

HISTORY MATTERS

Editorial Introduction: History Matters on the 2020 Belgian Parliamentary Commission on the Colonial Past

We are living in a time when social movements and individual and group consciousness demand a reckoning with the past. Monuments in different places around the globe have generated protests and some have been removed. In Cameroon, Namibia, Nigeria, and South Africa, activists, state representatives, and cultural workers have fought for the restitution of art and artifacts as well as human remains, all looted or purchased or removed in the context of conquest and colonialism. Some US universities have set up committees to study their institution's involvement with enslavement and the trade in enslaved people. And in Europe, cities like Rotterdam in the Netherlands commissioned a study of its colonial past and ties to enslaving and trading people in the centuries of the transatlantic slave trade. On the African continent, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Rwanda have held Truth Commissions to confront their more recent violent pasts and promote reconciliation.

In this global context and responding to concern and criticism in Belgium about its colonial past, in 2020 the Belgian parliament established a 'special commission charged with examining the Congo Free State (1885–1908) and the colonial past of Belgium in Congo (1908–1960), Rwanda and Burundi (1919–1962), its impact and the lessons that need to be drawn from this past'. The Belgian commission included twenty members of parliament representing a diversity of political opinion.¹ The commission initiated its work by naming a panel of ten experts to write a report. The panel included five historians (two Congolese at European universities and three Belgians at Belgian and US universities); three experts in transitional justice (one Rwandan jurist and two Belgians); and two representatives of the African diaspora in Belgium. The Commission charged them with drafting a wide-ranging report on the state of research (Belgian, Burundian, Congolese, and Rwandan) on Belgian colonialism; the availability and accessibility of public and non-state archives in Belgium, Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda; the degree of consensus on the Belgian colonial past; what significant research remained; and a survey of research on Belgium's colonial history in relation to the postcolonial period and particularly with relation to questions of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance. The report would inform the Commission's deliberations.

This was a monumental task. Released in October 2021, the report is nearly seven-hundred pages long.² The commission held hearings, deliberated, and drafted recommendations. In December 2022, the Belgian parliament failed to find the political consensus necessary to endorse the Commission's recommendations: an official apology for colonial domination, exploitation, violence and atrocities; a national day of remembrance; a monument to victims of 'human zoos'; scholarships; and a national action plan against racism, among others.

In this iteration of History Matters three authors take up the work of the 2020 Belgian parliamentary commission on the colonial past to help us think through this exercise and to query what these

¹Unlike the Belgian Parliamentary Commission formed in 2000 to study the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the Commission on the Belgian Colonial Past did not have investigative powers to access closed archival documents.

²Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, 'La commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'État indépendant du Congo et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi, ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver', Doc 55 1462/002, 26 Oct. 2021, <https://www.lachambre.be/flwb/pdf/55/1462/55K1462002.pdf>.



governmental commissions do, what they miss or even refuse to do, and the ethical and professional challenges historians face when they participate in such official inquiries. The coauthors of the first piece, Sarah Van Beurden and Gillian Mathys, served as historian experts on the empaneled commission that produced the report. The author of the second piece, Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, is an historian at the University of Lubumbashi and leads the project *Memoires de Lubumbashi* in collaboration with Bogumil Jewsiewicki. Larger questions about how to assess and work to not just acknowledge but to repair the violence, harm, and underdevelopment that colonialism produced hang over this and all such commissions. They inform not just commissions, but for many of us, our research, teaching, and actions in the world. These pieces help us consider the constraints and possibilities historians face in doing this work. They also draw our attention to the significance of not just non-state archives but of memories, practices of memory, and words that center the lives and experiences of those who lived through and in the colonial period.

We hope these reflections spark productive debates about colonialism's public and private after-lives and that they invite others to share their experiences and analysis in this space in future issues of *The Journal of African History*.