and well-monitored"⁵⁸. The issue of the military capabilities of the soldiers was equally quickly resolved. There was an almost unanimous consensus about the military value of Congolese soldiers (bravery, discipline, loyalty, etc.), about their 'ideal' use as 'shock troops' (in line with pre-war military racial theories regarding the martial employment of *force noire*⁵⁹) and about the necessity of providing them with specific mentoring by officers who were familiar with 'the African' and his 'mentality'. Military experts only had reservations about the resistance of Congolese's "nerves in the face of violent and prolonged bombings"⁶⁰ and of the intensity of "modern artillery"⁶¹. The historiographical debate about colonial troops being used

51. Based on the expression used in the Minister of Colonies to Governor General, 3 June 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

52. Eugène Henry (1862-1930). A former military figure, Henry started his colonial career in the CFS administration in 1905. He served as Governor General from 1916 to 1921. FERNAND DELLICOUR, "Henry (Eugène Joseph Marie)", in *Biographie Coloniale Belge*, vol. III, 1955, col. 390-394.

53. On the career of Charles Tombeur (1867-1947), whose actions in WWI were later mythologized by colonial propaganda, see FERNAND DELLICOUR, "Tombeur (Charles-Henri-Marie-Ernest, baron Tombeur de Tabora)", in *Biographie Coloniale Belge*, t.VI, 1968, col.1022-1026.

54. Minister of Colonies to Governor General, 3 June 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

55. Ministry of Colonies to Governor General, 26 June 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

56. On September 15, 16 and 17, 1916. Report of the Visit to the Camp of French Colonial Troops by Captain-Commandant A. Couche, 24 September 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

57. See the file "Armée indigène. Documents parlementaires français" in AA FP (2665).

58. Note from the Chief Doctor of the Colony, 12 July 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

59. MARC MICHEL, *Les Africains et la Grande Guerre: L'appel à l'Afrique (1914-1918)*, Paris, 2014, p. 15-29; CHRISTIAN KÖLLER, "Von Wilden aller Rassen niedergemetzelt'...", p. 67-72. The theories of the French general Charles Mangin (1866-1925) seemed to have been well-known by (and influential on) Belgian colonial military *milieux*.

60. Telegram from General Tombeur to Minister of Colonies, 30 July 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

61. Captain-Cdt Léopold Reuil to Direction of Force Publique, 10 July 1917, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

as cannon fodder⁶² cannot really be addressed from these exchanges, as there was little explicit reflection on this topic, but a few remarks about the Congolese alleged “indifference in the face of death”⁶³ and “natural contempt for danger”⁶⁴ in the assessment of their employment as assault troops offer a glimpse about the state of mind of some Belgian military experts.

Logistical issues were complicated, but from an analysis of the successive discussions held between 1915 and 1918, it appears that there was no question in this domain that could a *priori* not be solved or that appeared crippling for the different parties. The project went so far as to plan the design of a specific uniform for colonial troops⁶⁵. Beyond organizational considerations, apprehensions related to the maintenance of racial boundaries and white prestige and security were at the very heart of these discussions - and proved decisive for the Belgian ultimate decision. Starting from the earliest debates, the role of the “considerations of colonial politics” was underlined as the most pressing one by the Minister of Colonies because of the “infringements on the prestige of the white race that could result”⁶⁶. For the administration settled in the colony itself, these anxieties were central. Governor General Eugène Henry was the fiercest opponent to the project on these very premises, as he was “all too aware of the potential consequences of promiscuity between our natives and our fellow countrymen to ignore the great danger of it. How, on

the other hand, would it be possible to maintain in the native society, where our black soldiers would quickly return, the respect of the life of the European and the prestige essential to guarantee it, if we send them to Europe to fight white troops, and maybe even defeat them?”⁶⁷ Here again, the logics of imperial comparison proved powerful. In their assessment of French experiences with *tirailleurs*, Belgian authorities were eager to investigate closely how French militaries were dealing with the potential consequences of African soldiers trained to kill - and actually killing - white men and with the management of their lives behind the battle lines, notably in terms of interracial relations⁶⁸. They also kept carefully collecting arguments from papers published in the British press; the fact that African subjects from British colonies had been excluded from fighting positions on the Western front was indeed in large part inspired by similar preoccupations⁶⁹. For the colonial authorities, the prospect of a Congolese division fighting in the metropole was radically different from the war experience in Eastern Africa. There, soldiers might have killed Europeans enemies, but these were a minority as colonial armies in Africa were mainly composed of indigenous rank-and-files led by a handful of white officers. A few Belgian veterans of the *Force Publique* objected that “Blacks do not ignore that Europe is split between two camps” and that “they will find it natural to fight by the side of their *Wazungu* against the common enemy”⁷⁰, but they were a minority. Overall, this kind of argument did not address what appeared

62. The debate, still not entirely resolved, is perfectly exposed in CHRISTIAN KOLLER, “The Recruitment of Colonial Troops...”, pp. 119-122.

63. “Rapport sur une visite au camp de Saint Médard des troupes coloniales françaises”, undated [1916], unsigned, AA FP (2649), file “Projet de formation d’une division coloniale belge”.

64. “Rapport sur l’emploi éventuel des troupes du Congo”, undated [1916], unsigned, AA FP (2649), file “Rapport sur l’emploi éventuel des troupes du Congo”.

65. “Projet de l’uniforme à adopter pour la Division des Troupes Coloniales”, undated [1916], AA FP (2665), file “1228 – Corps expéditionnaire colonial”.

66. Minister of Colonies to Governor General, 3 June 1916, AA FP (2649), file “Projet de formation d’une division coloniale belge”.

67. Governor General to Minister of Colonies, 26 July 1916, AA FP (2665), file “1227 - Troupes noires”. These arguments are also formulated in dramatic terms in two telegrams sent to the Minister of Colonies (6 & 17 July 1917) in the same file.

68. See notably the “Questionnaire pour la Mission Militaire Belge près le Grand Quartier Général Français”, 10 September 1916, AA FP (2649), file “Projet de formation d’une division coloniale belge”.

69. DAVID KILLINGRAY, “The Idea of a British...”.

70. In the words of Colonel Philippe Molitor (1869-1952), quoted in “Rapport sur l’emploi éventuel des troupes du Congo”, undated [1916], unsigned, AA FP (2649), file “Rapport sur l’emploi éventuel des troupes du Congo”.

to be a major problem (and difference with previous campaigns within Africa): the project proposed the transport of these men to the land of "their civilizers"⁷¹ and as such generated risks of "promiscuity between soldiers and inhabitants" that could have "pernicious effects on the mentality of the Black"⁷².

The colonial administration was in fact less worried about what might happen in Europe than about what the soldiers might actually say about it to their fellow countrymen once back in the Congo. There were widespread fears that exposing Congolese to European military hostilities and to European society at large might weaken the prestige of the white race and Africans' alleged belief in white superiority. As the governor general repeated in 1917, "bringing black troops to the European front means killing our prestige of being white. The Black will consider the White as his equal, or even as his inferior"⁷³. Significantly, the same anxieties informed the debates about the migration of Congolese workers to support the war effort behind the lines. While this perspective did not involve violent confrontations with white people, it posed a serious threat to "the future maintenance of our authority over the natives"⁷⁴ given "the harmful effect that will necessarily have on our work of colonization and civilization the temporary sending to Europe of non-civilized Blacks who are going to live in ordinary conditions [...] and escape any kind of discipline, nota-

bly after working hours"⁷⁵. At the end of the war, this argument had clearly convinced the minister of colonies who tried to explain to the metropolitan *Conseil des Ministres* that the war had already created trouble in the colony and that he consequently "loathed the idea of associating our Blacks with the fights between Europeans. This could but be fatal to civilization and to the prestige of the white race in Africa"⁷⁶. The securing and maintenance of racial categories - and therefore of the hierarchies of rule that were built on it - were at stake. Because they threatened racial boundaries (both in spatial and political terms), imperial circulations of colonial subjects put the fiction of racial subordination, here embodied by the claim to "prestige", at risk. It is therefore no coincidence that the topic of interracial sexuality held a notable place in these discussions.

It is now well-known that sexuality had been a strategic site of defining racial boundaries and transgressions⁷⁷. As such, it generated permanent political tensions in colonial empires, tensions that were exacerbated in periods of crisis of control (whether imagined or real). In the present case, wartime anxieties related to gender, sexuality and female virtue in metropolitan Europe contributed to making the topic of interracial sex involving African soldiers "a point of convergence"⁷⁸ for a plurality of concerns related to race, gender, national purity and imperial authority. The alleged irresistibility of Congolese soldiers in the eyes of

71. Governor General to Minister of Colonies, 26 July 1916, AA FP (2665), file "1227 - Troupes noires".

72. Minister of Colonies to Governor General, 3 June 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

73. Quoted in Report "Objections faites par le Gouverneur Général à l'envoi d'un corps de troupes noires.

Conversation de Mr. Henry avec Mr. Crokaert", 18 December 1917, AA FP (2665), file "1227 - Troupes noires".

74. Note by Chief of Cabinet Ministry of Colonies, 11 October 1916, AA AI (1416), file "Recrutement de main d'œuvre noire pour la Belgique".

75. In addition to arguments linked to the already existing shortage of a workforce in the colony and its limited professional qualifications. Minister of Colonies to Minister of War/Prime Minister, 11 October 1916, AA AI (1416), file "Recrutement de main d'œuvre noire pour la Belgique".

76. Minister of Colonies to Members of Government, 20 January 1918, ,, AA FP (2665), file "1228 - Corps expéditionnaire colonial".

77. In the vast literature, see ANN MC CLINTOCK, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York, 1995; ANN LAURA STOLER, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Berkeley, 2002; Carina Ray, "Interracial Sex and the Making of Empire", in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, Oxford, 2013, p. 190-211.

78. ANNABELLE MELZER, "Spectacles and Sexualities. The 'Mise-En-Scène' of the 'Tirailleur Sénégalais' on the Western Front, 1914-1920", in *Borderlines. Genders and Identities in War and Peace, 1870-1930*, New York, 2013, p.215.

white women ("they will, and there is no doubt about it, give themselves to them"⁷⁹ warned a fatalist governor general in 1917) was a threat that Belgian authorities considered very seriously. The general of the *Force Publique*, Tombeur, insisted in his first report that planning the transport of black women to accompany the colonial brigade in Belgium was an absolute prerequisite for any project of the sort⁸⁰. In the aftermath, this issue was integrated into the questionnaire submitted to the French army, which had to acknowledge that "no native woman accompany the contingents of troops; there is maybe a mistake in it"⁸¹. In spite of its ambitious and enthusiastic deployment of African soldiers to the mainland, the French government quickly developed obsessive anxieties about miscegenation and actively sought to circumscribe interactions between *tirailleurs* and French women⁸². On the British side, the war also brought about the implementation of unprecedented measures of (sexual) surveillance and control of non-white soldiers from the colonial world⁸³. In each of these contexts, the prospect of interracial sex generated anxieties that bundled together "the myths of uncontrolled black lust close to as well as at home, and white proletarian women's curiosity about sex and, most dangerously, about

interracial sex"⁸⁴, in the words of Philippa Levine. In the Belgian case, these relationships were primarily considered threatening not because they would be immoral, sources of venereal contagion or even leading to miscegenation, but because they would damage white prestige and consequently racial hierarchies in the colony. This concern was an enduring one in the Belgian Congo. It became obsessive whenever the perspective of relations between black men and white women surfaced, as they reversed the racial and gender premises that were at the heart of the (sexual) politics of colonialism⁸⁵ and created "weaknesses and fissures that would undermine imperial rule"⁸⁶ in the long run.

These fissures also raised immediate and concrete worries. In the eyes of colonial authorities, exposing Congolese men to Belgian conduct they would not have encountered at home (i.e. "loose" women, prostitution, but also illiterate and working-class men for instance) and therefore injuring white prestige meant reinforcing the threat of an anti-Belgian uprising in the Congo. "Order reigns in the Congo because the Black fears us, and he fears us because he considers us as a superior being. It is our ethnic prestige

79. Report "Objections faites par le Gouverneur Général à l'envoi d'un corps de troupes noires. Conversation de Mr. Henry avec Mr. Crokaert", 18 December 1917, AA FP (2665), file "1227 - Troupes noires".

80. Telegram from General Tombeur to Minister of Colonies, 30 July 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

81. Report of the Visit to the Camp of French Colonial Troops by Captain-Commandant A. Couche, 24 September 1916, AA FP (2649), file "Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge".

82. TYLER STOVALL, "Love, Labor, and Race: Colonial Men and White Women in France during the Great War", in *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race*, Lanham, 2003, p. 297-321; JEAN-YVES LE NAOUR, "La question de la violation de l'interdit racial en 1914-1918. La rencontre des coloniaux et des femmes françaises", in *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, no. 61, 2000, p. 171-186; RICHARD FOGARTY, *Race and War in France...*, p. 202-229; CHRISTIAN KOLLER, "Enemy Image. Race and Gender Stereotypes in the Discussion on Colonial Troops. A Franco-German Comparison, 1914-1923", in *Home/Front. The Military, War and Gender in 20th Century Germany*, Oxford, 2002, p. 139-157; DAVID MURPHY, "Love, Trauma and War: the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* and Sexual-Racial Politics in 1920s France", in *Irish Journal of French Studies*, no. 13, 2013, p. 111-128.

83. PHILIPPA LEVINE, "Battle Colors: Race, Sex, and Colonial Soldierly in World War I", in *Journal of Women's History*, no. 9, 1998 (4), p. 104-130.

84. *Idem*, p. 110.

85. JEAN-LUC VELLUT, "Le Katanga industriel en 1944: malaises et anxiétés dans la société coloniale", in *Le Congo Belge durant la seconde guerre mondiale. Recueil d'études. Bijdragen over Belgisch-Congo tijdens de tweede wereldoorlog*, Brussels, 1983, p. 513; AMANDINE LAURO, *Coloniaux, ménagères et prostituées au Congo Belge 1885-1930*, Brussels, 2005. See also PEDRO MONAVILLE, "La crise congolaise de juillet 1960 et le sexe de la décolonisation", in *Sextant*, no. 25, 2008, p. 87-102.

86. RICHARD FOGARTY, *Race and War in France...*, p. 205.

that gives us the mastering of the country"⁸⁷. This kind of argument permeated colonial troops' debates in Belgium, and it was even the most important drawback to the project in the eyes of the *in-situ* colonial administration⁸⁸. The risk of insubordination or revolt in the colony was an old but nevertheless strong insecurity among the Belgian authorities, here clearly reinforced by wartime anxieties that made patterns of obedience and questions of loyalty more important. The complex dialectic between the politics of prestige and the use of force as instruments of colonial domination, as underlined by Emmanuelle Saada⁸⁹, appears clearly in this context: "This ordeal undergone, we will be done with our racial prestige, our biggest - I was about to say our unique - power in the still barbaric *milieu* where we live. From now on, we will only be able to count, in order to subdue the natives to our authority, on force, that force that we have taught them to use against us"⁹⁰. Here again, a comparison with the French and British African territories was inevitable. All colonial powers knew, to various degrees, the paradox of relying on armed forces mainly composed of colonized soldiers while dealing with "fears of training the dispossessed in the ways - and weapons - of their masters"⁹¹. From the Belgian point of view, while the risk of anticolonial violence was the same as in the other colonies, the means of repression were completely different. First, as mentioned earlier, Belgian-Congolese laws forbade the sending of troops from the metropole to the colony, meaning that no backup (white) force could

be sent in case of mutiny. And second, the maintenance of law and order in the colony rested in the hands of the army and police corps composed of Congolese soldiers; the fact that Belgium, with its single colonial possession, was not an empire (in the strict sense of the term) and could therefore not resort to other colonial territories to repress disorders was clearly identified as a specific problem. Again, Governor General Henry was the most alarmist figure: "If a general revolt happens among our troops, we would be lost. That is why the measure that would allow Blacks, after they had become aware of their force, to turn against us, could bring the colony to ruins"⁹².

Even those who were in favor of the deployment of colonial troops to the Western front did not dispute this view⁹³. They merely suggested solutions to counter the dangerous effects of racial mixing within and behind battle lines. A first option was to be especially vigilant in the recruitment of loyal men and to have the right attitude (paternalist yet benevolent). Faced with the security anxieties of government officials, officers of the *Force Publique* tried to reassure them, reminding them that "the benevolent and human White gets from the Black a dedication that can reach the point of sacrifice" and that "the help that the Blacks will give us will be as efficient, as voluntary, as we would have been able to bind them to us through special deference, through a fair remuneration of their services, through rewards due to their military virtues (they are very sensitive to honors and distinctions)"⁹⁴.

87. Report "Objections faites par le Gouverneur Général à l'envoi d'un corps de troupes noires. Conversation de Mr. Henry avec Mr. Crokaert", 18 December 1917, AA FP (2665), file "1227 - Troupes noires".

88. The governor general clearly said that "if it was not for the essential question of the safeguard of the colony", he would be enthusiastic for the project. *Idem*.

89. EMMANUELLE SAADA, "The Empire of Law: Dignity, Prestige, and Domination in the 'Colonial Situation'", in *French Politics, Culture & Society*, no. 20, 2002 (2), p. 98-120.

90. Governor General to Minister of Colonies, 26 July 1916, AA FP (2665), file "1227 - Troupes noires".

91. PHILIPPA LEVINE, "Battle Colors...", p. 112.

92. Governor General to Minister of Colonies, 26 July 1916, AA FP (2665), file "1227 - Troupes noires".

93. With the (relative) exception of a few observers who did not understand the question as raised by the colonial administration and who insisted that there was no revolt to fear from the Congolese population in the (metropolitan) absence of the *Force Publique*.

94. Report of Colonel P. Molitor in "Rapport sur l'emploi éventuel des troupes du Congo", undated [1916], unsigned, AA FP (2649), file « Rapport sur l'emploi éventuel des troupes du Congo ».

A second strategy consisted of controlling as strictly as possible their mobility and especially their access to European society. Several colonial experts advised that the troops should be subject to "strict regulation" and be kept "away from the European element, and especially from the female European element", so that they "would go back to Africa as respectful of the White as before their departure"⁹⁵. Once again, this was an issue on which French expertise was highly sought after: Belgian military leaders repeatedly wondered whether "special measures" had been implemented "to avoid the promiscuity of black contingents with the European populations near the front"⁹⁶. They received ambiguous answers from their French colleagues⁹⁷, reflecting the unease of France regarding the possibility of policing the interactions of African men stationed on its soil with metropolitan civil populations (and especially women).

Another possible way to counter these problems was to send Congolese regiments to other fronts in Southern Europe or even the Middle East. Besides its obvious climatic benefits, this option presented a "lesser moral prejudice since the Turkish is not a White"⁹⁸. In addition, it had a unique patriotic appeal. For the Belgians, it might have been another crusade (through an imperial proxy), an occasion to follow in the footsteps of Godefroy de Bouillon⁹⁹, a mythical figure of the Belgian national narrative whose martial qualities could

only have had powerful resonances in the context of the First World War. From a colonial point of view, this perspective had its own historical echoes: in the eyes of the colonial administration, fighting the forces of the Ottoman Empire could only remind the Congolese of the 'Anti-esclavagist campaign' led in the country in the 1890s against the 'Arab' slave traders. This meant that the Congolese would combat an enemy that was also - personally and historically - their own, even if there was also a risk of religious "contamination"¹⁰⁰ (the power of attraction of Islam on the Christian Congolese was another enduring anxiety in colonial Congo, here reinforced by German and Ottoman pro-Muslim propaganda designed for Africans)¹⁰¹. However, the organisational drawbacks of such an option appeared even worse than those required for a deployment on the Western front, and there was no demand from the Allies for a Belgian investment on southern terrains of operations¹⁰².

Finally, a last option suggested by Belgian advisors was to carefully monitor the return of soldiers to the Congo after the war, notably by creating special spaces (both material and social) to prevent them from mixing with the rest of Congolese society. The idea was to avoid the propagation of anti-white contempt that could only arise from the revelation of metropolitan Belgians' not-so-superior conduct. Some officers of the *Force Publique* recommended that the veterans would be confined in purpose-built areas, while others advocated for

95. Report of Joseph Muyle in *Idem*.

96. « Questionnaire pour la Mission Militaire Belge près le Grand Quartier Général Français », 10 September 1916, AA FP (2649), file « Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge ».

97. See the contradictory replies in *Idem* and « Report. Visit to the Camp of the French Colonial Troops » by Captain-Cdt Couche, 24 September 1916, AA FP (2649), file « Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge ».

98. « Corps expéditionnaire colonial. Projet de note pour le Conseil des Ministres (Approuvé le 1^{er} décembre 1917) », undated [November 1917], AA FP (2665), file « 1227 - Troupes noires ».

99. « Les troupes noires du Congo Belge », in *La Libre Parole*, 14 January 1918.

100. Report « Objections faites par le Gouverneur Général à l'envoi d'un corps de troupes noires. Conversation de Mr. Henry avec Mr. Crokaert », 18 December 1917, AA FP (2665), file « 1227 - Troupes noires ».

101. See for instance LÉON ANCIAUX, *Le problème musulman en Afrique Centrale*, Brussels, 1949 (and thanks to Benoit Henriet for pointing me to this reference). German and Ottoman propaganda targeting African Muslims was multifaceted: see the overview provided by KENNETH J. OROSZ, "Propaganda in the Colonies (Africa)", in *1914-1918 online: International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, Berlin, Free University of Berlin, 2017, http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/propaganda_in_the_colonies_africa, accessed 2 March 2017.

102. Minister of Colonies to Members of Government, 20 January 1918, AA FP (2665), file « 1228 – Corps expéditionnaire colonial ».

a planned dispersion in the vast colony that was the Congo. One of them even recommended that they could make the best veterans officers, so that they could revel in their own prestige (and not try to undermine their patrons). Some observers were particularly cynical about these projects; the supervision that was proposed for the veterans would not, in any case, necessitate major means, given that most of the soldiers were going to die: "In a deadly war that entrenches Europe in blood, a considerable number of the soldiers who would compose the colonial division sent to Europe will succumb (...)"¹⁰³. Still in 1917, the Ministry of Colonies reshaped that "very few [Blacks] would survive. (...) Used by the war and soon reaching old age, which comes early among Blacks, they would disappear by a natural death within the scope of a few years"¹⁰⁴.

V. A Prolonged Debate: Commemorative Parades and Colonial Surveillance

While concerns that exposing Africans to foreign (including metropolitan) influences would undermine colonial authority were not new in 1914, they were also going to be long-lasting. Until the late 1950s, colonial authorities relentlessly deterred Congolese people from travelling to Europe (whether for education or work) as far as possible on the very same grounds as those invoked during the First World War¹⁰⁵. Even the most important displays of patriotic pride were deemed to not be worth the risk. When in 1919 the Ministry of

the Colonies planned the inclusion of a "colonial delegation" in the first postwar 21st of July military parade, it was clear from the start that it could only concern white officers¹⁰⁶.

A decade later, celebrations for the centenary of the birth of the Belgian state in July 1930 offer another window onto the long-term echoes of the First World War debates, even if the final outcome was different. The grand military parade that was one of the major highlights of the festivities indeed included a delegation of about one hundred Congolese soldiers of the *Force Publique*, but this did not go without controversy. Debated from April 1929, this involvement was fiercely opposed by all the major representatives of the colonial authorities: the governor general, the commander-in-chief of the *Force Publique*, the director of the medical service of the colony and even the Minister of Colonies himself. The similarities with the 1914-1918 debates are striking: all feared the disastrous consequences for white prestige and consequently for the discipline and morale of the troops far more than any logistical difficulties¹⁰⁷. Again, the maintenance of the fiction of racial superiority was at stake. From the start, the Minister argued that if the project was realized, strict conditions would have to be defined beforehand, especially in terms of surveillance by white officers and tight control of "contact with the civil population, limited to what is strictly essential and authorized by the European supervisory staff"¹⁰⁸. Forced to yield to pressure from the metropolitan government in May 1930¹⁰⁹, the Ministry of Colonies set up an official "Commission in Charge of

103. Note for Minister of War, 9 September 1916, AA FP (2649), file « Projet de formation d'une division coloniale belge ».

104. Reactions of J. Crokaert in « Objections faites par le Gouverneur Général à l'envoi d'un corps de troupes noires. Conversation de Mr. Henry avec Mr. Crokaert », 18 December 1917, AA FP (2665), file « 1227 - Troupes noires ».

105. On the late-colonial development of Congolese migrations and of the membership issues associated with them, see ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA, *In het land van de Banoko...*, and MARJOLEIN SCHEPERS, *(Post-)Colonial Membership Regimes: Congolese Immigration in Belgium, 1945-1972*, Master Thesis in Migration History, University of Leiden, 2013.

106. See the exchanges in AA, SPA (Collection Colonial Personnel) R (50), file « Revue du 22 juillet 1919 ».

107. See the exchanges in AA FP (2624), file « 1023 – Participation d'un détachement aux Fêtes du Centenaire ».

108. Note from the 1st Department of the Ministry of Colonies, 20 August 1930, AA FP (2624), file « 1023 – Participation d'un détachement aux Fêtes du Centenaire ».

109. Minister of Colonies to Governor General, 23 May 1930, AA FP (2624), file « 1023 – Participation d'un détachement aux Fêtes du Centenaire ».



The *Force Publique* parades on the streets of Brussels during the celebrations of the centenary of Belgium.
Anonymous photo, 1930, MRAC Collections – HP.58.40.466.

the surveillance of the black militaries during their stay in Belgium¹¹⁰ that organized their garrisoning in some emptied barracks of Brussels and forbade any autonomous outings¹¹¹. Not surprisingly, the program of excursions was carefully planned and aimed at “developing among them the knowledge of a beautiful and powerful Belgium”¹¹². And if the dreadful precedent of the 1897 colonial exhibition of Tervueren was invoked, it was less for the tragic deaths occasioned than as a reminder of the alarm provoked by “the misconduct of some white women [which] caused a detrimental scandal for the morality and the discipline of the Black, as well as for the opinion of the moral value of the European that it is indispensable to give him”¹¹³. The spectrum of interracial affairs and of crumbling racial hierarchies conceived as threats for white prestige and the maintenance of disciplinary control over African forces persisted as a traumatic one.

While the reports compiled just after the departure of the contingent appeared very positive about the consequences of the experience¹¹⁴, the overall conclusions must not have been so enthusiastic since the “lessons of 1930”¹¹⁵ were evoked from the 1930s to the mid-1950s to argue against other

projects involving Congolese soldiers in metropolitan commemorative events. Already in 1931, it appeared safer to send wax mannequins rather than flesh-and-blood men to represent the *Force Publique's* actions in the First World War to the famous international colonial exhibition of Paris for instance¹¹⁶. And when in 1953 and 1955, detachments of Congolese troops came to the metropole, it was against the advice of the Minister of Colonies and, again, under strict surveillance; even the company of other ‘ordinary’ militaries within the barracks was eyed with suspicion¹¹⁷. Congolese soldiers complained about the situation¹¹⁸ and on the occasion of a trip to the World Fair of 1958, some of them even denounced this state of affairs in an anonymous letter that complained they were “watched over like slaves”¹¹⁹. The guard had been let down, however: soldiers were permitted to go out into the city by themselves (and even to visit *cafés à femmes* -prostitution bars- of the northern districts of the capital¹²⁰). However, they were still carefully watched over, as the reports and in-depth investigations of individual shadowing maintained in the archives demonstrate¹²¹. What is more, the loosening of the rules of surveillance was bitterly regretted immediately afterwards: on the boat that took the soldiers back to Congo, officers were

110. Minister of Colonies to Minister of Interior, 13 June 1930, AA FP (2624), file « 1023 – Participation d’un détachement aux Fêtes du Centenaire ».

111. « Instructions spéciales pour le séjour en Belgique du détachement de la FP appelé à participer aux fêtes et aux cérémonies du centenaire », undated [July 1930], AA FP (2624), file « 1023 – Participation d’un détachement aux Fêtes du Centenaire ».

112. Minister of Colonies to Governor General, 7 August 1930, AA FP (2624), file « 1023 – Participation d’un détachement aux Fêtes du Centenaire ».

113. « Les troupes coloniales en Belgique », report by Captain Lheck, 7 September 1930, AA FP (2624), file « 1023 – Participation d’un détachement aux Fêtes du Centenaire ».

114. « Rapport concernant le séjour des militaires noirs en Belgique » by Adjudant De Bruyn, undated [1930], AA FP (2624), file « 1023 – Participation d’un détachement aux Fêtes du Centenaire ».

115. Vice-Governor General for Governor General to Minister of Colonies, 17 February 1939, AA FP (2621), file « 1006 – Exposition de Liège 1939 ».

116. See the file 1003 « Exposition de Paris en 1931 » in AA FP (2621).

117. Minister of Colonies to Ministry of National Defence, 18 February 1952, AA FP (2625), file « Cérémonies et fêtes ».

118. Ministry of National Defence to Minister of Colonies, 10 August 1955, AA (FP 2625), file « Déplacement en Belgique d’une unité FP à l’occasion de la Fête Nationale 21 juillet 1955 ».

119. Anonymous to General Van Inthout, 14 August 1958, AA FP (2623) file « Expo 58. Détachement FP ». Some complaints from other Congolese attendants of the Fair were also published in Belgian newspapers, as shown by MATTHEW STANARD, “Belgium, the Congo, and Imperial Immobility: A Singular Empire and the Historiography of the Single Analytic Field”, in *French Colonial History*, no. 15, 2014, p. 88.

120. Colonel Darville to General Van Inthout, 12 November 1958, AA FP (2623), file « 7. Gardiens Expo ». This was also echoed in the newspaper *Pourquoi Pas?* to the discontent of the colonial administration.

121. See the reports in the file « 7. Gardiens Expo » in AA FP (2623).

alarmed by the fact that “everything has changed in comparison with the outward journey [...]. [...] The general state of mind had strongly evolved in a bad direction”¹²². Several decades after the First World War and in a completely different political context, the recurrence of the themes and of the logics of imperial anxieties is striking.

VI. Conclusion

In light of the vast literature devoted to the issue of colonial troops on the Western Front during the First World War, none of the arguments developed within the Belgian-Congolese context were really unique. Anxieties linked to the blurring of racial boundaries and sexual transgressions and preoccupations with white prestige and security (as well as with the colonial order at large) were all present to various extents in other imperial contexts, even in those in which the deployment of African soldiers was supported with enthusiasm, such as in the French case. The specificity of the Belgian situation therefore lies in the ways in which those arguments were combined, not only with each other, but also with Belgian insecurities as a colonial power, both on the international diplomatic stage and in the colony itself. The shadow of the then-recent Red Rubber Campaign proved, here again, to be a powerful one. It played an important role in nurturing Belgian leaders’ defensive suspicions about the potential reproaches of their allies – and their potential territorial ambitions in Central Africa. Belgian enthusiasm (or sense of relief) in the postwar discrediting of the most vocal British campaigners who denounced the Red Rubber

Scandal, as exemplified by the work of journalist Pierre Daye mentioned at the beginning of this article, should thus also be understood in light of a longer history of imperial tensions that did not vanish during the war.

On the other side of the Channel, British journalists knew the story as well; when it came to reporting on the discussion about a Congolese contingent in Europe, some of them knew how to hit a sensitive spot. In an article published in the well-known magazine *The Graphic* for instance, the established writer Demetrius C. Boulger explicitly used the Red Rubber Campaign as an invective argument, stating that the transportation of loyal and motivated Congolese troops to Belgium would have been the best proof that previous criticisms of Belgium’s imperial violence and traumatic rule had been calumnies¹²³. This also allows us to reassert how far the transimperial dimension of these debates has never been “hidden”: bringing to light these aspects appears therefore less as the result of a “new” analytical standpoint privileging an interimperial perspective than as heuristic evidence. In this domain as in many others, Belgian colonial leaders thought – and planned – in terms of comparisons, competition and (counter)inspiration. The deployment of colonial troops in Europe was based on a common series of premises, imperatives and challenges that were likely meant to encourage edifying lessons across empires. This arises from archival records, perhaps more than from a secondary literature which, while often comparative or connected in its multi- (rather than inter-)¹²⁴ imperial scope, has generally paid little attention to the Belgian case – as to “small” imperial nations at large – with

122. Report on the outward journey, 17 November 1958, AA FP (2623), file «Expo 58. Détachement FP».

123. DEMETRIUS C. BOULGER, “A Congolese Contingent for Europe”, in *The Graphic*, 4 November 1916.

124. Explorations of interimperial circulations and encounters which are quite recent are one of the most promising paths of current research about empires. See for example VOLKER BARTH & ROLAND CVETKOVY (eds), *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930*, London, 2015 and SIMON POTTER & JONATHAN SAHA, “Global History, Imperial History and Connected Histories of Empire”, in *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, no. 16, 2015 (1).

French and British empires often being used as metonyms of European colonialism¹²⁵.

In any case, and despite the (more or less) formal entreaties made by the French and British allies, the combination of these multiple arguments proved to be key in the final Belgian decision not to organize the deployment of Congolese men in Flanders Fields, far more than any logistical or military operation-related preoccupations. The decision therefore was not based on criteria of feasibility, but on political choices. And as such, it cannot be summarized -and understood- as a 'non-event', even if it appears more guided by (emotional) anxieties rather than by rational 'facts'. Recent scholarship on the role of anxieties in colonial governance has shown the importance of the relationship between emotions, power and politics in imperial contexts¹²⁶, to say nothing of the path-breaking work of Nancy R. Hunt on the (extreme) nervousness of Belgian colonial rulers¹²⁷. More research needs to be done so we can achieve a more nuanced understanding of the Belgian specificities in this regard, not only in a comparative perspective, but also by considering these debates in a broader (or longer) historical context. Obsessive concerns with (real or imagined) threats to the hegemony of colonizers and potential 'betrayals' by colonized subjects were certainly not specific to the Belgian Congo, but the unquenchable thirst for prestige by Belgian colonial rulers¹²⁸, their

meticulous attention to appearances of decorum and respectability, their rhetorical investment in the idea of *colonie-modèle*, and the acute sense of imperial vulnerability that was barely hidden, sketched a distinctive configuration. To what degree it was influenced by a specific relationship with the use of force, the challenges of imperial identity as a small nation and the not-so-favorable dynamics of interimperial comparisons remains an open question, but the debates about the deployment of colonial troops in World War One showed that these arguments could represent an explosive cocktail of sensibilities.

From the interwar period to the eve of decolonization, fears associated with the destabilizing influence of cross-cultural encounters within the metropole were not limited to Congolese-Belgian contact, but also extended to Congolese-of-the-colony to Congolese-of-the-metropole connections. While a tenuous numerical minority, the few Congolese who managed to escape colonial control measures to settle in Belgium created various anxieties during the colonial period. In a sense, many of them confirmed for the Belgian authorities that their fears had not been entirely misplaced, starting with the 32 Congolese men already living in Belgium when the First World War broke out who managed to be incorporated into the Belgian army. As the work of Griet Brosens has shown¹²⁹, several of them married white women, deserted or

125. To the detriment of the complexity of what "the colonial situation" implied, as already discussed in EMMANUEL BLANCHARD, MARIEKE BLOEMBERGEN and AMANDINE LAURO, "Tensions of Policing in Colonial Situations", in EMMANUEL BLANCHARD, MARIEKE BLOEMBERGEN and AMANDINE LAURO, *Policing in Colonial Empires. Cases, Connections, Boundaries (ca. 1850-1970)*, Bern, 2017, p. 30 & foll.

126. HARALD FISCHER-TINÉ (ed), *Anxieties, Fear and Panic in Colonial Settings. Empires on the Verge of a Moral Breakdown*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017; Maurus Reinkowski & Gregor Thum (eds), *Helpless Imperialists. Imperial Failure, Fear and Radicalization*, Göttingen, 2012; ROBERT PECKAM (ed), *Empires of Panic. Epidemics and Colonial Anxieties*, Hong Kong, 2015.

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

128. JEAN-LUC VELLUT, « Matériaux pour une image du blanc dans la société coloniale du Congo Belge », in *Stéréotypes nationaux et préjugés raciaux aux 19^{ème} et 20^{ème} siècles*, Leuven, 1982, p. 91-116. See also AMANDINE LAURO, « Maintenir l'ordre dans la *colonie-modèle*. Notes sur les désordres urbains et la police des frontières raciales au Congo Belge », in *Crime, History & Societies/Crime, Histoire & Sociétés*, no. 15, 2011 (2), p. 97-121.

129. GRIET BROSENS, *Congo aan den Yser...*

raised political criticisms, while the most famous, Paul Panda Farnana¹³⁰, quickly became the personification of the worst Belgian fears. Soon after the war, Panda created the first Congolese association on Belgian soil (the *Union Congolaise*). The association aimed initially at organizing his 31 fellow veterans and advocating for their recognition by the Belgian State –and more generally, the recognition of the contribution of Congolese soldiers in Africa, notably through the creation of a “Memorial of the Congolese Unknown Soldier”. The rejection of these demands by the Belgian authorities contributed to the radicalization of the claims of

Panda, who started talking about racial equality and openly criticizing Belgian colonial policies, not only in Belgium and the Congo but also on the international stage. These subversive developments, although highly marginal, strengthened Belgian colonial authorities’ belief that they had been right in their decision not to deploy Congolese troops in Europe, and that it was definitely best, even for military parades and commemorations, to just send “greetings from the far-away homeland” to the colonial troops, as the Belgian king and government chose to do during the First World War¹³¹.

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130. Paul Panda Farnana (1888-1930) was born in Lower Congo and brought to Belgium in 1900. He was recruited by the colonial agricultural administration in 1909. His postwar activism and notably his association with the Pan-African Movement of W.E.B. Dubois has made him a hero of anticolonial contestations in recent historiography. See ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA, *Présences congolaises en Belgique...*, passim; ANTOINE TSHITUNGU KONGOLO, *Visages de Paul Panda Farnana. Nationaliste, panafricaniste, intellectuel engagé*, Paris, 2011.

131. Minister of Colonies to Governor General, 4 November 1915, AA FP (2636), file « Incriptions sur les drapeaux et boucliers ».