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Nineteenth-century ‘trade guns’ in the Congo Estuary: Local refractions of a global trade

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Abstract

Throughout the nineteenth century, African communities in the Congo estuary displayed a consistent preference for ‘trade guns’, the rough-and-ready muzzle-loading muskets that European producers and traders regarded as obsolete and as an indirect proof of African backwardness. The first section of this article seeks to account for this consumer predilection. The second and third substantive parts of the article explore the provenance of these guns and argue that the lower Congo’s gun trade can be disaggregated into three phases, each of which was marked by the local ascendancy of different trading houses. The most general aim of the article is to make a case for the role of African consumer demand in fostering processes of global economic integration. More specifically, by showing that west-central African demand was responsible for the enduring vitality of Liège’s non-mechanised cottage industry, the article points to an often-overlooked aspect of nineteenth-century globalisation: far from invariably promoting innovation in industrialisation, the growing interdependence of different parts of the world could also have the effect of giving a new lease of life to apparently antiquated manufacturing methods.

Keywords: Congo estuary; Birmingham; Liège; ‘trade guns’; trade; cottage industry

This article examines the commerce of firearms in the Congo estuary in the late pre-colonial era. By focusing on the production and circulation of ‘trade guns’—that is, the cheap smoothbore muzzle-loading muskets manufactured in western Europe primarily for the African trade—it makes a general case for the role of African consumer demand in fostering processes of global economic integration in the nineteenth century. More specifically, it shows that lower Congolese demand was largely responsible for the enduring vitality of Liège’s non-mechanized cottage industry and for this Belgian town’s ability to replace Birmingham as the key supplier of arms to west-central Africa. The article, then, points to an often-overlooked aspect of nineteenth-century globalisation: far from invariably promoting innovation in industrialisation, the growing interdependence of different parts of the world could also have the effect of giving a new lease of life to ostensibly antiquated manufacturing methods. The argument is developed in three stages.

First, it is necessary to tease out the reasons why the African communities of the Congo estuary displayed a consistent preference for a technology that European observers regarded as ‘obsolete’ and ‘primitive’,¹ and, by transitivity, as a proof of African inherent backwardness. Building upon existing work on the ‘domestication’ of imported commodities,² and engaging with David

¹Cecil Herslet, *Report on the Arms Industry of Liège: Diplomatic and Consular Reports no. 650* (HMSO, 1906), 20.

²See, for example, Merete Lie and Knut H. Sørensen, eds., *Making Technology Our Own? Domesticating Technology into Everyday Life* (Scandinavian University Press, 1996), and David Howes, ed., *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets,*

Edgerton's call not to underestimate the staying powers of 'old' technologies,³ my analysis shows that the long historical relationship between Africans and firearms is inadequately served by approaches that do not go beyond the service functions of guns and do not foreground the cultural meanings with which imported weapons, and technological objects more generally, were endowed by Africans.⁴

The effort to periodise and, where possible, to quantify the gun trade of the Congo estuary in the nineteenth century takes up the second part of the article, where an examination is offered of the hitherto understudied commercial entanglements of the region and their European protagonists.⁵ While the main concern of Roger Anstey's pioneering book was international diplomacy,⁶ the river trade has been dealt with only in passing by Phyllis Martin and Martin Lynn in their northward-facing studies or by the scores of works centred on Portuguese Angola.⁷ This comparative neglect is difficult to account for, especially when we consider that it was precisely the highly developed commercial economy of the lower river that would turn it into a focus of intense inter-European rivalry towards the end of the century.

Finally, having dealt with the consumers and the importers of trade guns in west-central Africa, I turn my attention to the world of producers and demonstrate that developments along the lower Congo reflected broader dynamics of change in the European gun industry. As is shown in the third part of this article, the crisis of the Birmingham gun sector and the rise of Liège in the closing decades of the nineteenth century unsettled British gun makers,⁸ whose perspectives have influenced recent studies.⁹ Less well appreciated, however, is the extent to which the continuing strength of Liège's craft industry was a function of its ability to provision the west-central African market. This finding speaks to some pressing concerns of global historians.

During the past twenty or so years, a number of authors have reflected on the relationship between sub-Saharan Africa and modern globalisation, of which industrialisation was an integral

Local Realities (Routledge, 1996). For Africa-focused studies, see Jean Allman, ed., *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Indiana University Press, 2004); Dmitri van den Bersselaar, *The King of Drinks: Schnapps Gin from Modernity to Tradition* (Brill, 2007); and Robert Ross, *Things Change: Black Material Culture and the Development of a Consumer Society in South Africa, 1800–2020* (Brill, 2023).

³David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴Recent works informed by this perspective are Giacomo Macola, *The Gun in Central Africa: A History of Technology and Politics* (Ohio University Press, 2016), and Saheed Aderinto, *Guns and Society in Colonial Nigeria: Firearms, Culture, and Public Order* (Indiana University Press, 2018).

⁵While the best extant analysis—Norm Schrag, 'Mboma and the Lower Zaire: A Socioeconomic Study of a Kongo Trading Community, c.1785–1885' (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1985)—remains unpublished, Jelmer Vos has concentrated primarily on the middle decades of the century in "'Without the Slave Trade, No Recruitment': From Slave Trading to 'Migrant Recruitment' in the Lower Congo, 1830–90", in *Trafficking in Slavery's Wake: Law and the Experience of Women and Children in Africa*, eds. Benjamin N. Lawrance and Richard L. Roberts (Ohio University Press, 2012), 45–64. On the Tio/Teke and Bobangi traders of the middle Congo, the indispensable works are still Jan Vansina, *The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo, 1880–1892* (Oxford University Press, 1973), esp. chapters 10–11, and Robert W. Harms, *River of Wealth, River of Sorrow: The Central Zaire Basin in the Era of the Slave and Ivory Trade, 1500–1891* (Yale University Press, 1981).

⁶Roger T. Anstey, *Britain and the Congo in the 19th Century* (Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁷Phyllis M. Martin, *The External Trade of the Loango Coast: The Effects of Changing Commercial Relations on the Vili Kingdom of Loango* (Oxford University Press, 1972), and Martin Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa: The Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). Analyses of the Angolan trade are too numerous to be listed here. Key studies are: Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Mariana P. Candido, *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World: Benguela and Its Hinterland* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Jelmer Vos, *Kongo in the Age of Empire, 1860–1913: The Breakdown of a Moral Order* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).

⁸See, most notably, the *cri du coeur* by gunmakers 'Artifex' and 'Opifex' (C. E. and W. O. Greener), *The Causes of Decay in a British Industry* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907).

⁹Emrys Chew, *Arming the Periphery: The Arms Trade in the Indian Ocean during the Age of Global Empire* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), chapter 2.

part.¹⁰ The path-breaking work was no doubt Joseph E. Inikori's *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England*,¹¹ which made a powerful case for placing international commerce, and specifically the trans-Atlantic slave trade, at the heart of the English industrialisation processes in the long eighteenth century.¹² Inikori's broad perspective permitted him to address both the role of diasporic Africans as coerced producers of raw materials (especially, of course, cotton) for Atlantic commerce and the significance of western Africa and the Americas as overseas markets for English manufactures (especially, of course, cottons).¹³

It must be said, however, that this initial attention to the wide-ranging effects of African consumer demand is less prominent in Inikori's later elaborations, including an important article published in the pages of this journal, where Inikori convincingly presents the Atlantic basin as 'the geographical location of the early development of the modern global economy', but where the contribution of Africans to the process is (less convincingly) limited to their having supplied the bulk of the slave labour employed in 'plantation production of commodities in the Americas in the critical period 1650–1850'.¹⁴

Herein lies the key strength of the work of Jeremy Prestholdt, to whom we owe the most systematic and culturally sensitive attempt to date to foreground the role of African consumer desires in shaping economic developments in distant localities in the nineteenth century. By focusing on the preference of East Africans for unbleached cottons (locally known as *merikani*), Prestholdt has been able to establish that 'as East Africans became more deeply affected by contemporary movements of goods, ideas, and people, they also influenced patterns of global trade and foreign production'.¹⁵ The implication of Prestholdt's argument—as he himself put it in a slightly earlier article—is that, even at the height of imperialism and Europe's overseas projection, 'the shape of world markets has not been determined by Western interests alone' and that even ostensibly peripheral and marginal communities and 'individuals have possessed abilities to affect larger frameworks'.¹⁶

Unlike in Prestholdt's signature examples (Salem, MA, and Bombay), where technological innovation in the form of industrial mechanisation was a conspicuous outcome of the need to accommodate East African demand for specific types of cloth, the story examined in this article is that of the survival of a long-established craft industry past its 'sell-by date'. Nonetheless, it is a story that evokes an African centrality that most existing accounts of the growth of global linkages and interdependence have tended (and still tend) to obscure from view. As in the case of Prestholdt's *merikani*, then, the manufacture and commerce of trade guns in the second half of the nineteenth century remind us that a focus on African consumer demand might be of value in complicating current understandings of the workings not only of specific economic sectors, but of modern globalisation as well.

¹⁰I use the expression 'modern globalisation' in much the same way as Anthony G. Hopkins does in his influential typology: 'Introduction: Globalization—An Agenda for Historians', in *Globalization in World History*, ed. Anthony G. Hopkins (Pimlico, 2002), 1–10.

¹¹Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹²Giorgio Riello's more recent efforts to overcome production-led explanations of the Industrial Revolution are compatible with, and indeed build upon, Inikori's position. See Giorgio Riello, 'Cotton Textiles and the Industrial Revolution in a Global Context', *Past and Present*, no. 255 (2022): 87–139.

¹³Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England*, chapters 8–9.

¹⁴Joseph E. Inikori, 'Africa and the Globalization Process: Western Africa, 1450–1850', *Journal of Global History* 2, no. 1 (2007): 70, 79.

¹⁵Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (University of California Press, 2008), 6.

¹⁶Jeremy Prestholdt, 'On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism', *American Historical Review* 109, no. 3 (2004): 759, 780.

Consumers

Throughout the first eighty years of the nineteenth century, the Congo estuary—that is, the ca. 180-km-long navigable stretch comprised between the mouth of the great river and the beginning of the cataracts at Matadi—remained free of direct European political control, the only assertions of European ‘hard power’ being limited to sporadic anti-slavery and anti-piracy patrols and amphibious operations by the West African Squadron of the British Royal Navy from the early 1840s.¹⁷ This goes some way towards explaining why the exportation of enslaved persons to Brazil and Cuba lasted for as long as it did in the area. Once commercial change did materialise, however, its pace was dizzyingly quick.

In the 1840s, the lower Congo and, especially, the chiefdom of Boma were ‘the principal slave mart[s] on the Western Coast of Africa’. At the time, the estuary was reportedly ‘covered with slave factories’; numbering about thirty, these belonged mainly to Portuguese/Brazilian and Spanish/Cuban illegal traffickers, who ‘detested’ the ‘British flag’ on account of the surveillance exerted by the West African Squadron.¹⁸ Exports of legitimate goods—as opposed to slaves, who had hitherto dominated the trading economy of the lower river, leaving precious little space for other commodities—began to pick up in the mid-1850s, when, following the Portuguese occupation of Ambriz, the Liverpool firms of Thomas Tobin & Son (engaged in the produce trade with West Africa since the British Abolition of the Slave Trade Act of 1807¹⁹) and Hatton & Cookson (founded in 1838²⁰) both settled in Ponta (or Porto) da Lenha, on the north bank of the Congo River, roughly halfway between Boma and the Atlantic coast. In 1856, the value of the palm oil exported from the lower river, where oil palms grew ‘with marvellous exuberance’,²¹ was estimated at £28,000.²²

The palm oil (as well as groundnut) trade might have received a temporary setback in 1857–62, as a result of the so-called French ‘Migration Scheme’, that is, the government-sponsored recruitment of indentured migrant workers (*engagés*) for France’s West Indian possessions.²³ Administered by the Marseille firm of Régis frères, whose agents settled in Boma and Banana (as well as Loango), the migration scheme gave a renewed boost to the slave trade (since most ostensibly free labourers were actually ‘slaves redeemed from African dealers’²⁴) and resulted in

¹⁷Anstey, *Britain and the Congo*, 16–8; François Bontinck, ‘Manuel Vaka and Solongo Piracy in the Lower Zaire Bas-Zaire’, *Ngonge. Carnets de Sciences Humaines* (Kinshasa), no. 33 (1978): 5–17; Schrag, ‘Mboma and the Lower Zaire’, 81. The ethnography of the estuary is complicated. For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to note that, until the late seventeenth century or thereabout, the Kikongo-speaking peoples of the lower Congo were part of, or recognised a link of material subordination to, the Kongo kingdom centred on M’banza-Kongo/São Salvador. Following the latter polity’s partial collapse and contraction, local peoples reorganised themselves into a variety of small formations often anchored on specific river ports (or, in present-day northern Angola, on the kingdom’s former component provinces). The status and power of these chiefdoms, which commonly comprised a hierarchy of both political and trading titles, changed in accordance with the ebbs and flows of international commerce.

¹⁸Jamieson to Nicolls, 25 March 1845, encl. in Hamilton to Canning, 19 April 1845, Foreign Office 84/609, The National Archives of the UK, London (hereafter TNA, FO); Schrag, ‘Mboma and the Lower Zaire’, 81–2.

¹⁹Martin Lynn, ‘Trade and Politics in 19th-century Liverpool: The Tobin and Horsfall Families and Liverpool’s African trade’, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire*, no. 142 (1992): 107–8.

²⁰Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change*, 99.

²¹Prosper P. Augouard, 28 *Années au Congo. Tome Ier* (Société Française d’Imprimerie et de Librairie, 1905), 238. All translations from languages other than English are my own.

²²Gabriel to Malmesbury, 15 April 1859, TNA, FO 84/1075.

²³Ivory exports through the delta only became significant at a later date, from the late 1860s (Robert W. Harms, *Land of Tears: The Exploration and Exploitation of Equatorial Africa* [Basic Books, 2019], 83–5). Until the mid-1880s, however, most ivory from the interior continued to be exported from Angolan ports to the south of the estuary; Tisdell to Bayard, 25 April 1885, and Tisdell to Bayard, 29 June 1885, both in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States ... with the Annual Message of the President, December 8, 1885* (Department of State, 2018), 296, 307–8; Taunt to Whitney, 26 February 1886, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/u/us-navy-congo-river-expedition-1885.html#rep> (last accessed on 1 April 2024).

²⁴Vos, ‘Without the Slave Trade, No Recruitment’, 49.

the exportation of more than 17,000 'émigrés' from the region. To this extent, Richard F. Burton, the explorer turned consul who visited the Congo estuary and the cataracts district in 1863, was certainly correct in describing the 'engagé' system as the 'lineal descendant' of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.²⁵

From the early 1860s, however, the estuary's produce trade developed fast, not least thanks to the efforts of the Dutch firm of Kerdijk & Pincoffs (Afrikaansche Handelsvereniging [AHV] in 1866–79). The success of the Rotterdam company—in 1863, Elkman, Kerdijk & Pincoffs's manager in Banana, the Congolese headquarters of the firm, was reported to be shipping about '800 Tons of Palm oil annually' to the Netherlands²⁶—was largely the result of the policy of employing 'a great many of the old Portuguese Slave Dealers as brokers to purchase Oil'.²⁷ It brought other firms to the area, especially Lasnier, Daumas, Lartigue & C^{ie}, founded in Le Havre in 1866 by former employees of Régis. Lasnier, Daumas, Lartigue & C^{ie} (Daumas, Béraud et C^{ie} from 1879) joined Hatton & Cookson, the only British trading house left in the estuary after the withdrawal of Tobin & Son from the lower river in 1862–63.

Already in late 1866, Commander Peile, of HMS *Espoir*, stated that he 'was astonished at the extensive Trade carried on at Embomma [Boma] in Palm Oil, Palm Kernels and Ground Nuts. He was informed, and believes it to be the case, that Legal trade has altogether superseded Slave Trade at that place.'²⁸ Ten years later—as Alexandre Delcommune, then a young Belgian employee of Lasnier, Daumas, Lartigue & C^{ie}, would reminisce—the trade out of Boma 'was very considerable; for years, thousands of tonnes of palm kernels, groundnuts, sesame and palm oil left the Congo each year to be sold on European markets. . . . On several occasions, I myself bought more than 25 tonnes of palm kernels, groundnuts and palm oil in one day.'²⁹ By that time, the three leading northern European trading houses—the AHV; Lasnier, Daumas, Lartigue & C^{ie}; and Hatton & Cookson—their Portuguese and Spanish agents, as well as a handful of still-independent Portuguese firms, had begun greatly to expand the scale of their operations. According to Norm Schrag's calculations, by 1885, there were probably more than 160 active trading establishments (or 'factories'), and between 225 and 250 foreign traders, in the estuary.³⁰ Altogether, then, thanks to its natural resources and the repurposing of old slave circuits, the lower Congo adjusted easily to the end of the export slave trade, and the last two decades of the pre-colonial era were a period of relative prosperity for estuary communities, who—as Henry M. Stanley remarked in 1879—benefited from 'the fierce and sharp competition which exist[ed] between the traders to secure the largest trade'.³¹

Throughout this period of intense commercial interaction with the outside world, a great variety of commodities were imported into the estuary, as the Luanda-based British consul, Hopkins, reported in 1874.

[C]otton piece goods, such as greys, woven and printed cottons, silks, woollen goods, Malay handkerchiefs, blankets, army, livery, and police coats, woollen and cotton caps, flint muskets, powder, matchets, knives, daggers, brass rods and chains, padlocks, small metal

²⁵Richard F. Burton, *Two Trips to Gorilla Land and the Cataracts of the Congo*, vol. 2 (Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1876), 332.

²⁶Wilmot to Walker, 3 October 1863, encl. in Romaine to Layard, 24 November 1863, TNA, FO 84/1209.

²⁷Hornby to Secretary of the Admiralty, 15 May 1866, encl. in Romaine to Hammond, 11 July 1866, TNA, FO 84/1268.

²⁸Cited in Hornby to Secretary of the Admiralty, 23 December 1866, encl. in Admiralty to FO, 26 January 1867, TNA, FO 84/1281.

²⁹Alexandre Delcommune, *Vingt années de vie africaine*, vol. 1 (Vve Ferdinand Larcier, 1922), 45. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for providing me with the correct translation of 'coconotes', the word employed by Delcommune for 'palm kernels'.

³⁰Schrag, 'Mboma and the Lower Zaire', 192.

³¹Henry M. Stanley, *The Congo and the Founding of Its Free State: A Story of Work and Exploration*, vol. 1 (Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1885), 100.

bells, beads, salt, rum, gin, and liqueurs; and with these goods are purchased palm oil, palm kernels, pea nuts, sesame seed, and rubber.³²

Insofar as firearms were concerned, however, lower Congo consumers displayed a consistent preference for flintlock muzzle-loading muskets, the so-called ‘trade’ or ‘African’ (or, in earlier days, ‘slave’) guns. Writing in the mid-1860s, John D. Goodman, the chairman of the newly formed Birmingham Small Arms Company, stated that while ‘the taste of the African [was] fickle in the matter of beads’, it was not ‘so with guns, wherein he rejects all improvements, and rigidly adheres to the old flint musket, with its bright barrel, which his father and his grandfather used before him’.³³ While Goodman’s assertion of a kind of inherent African conservatism is open to doubt, he was certainly correct about the dominance of flintlocks on the west-central African market—as is borne out by additional evidence from the same decade. In 1867, for instance, the BaSolongo of the southern bank of the estuary ‘possess[ed] no arms but trade guns’;³⁴ two years later, flintlocks were reported to be the only marketable models of firearms in Ambrizete, to the south of the estuary.³⁵ The situation remained unchanged during the following fifteen or so years: in 1878 Boma, if we are to believe Delcommune, ‘all the natives . . . were . . . armed with flint guns’.³⁶ Four years later, the followers of Ngaliema, the Teke chief of Kintamo, on the southern shore of Stanley (Malebo) Pool, had invested some at least of the proceeds of their growing ivory trade in flintlocks, of which they possessed more than 1,000.³⁷

This demonstrable predilection for ‘guns of the cheapest description’, made using ‘a low quality of iron’ for the barrels and wood liable ‘to expand and shrink’ for the stocks, requires clarification.³⁸ Was the weight of tradition (as suggested by Goodman) a truly significant factor? The preference for flintlocks over percussion locks is easy to explain and must be attributed to the frequent scarcity of the caps required to fire the latter. Flintstones, conversely, were everywhere to be found.³⁹ Being typically made from ‘soft’ wrought iron (as opposed to ‘hard’ steel), smoothbore muzzle-loaders were a more accessible (as well as cheaper) technology than rifles.⁴⁰ Although direct evidence pertaining to the lower Congo is thin on the ground, it would be surprising if local craftsmen had not drawn on existing iron-working skills to prolong the lifespan of a damaged weapon and/or to keep a faulty one in working order. This, certainly, was a common occurrence across the broader region, for instance among the Chokwe, one of whose ironsmiths was put to the test by the Hungarian trader László Magyar in the 1850s. The artisan in question was given

³²Report by Consul Hopkins on the Trade, Commerce, Navigation &c., of the Districts comprised within the Northern limits of Angola and Black Point . . . , 17 October 1874, in *Reports from Her Majesty’s Consuls on the Manufactures, Commerce, &c. . . . Part I* (Harrison and Sons, 1875), 243.

³³John D. Goodman, ‘The Birmingham Gun Trade’, in Samuel Timmins, ed., *The Resources, Products, and Industrial History of Birmingham* (Robert Hardwicke, 1866), 420. Virtually identical remarks are to be found in Anon., ‘La fabrication des armes à Silex’, *L’Armurerie Liégeoise* (1 December 1899), 251.

³⁴Grubbe to Secretary of the Admiralty, 25 April 1867, encl. in Secretary of the Admiralty to FO, 3 May 1867, TNA, FO 84/1281.

³⁵Charles Jeannest, *Quatre années au Congo* (G. Charpentier et C^{ie}, 1883), 25.

³⁶Delcommune, *Vingt années de vie africaine*, 95.

³⁷Camille Coquilhat, *Sur le Haut-Congo* (J. Lebègue et C^{ie}, 1888), 59; Harms, *Land of Tears*, 150–1.

³⁸Goodman, ‘The Birmingham Gun Trade’, 388–90. At least in England, the passing of the Gun Barrel Proof Act of 1813 notwithstanding, trade guns were ‘rarely if ever proved’ in the early decades of the century (De Witt Bailey and Douglas A. Nie, *English Gunmakers: The Birmingham and Provincial Gun Trade in the 18th and 19th Century* [Arco Publishing Company, 1978], 16). Later on in the century, proofing became more common, though the tests carried out at the Birmingham proof house were still comparatively ‘poor’ (‘Artifex’ and ‘Opifex’, *The Causes of Decay*, 128). The situation was much the same in newly independent Belgium, where the proofing of ‘armes de traite’ was only made compulsory in 1846; Jos Fraikin, *L’industrie armuriers liégeoise et le Banc d’épreuves des armes à feu de Liège* (H. Vaillant-Carmanne, 1940), 138–9, 147.

³⁹Jeannest, *Quatre années au Congo*, 25, and Alphonse-Jules Wauters, *Le Congo au point de vue économique* (Institut National de Géographie, 1885), 174.

⁴⁰William K. Storey, *Guns, Race and Power in Colonial South Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 140.

a damaged musket without lock for repair, and as a sample a French flintlock on whose cover the word 'Laport' was engraved. After some days the blacksmith returned the musket in working order. He had not only manufactured the lock well and neatly, but also faithfully engraved the word 'Laport' on the cover, with the letters being only somewhat less subtle.⁴¹

In terms of functional usage, flintlocks, given their limited penetrative power, are unlikely ever to have proved very helpful in big-game hunting, which in the Congo estuary meant primarily hippos, who, 'with their thick hides, ... cared nothing for native flint-lock guns, and knew nothing of more serious weapons'.⁴² Their military applications, however, were not to be looked down upon, especially because the dense mangrove swamps and natural canals of this 'vegetable Venice'⁴³ enabled gunmen familiar with the terrain to converge on the enemy without being detected. Thus, in 1867, when the Royal Navy contemplated a large-scale punitive expedition against a BaSolongo group, who had burnt down and plundered a Hatton & Cookson factory in Santo Antonio late in 1866, both Captain Grubbe and Captain Ruxton, officers of the West African Squadron, cautioned against underestimating the effects of trade guns in narrow, mangrove-flanked brooks. There, such muskets, their long loading time and short range notwithstanding, could be 'destructive to the crew of boats who cannot see their enemies'.⁴⁴

At the time, the prospective operation did not materialise. The following year, however, three British tenders went up Malela Creek (not far from Ponta da Lenha) to punish the pirates who had seized 'a Launch with a Cargo of gunpowder' belonging to the AHV. The land party encountered no resistance as it set the guilty village on fire and destroyed both its crops and canoes. As Commander Johnstone's boats began their return journey, however, they came under sustained fire. Attempts to respond proved fruitless, since 'no one was visible, and the bush too thick to allow of landing'. Six men experienced 'gunshot wounds produced by iron slugs of various sizes'.⁴⁵ The casualties suffered by the British on this occasion illustrate two other key advantages of heavy-calibre, smoothbore muzzle-loaders. Not only were they well suited to the low-quality, coarse trade gunpowder imported into west-central Africa by European firms,⁴⁶ but they could also be used with almost any projectile: iron slugs, of course, but also 'bits of copper ingots' and even 'stones' (*pierres*).⁴⁷

As I have argued elsewhere,⁴⁸ imported firearms—like other externally introduced technologies and commodities—were also endowed with less predictable symbolic attributes that spoke to the receiving communities' socio-cultural norms and structures. The history of firearms in Africa, that is, can hardly be reduced to their utilitarian value. When examined from this perspective, the popularity of trade guns in the Congo estuary might be better grasped. Among Kikongo-speakers

⁴¹Cited in Achim von Oppen, *Terms of Trade and Terms of Trust: The History and Contexts of Pre-Colonial Market Production around the Upper Zambezi and Kasai* (LIT Verlag, n.d.), 173.

⁴²W. Holman Bentley, *Pioneering on the Congo*, vol. 1 (The Religious Tract Society, 1900), 389. See also Wauters, *Le Congo*, 45.

⁴³The expression comes from Harry H. Johnston, *The River Congo from Its Mouth to Bolobo* (Sampson, Low, Marston & Company, 1895), 27.

⁴⁴Ruxton to Secretary to the Admiralty, 23 April 1867, encl. in Secretary of the Admiralty to FO, 3 May 1867, TNA, FO 84/1281.

⁴⁵Johnstone to Dowell, 9 December 1868 and Assistant Surgeon to Johnstone, 9 December 1868, both encl. in Secretary of the Admiralty to Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 31 March 1869, TNA, FO 84/1310; Bontinck, 'Manuel Vaka'.

⁴⁶'The bigger the calibre, the less the fouling after firing'; author's telephone interview with Paul Dubrunfaut, 29 January 2024. See also Paul Dubrunfaut, 'Armes à feu de traite en Afrique à la veille de la colonisation européenne', *Militaria Belgica* (1986), 28.

⁴⁷Bentley, *Pioneering on the Congo*, 429; Jeannest, *Quatre années au Congo*, 112. The use of 'small pebbles and baked clay balls instead of bullets' was also mentioned by US agent Tisdell in 1885 (Tisdell to Bayard, 29 June 1885, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 303). And see also Henry M. Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent*, vol. 2 (Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1878), 436.

⁴⁸Macola, *The Gun in Central Africa*.

noise was understood to have the power both to drive away harmful spirits and to facilitate entry into the spirit world⁴⁹—hence the role of gun firing, not only ‘as a sign of rejoicing’ in the context of celebratory events (such as weddings),⁵⁰ but also, and especially, during funerals, of which it became a key ingredient over the course of the nineteenth century or earlier. According to the trader Charles Jeannest, who worked for Lasnier, Daumas, Lartigue & C^{ie} in 1869–73, there could be no ‘good burial without making a racket’.⁵¹ At least in northern Angola, the bang produced by the heavy charges that large-calibre, smoothbore muzzle-loaders could withstand was magnified by loading them ‘with a tamping of “fuba”, or fine mandioca-meal, instead of other wadding, and they then give a terrific report when fired off, and not unfrequently burst’.⁵² To account for the great quantities of gunpowder kept by the AHV in Banana in 1879, Stanley went so far as to suggest the existence of a kind of fixed chart: ‘every child that dies receives a salute of honour of five shots, while a woman has ten, and a man twenty: for a chief ten or twelve barrels might not suffice’.⁵³ Ten years later, it was still unimaginable that a celebration or funeral would take place on the lower Congo without ‘expressing emotion by firing loose powder [i.e., blanks]’.⁵⁴

Trade guns were also appropriated as symbols of power and signs of status and wealth, which explains why political and economic authorities in the Congo estuary invariably made it a point of surrounding themselves with as many gunmen as possible.⁵⁵ When firearms were so deployed, their practical efficacy ceased to be a determining factor, as noted in 1882 by Fr Prosper Augouard, whose host, ‘king Koukoulou’ of the BaSolongo, moved about with ‘a large escort armed with guns. Granted, some of these guns had no hammer; but they still made up the numbers.’⁵⁶ The association between wealth and firearms may have given rise to the practice of utilising trade muskets as units of account for ivory transactions. This instance of user re-innovation—in which guns were employed to measure the value of ivory without being ‘necessarily exchanged. If the agreed-upon price for a certain tusk was five guns, for example, the seller would then pick out five guns’ worth of cloth, gunpowder, and other items’⁵⁷—is mentioned in several nineteenth-century sources and bears witness to the local popularity and diffusion of trade guns at the time.⁵⁸ While obviously an exaggeration, there was thus some truth to US envoy W. P. Tisdell’s remark that, among the ‘tribes’ of the Congo valley, the gun was used ‘for everything but for war purposes or the killing of game’.⁵⁹

Importers

The functional and symbolic applications discussed in the previous section explain why the lower Congo’s demand for trade guns remained high and consistent throughout the nineteenth century. The world of importers, conversely, experienced more change, and the evidence presented in this section suggests that the Congo estuary’s gun trade in the late pre-colonial period can be disaggregated into three consecutive phases.

⁴⁹John H. Weeks, ‘Notes on Some Customs of the Lower Congo People’, *Folklore* 19, no. 4 (1908): 430; ‘Notes on Some Customs of the Lower Congo People (Continued)’, *Folklore* 20, no. 1 (1909): 60.

⁵⁰Jeannest, *Quatre années au Congo*, 134; cf. also Delcommune, *Vingt années de vie africaine*, 78.

⁵¹Jeannest, *Quatre années au Congo*, 81.

⁵²Joachim J. Monteiro, *The River Congo*, vol. 1 (Macmillan & Co., 1875), 142.

⁵³Stanley, *The Congo*, 75. Cf. also Jeannest, *Quatre années au Congo*, 129.

⁵⁴Schalwijk and De Bloeme to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 18 January 1889, Nationaal Archief, The Hague, NAHV, 2.18.10.09, 364.

⁵⁵See, for example Delcommune, *Vingt années de vie africaine*, 52, 112–13, 120, and Stanley, *The Congo*, 129–30.

⁵⁶Augouard, *28 Années au Congo*, 270.

⁵⁷Harms, *Land of Tears*, 85–6.

⁵⁸See, for example Monteiro, *The River Congo*, 110–11, and Jeannest, *Quatre années au Congo*, 59–60.

⁵⁹Tisdell to Bayard, 29 June 1885, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 303.

Even though some Portuguese-made guns (including the so-called *lazarinos* or *lazarinas*, the famous flintlocks churned out by the workshop of Lázaro Lazarino of Braga⁶⁰) must have found their way to the lower Congo in the early years of century, throughout the decades of the illegal slave trade and up to the mid-1860s, the bulk of the muskets bartered in the estuary and surrounding areas no doubt originated in what was then ‘the Small Arms arsenal of the world’,⁶¹ Birmingham, which had had a very substantial gun trade with West Africa since the eighteenth century.⁶² Birmingham trade guns were imported into the lower Congo—often via Brazil—both by Brazilian and Portuguese slave dealers and by the aforementioned Liverpool trading houses, which were seeking to expand the produce trade on the west-central African coast.⁶³ Writing in the mid-1860s, Goodman estimated Birmingham’s annual gun exports ‘to the West Coast of Africa’ at ‘probably 100,000 to 150,000’.⁶⁴ We, of course, do not know precisely how many of these ‘African guns’ ended up in the Congo estuary, but there is at least one indirect indication that their number was not insignificant. In the summer of 1862, the Governor General of Angola, whose commitment to preventing the departure of slave ships from Luanda to the mouth of the Congo was being called into question by Commissioner Edmund Gabriel, polemically suggested that the best possible way of reducing slave sales on the lower river was to prohibit the trade in ‘powder and arms, now almost exclusively furnished by English commerce’. As he explained to Foreign Secretary Russel, Gabriel had snubbed the Governor’s proposition both because he thought its utility was doubtful and because he knew that its ‘pernicious effects . . . on British commerce in this quarter might be extensively felt’.⁶⁵

A number of French muskets were certainly introduced into the estuary at the time of the ‘Migration Scheme’, when Régis agents in Boma were ‘paying as much as 5*l.* or 6*l.* sterling each for [slaves] in well-assorted goods’.⁶⁶ Yet it was an ‘astonishingly bold move’⁶⁷ by Lasnier, Daumas, Lartigue & C^{ie} that brought the local dominance of English trade guns to an end in the late 1860s. In 1868, the Havre-based company purchased ‘around six hundred thousand old French army flintlocks still in the possession of the State’.⁶⁸ Over the course of the next one or two years, almost half of the 600,000 muskets were sent to west and west-central Africa—so much so that when, upon the outbreak of war with Prussia in the summer of 1870, the French government requested that the guns be returned, only 330,000 were left in France.⁶⁹ This unprecedented availability of former military guns sparked the ‘envy’ of ‘other companies’, which did not ‘stock that item’.⁷⁰ It also did wonders for the local reputation of Lasnier, Daumas, Lartigue & C^{ie}, which became ‘renowned for the excellence of its firearms’,⁷¹ and probably resulted in qualitative improvement.

⁶⁰Claude Gaier, ed., *Prestige de l’armurerie portugaise. La part de Liège* (Ville de Liège—Echevinat de la Culture, des Musées et du Tourisme, 1991), 15.

⁶¹Clive Harris, *The History of the Birmingham Gun-Barrel Proof House* (The Guardians of the Birmingham Proof House, 1946), 41.

⁶²Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England*, 461.

⁶³Forbes to Fanshawe, 6 April 1850, encl. in Fanshawe to Secretary to the Admiralty, 6 May 1850, TNA, FO 84/826.

⁶⁴Goodman, ‘The Birmingham Gun Trade’, 419.

⁶⁵Silva Franco to Gabriel, 28 August 1862, encl. in Gabriel to Russell, 17 September 1862, in *Correspondence with the British Commissioners . . . Relating to the Slave Trade from January 1 to December 31, 1862* (Harrison and Sons, 1863), 95–7.

⁶⁶Gabriel to Earl of Malmesbury, 15 April 1859, TNA, FO 84/1075. In 1863, Burton reported the presence of French (as well as American) guns in Noki-Matadi; Burton, *Two Trips to Gorilla Land*, 142.

⁶⁷Jean-Claude Nardin, ‘Notes sur le commerce français des armes à feu en Afrique occidentale au XIX^e siècle, avant l’essor impérialiste’, in *Perspectives nouvelles sur le passé de l’Afrique Noire et de Madagascar. Mélanges offerts à Hubert Deschamps* (Publications de la Sorbonne, 1974), 258.

⁶⁸Cited in *ibid.*, 259. Cf. also Bernard Schnapper, *La politique et le commerce français dans le golfe de Guinée de 1838 à 1871* (Mouton & Co, 1961), 117. According to the trader Jeannest (*Quatre années au Congo*, 25), a few percussion locks converted into flintlocks were also to be found among the 600,000 guns.

⁶⁹Nardin, ‘Notes sur le commerce français’, 260.

⁷⁰Masson to Commandant en chef de la Division navale de l’Atlantique du Sud, 30 July 1875, Archives Nationales, Site de Paris, MAR/3J/257.

⁷¹Delcommune, *Vingt années de vie africaine*, 37.

At least according to the missionary W. Holman Bentley, in the early 1860s, the people of São Salvador ‘did not trust the guns and powder of the quality then sold, they missed fire too often’. By the end of the following decade, however, ‘bows and arrows and spears had entirely disappeared, except as toys or for rat hunts, and guns were common and cheap’.⁷²

The French trading house, however, could not repeat its exploit a few years later: when, in the mid-1870s, the French government put on the market ‘some substantial quantities’ of discarded percussion-lock muskets, these were quickly snapped up by *Liégeois* traders-contractors (*fabricants*), who promptly had them converted into flintlocks—an instance of technological ‘regression’ that was clearly dictated by the preferences of African consumers, who ‘only wanted this mechanism’.⁷³ If we are to believe the merchant Marius Daumas, a key problem that explains the brevity of French hegemony over the lower Congo’s gun trade was the absence of national steamship services and the high transport costs that this deficiency entailed. Until the early 1880s, the mail steamers calling regularly at the Congo mouth were all British;⁷⁴ and while both the (N) AHV and Hatton & Cookson had invested in company steamships, Daumas, Béraud et Cie continued to rely on ‘two good sailing ships’ to serve the route to western Europe.⁷⁵

Liège’s readiness to expand its ‘age-old’⁷⁶ reconditioning business was one of the reasons why, after the French interlude, it was Belgian, rather than English, contractors and manufacturers who proved able to intercept the estuary’s continuing demand for flintlocks. The others were the cheapness of Belgian arms and the adaptability and astuteness of the country’s gun workers, who—as Birmingham producers were wont to lament—had no compunction about making extensive use of English-made and -proofed barrels. This enabled Belgian *fabricants* to pass the firearms assembled in Liège for Birmingham guns, whose proof mark was reportedly ‘regarded as a certificate of good quality’ by African consumers long accustomed with it.⁷⁷ Open counterfeiting took place as well, and it was not limited to English proof and trade marks.⁷⁸ According to the explorer Serpa Pinto, for instance, the *lazarinos* that circulated in the interior of Angola in the late 1870s were all ‘manufactured in Belgium’, but still bore the ‘name of Lazaro—*lazarino*, a native of Braga— ... unblushingly engraved on the barrels of the pieces manufactured ... for the blacks—and which are but a clumsy imitation of the perfect weapon turned out by the celebrated Portuguese gunsmith’.⁷⁹

The Société commerciale belge Gillis et Cie, a Belgian trading company associated with Stanley’s ongoing state-building activities on the lower Congo, made its appearance on the estuary in the early 1880s, establishing bases ‘brimming with Belgian-made goods’ both in Boma and Noki.⁸⁰ By then, however, all the large trading firms active on the lower river were expanding the number of their factories and had begun to deal extensively in Liège-produced or -refitted guns.⁸¹ The most representative case is that of the Nieuwe Afrikaansche Handels Vennootschap (NAHV), which had replaced the AHV following the latter’s famous bankruptcy in 1879.⁸² All the sources agree that, vis-à-vis its local rivals, the new Dutch company was a true giant: endowed with a ‘capital of

⁷²Bentley, *Pioneering on the Congo*, 143.

⁷³Marius Daumas, *Exposé sur le présent et l’avenir de l’Afrique centrale* (Imprimerie Alcan-Lévy, 1879), 17.

⁷⁴Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change*, 107–9.

⁷⁵F. A. Pinto, ‘Missão ao Zaire’, in F. A. Pinto, *Angola e Congo. Conferencias por F.A. Pinto* (Livreria Ferreira, 1888), 396. See also Stanley, *The Congo*, 91–2.

⁷⁶Claude Gaier, *Quatre siècles d’armurerie liégeoise*. 3rd edn. (Eugène Wahle, 1985), 189.

⁷⁷‘Artifex’ and ‘Opifex’, *The Causes of Decay*, 130.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 123; Goodman, ‘The Birmingham Gun Trade’, 427.

⁷⁹Alexandro A. da Rocha de Serpa Pinto, *How I Crossed Africa*, vol. 1 (Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1881), 178–9. See also Marianne L. Wiesebron, ‘Um século de comércio de armas da Bélgica para o Brasil: 1830–1930’, *Ciência & Trópico* (Recife) 22, no. 1 (1994): 129.

⁸⁰M. Coosemans, ‘Gillis (Adolphe)’, in *Biographie Coloniale Belge*, vol. 1 (Librairie Falk Fils, 1948), cols 407–8.

⁸¹Schrag, ‘Mboma and the Lower Zaire’, 192–3 and appendix 7.

⁸²For more detail, see Henk L. Wesseling, ‘The Netherlands and the Partition of Africa’, *Journal of African History* 22, no. 4 (1981): 500.

£200,000', it employed between 50 and 60 'white agents' (mainly Dutch and Portuguese) in its Banana headquarters and plenty more in its factories dotted along the lower Congo and adjoining sections of the Atlantic coastline.⁸³ It had its own fleet of ocean-worthy steamers and also made use of additional freight space on British and German steamships.⁸⁴ In 1886, Giacomo Bove, a visiting Italian explorer, was told that the NAHV imported 'at least 25,000 guns per year' (as well as 'some hundred thousand casks of gin') through Banana.⁸⁵ The NAHV's own figures are similar and give a yearly average of ca. 24,000 for the 1884–88 period. Most of these were discarded French percussion guns which had been converted into flintlocks at Liège.⁸⁶ Since French and probably even English trading firms sold weapons of the same provenance on the lower river,⁸⁷ Belgian geographer Alphonse-Jules Wauters cannot have been wide off the mark when he remarked that, in the mid-1880s, Liège enjoyed a 'monopoly, as it were, over the supply of guns' to the Congo.⁸⁸

Producers

The changes described in the previous section reflect—and should be understood as local manifestations of—broader trends in the international gun sector. There are, indeed, more general indications of the rise of Liège as a gun manufacturing centre for the African and other trades from the mid-1870s and of the coeval, and related, decline of Birmingham. Before presenting this evidence, however, it might be helpful briefly to survey the development, international connections, and internal organisation of the two towns' trade gun industries.

As mentioned earlier, Birmingham's trade gun exports to West Africa had begun to grow significantly in the eighteenth century, when both English and continental European slave traders contributed to entrench the popularity of Birmingham-made muskets on the Atlantic coast of Africa.⁸⁹ Even though Priya Satia has argued that state purchases of military weapons, or parts thereof, were more profitable to Birmingham gun-contractors than private trade and therefore played a more important role in precipitating economic and industrial change in the English Midlands,⁹⁰ with 'something between 200,000 and 150,000 guns [being] unloaded yearly on the African coast in the second half of the eighteenth century by English merchants',⁹¹ the significance of trade guns can hardly be overestimated. At least in the period 1796 to 1805, Atlantic Africa absorbed almost half (44%) of English gun exports.⁹² In previous decades, moreover, Birmingham trade guns had also made some inroads into a number of other markets, especially the North American one. Increase in exports drove the overall growth of the sector: in the late eighteenth century, the making of small arms in Birmingham already employed between 4,000 and 5,000

⁸³Bentley, *Pioneering on the Congo*, 69–71. There are several admiring descriptions of the (N)AHV's settlement in Banana in the late 1870s and early 1880s. See, for instance, Stanley, *The Congo*, 72–4, and Coquilhat, *Sur le Haut-Congo*, 30.

⁸⁴Stanley, *The Congo*, 91; Pinto, 'Missão ao Zaire', 385. According to Pinto, in ca. 1880, the NAHV paid 'its shareholders a dividend of between 15 and 18 percent' (*Ibid.*, p. 389).

⁸⁵Giacomo Bove, 'Relazione intorno al Congo', 22 January 1887, encl. in Robilant to Bove, 18 February 1887, Archivio storico-diplomatico del Ministero degli affari esteri, Rome, Ministero Africa Italiana, vol. 1, Pos. 100/1.

⁸⁶Schalwijk and De Bloeme to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 18 January 1889; Vos, *Kongo in the Age of Empire*, 169, n. 61. This and other evidence suggest the need to revise—or, at any rate, restrict to specific years—Anstey's old conclusion that 'most of the exports of the Dutch company', guns included, 'were British goods' (Anstey, *Britain and the Congo*, 31).

⁸⁷Daumas, *Exposé*, 17, 23. Besides Daumas, Béraud et C^{ie} and Hatton & Cookson, a late northern European arrival on the scene was the Congo and Central Africa Company (taken over by the British Congo Company in 1887).

⁸⁸Wauters, *Le Congo*, 173.

⁸⁹Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England*, 461.

⁹⁰Priya Satia, *Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution* (Penguin Press, 2018). Cf. also 'Roundtable Review Discussion', *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 3 (2019): 455–69.

⁹¹Joseph E. Inikori, 'The Import of Firearms into West Africa 1750–1807: A Quantitative Analysis', *Journal of African History* 18, no. 3 (1977): 348.

⁹²Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England*, 460.

people, who, according to John Whately, one of the town's most important gun manufacturers, 'in time of peace, [were] almost entirely supported by the African trade'.⁹³

The manufacture of the first *Liégeois* '*armes de traite*' (also known as '*fusils pour les sauvages*') dated probably to the end of the seventeenth century, when some of their number found their way to the Native American Indians of present-day New York State.⁹⁴ Their quantities and variety grew over the course of the eighteenth century, when Belgian trade guns—whose design was, as a rule, inspired by that of pre-existing muskets, such as, for instance, the British infantry firearm, the 'Brown Bess'—were exported to the Mediterranean, the Americas, and the slave trading areas of West Africa mainly via Dutch, French, and Portuguese ports.⁹⁵ At the end of the century, the total sector workforce in Liège was estimated at 2,000–2,500,⁹⁶ still only half that of Birmingham's. The real boom dated to the following century, as attested by the fact that the '*siècle d'or*' of Belgian gun making witnessed a 'spectacular' increase in the number of Liège-based *fabricants* (from 36 in 1816 to 174 in 1884), the most successful of whom were—just like in Birmingham—admitted into the ranks of the town's wealthy bourgeoisie.⁹⁷

Throughout the nineteenth century, notwithstanding the arrival in Europe of the mechanised 'American System' from the late 1850s,⁹⁸ trade guns continued to be entirely or predominantly handmade. Describing the organisation of the business in Birmingham in the early 1860s, Goodman stressed its highly 'subdivided' and specialised character. The 'chief branches' were 'stock, barrel, lock, furniture, and oddwork making', the various components being produced by distinct tradesmen and then 'collected by the manufacturer, known as gunmaker'.⁹⁹ Although this 'system [made] it extremely difficult to obtain a correct estimate of the number of workmen employed in the trade', Goodman put it at 7,340, subdivided into 3,420 'material makers' (whose ranks included, for example, 700 'barrel welders' and 1,200 'lock forgers') and 3,920 'setters-up' (among whom were 1,000 'stockers', 1,000 'screwers', etc.). And to these one needed to add 'a considerable number' of underage boys 'employed mainly in carrying the work from one to another, as it passes through his several stages'.¹⁰⁰

Extreme task specialisation and the smallness of independent productive units had also characterised the gun making sector in Liège from the outset. This organisation of labour would prove long-lasting and was, indeed, still predominant in as late as 1906, as British Consul Hertslet reported.

The manufacturer buys the barrels, which have been tested in their roughly-made state, from the piece-workers who makes them, and then hands them over to the fitter (also frequently a piece-worker) who welds the single barrels together. The barrels are then returned to the manufacturer, and passed on by him to the breech-fitter, who fits the breeches and barrels together; the breech-piece, manufactured by machinery, is furnished to the breech-fitter, who is required to properly fashion it before fitting it to the barrels. The pieces, mechanically stamped out, which form the lock, are finished and put together by the lock-maker. The lock is then attached to the barrels by another workman, described at Liège as the '*Systèmeur*', and by yet another workman is fitted with its stock. When all the various parts are in order and fitted together the guns are submitted to the finisher . . . , who sees that they are properly

⁹³Cited in *ibid.*, 458.

⁹⁴Gaier, *Quatre siècles d'armurerie liégeoise*, 55.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 57, 58, 99.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 68.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 127, 139; Satia, *Empire of Guns*, 98, 109.

⁹⁸Russell I. Fries, 'British Response to the American System: The Case of the Small-Arms Industry after 1850', *Technology and Culture* 16, no. 3 (1975): 377–403.

⁹⁹Goodman, 'The Birmingham Gun Trade', 388, 391.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 392–3.

adjusted. The guns are then submitted to the processes of nickeling, polishing, and engraving, &c¹⁰¹

Despite their similarities, the Birmingham and Liège gun industries were set apart by two main factors. Firstly, Belgian workers were paid significantly less than their British counterparts. In the late 1850s, for instance, while ‘the weekly wages of Birmingham gunmakers, outworkers, and boy-assistants ranged from 30 shillings to £6, 15 to 25 shillings, and 5 to 10 shillings respectively, Liège gunmakers were paid the equivalent of just 12 to 17 shillings’.¹⁰² This wage differential meant that Liège-made weapons could be sold more cheaply than Birmingham ones. And this, in turn, as Emrys Chews explains, enabled ‘Liège to capture a larger share of the market at opportune moments, beginning with the cheaper end of the small arms trade’.¹⁰³ The second difference was that while in Birmingham the business was workshop-based, homeworking remained the chief form of labour in Liège.¹⁰⁴ Frequently ‘aided by members of their families’, including women and children employed as porters or in other auxiliary roles, cottage workers were ‘grouped, in accordance with their particular branch of the trade, in various quarters of Liège and in the neighbouring suburbs’.¹⁰⁵

Figures from the two towns’ proof houses offer a rough illustration of the state of the industries at the height of the lower Congo’s gun trade. The total number of gun barrels marked or punched (*poinçonné*) at the Liège proof house rose from 7 million in the 1860s to almost 10 million in the 1880s.¹⁰⁶ In the terminology of the business, trade guns (as well as some other single-shot weapons) fell into two categories: ‘*fusils à un coup*’ and ‘*fusils de bord*’.¹⁰⁷ In 1860, the Liège proof house tested 192,333 barrels destined to be assembled into these two types of guns. The figure then grew to 226,980, in 1870, 248,582, in 1880, and 372,581, in 1889—the yearly average for the period 1870–79 being 225,144 and almost 300,000 (296,688) for the subsequent decade, that is, an increase of more than 30%.¹⁰⁸ Assuming that, at least in the 1880s, trade guns represented approximately one-half of the aggregate number of *fusils à un coup* and *fusils de bord*, an intelligent guess would be that, at the time, one in six or seven of the barrels proofed in Liège belonged to Africa- or Latin America-bound muskets.

Evidence from the Birmingham proof house reveals an opposite picture, as the total number of tests decreased from close to 7 million in the 1870s (6,674,629) to about 6 million in the 1880s (5,906,088) and to less than 4 million in the 1890s (3,920,466).¹⁰⁹ But the best indication of the contraction of the African gun trade out of Birmingham is that, as the century wore on, the number of Birmingham-made and -proofed barrels absorbed by *Liégeois* contractors continued to

¹⁰¹Herslet, *Report on the Arms Industry of Liège*, 7–8. For more detail, see Maurice Ansiaux, ‘L’industrie armurière liégeoise’, in *Les industries à domicile en Belgique. Volume I* (J. Lebègue et C^{ie}, 1899), 67–72.

¹⁰²Chew, *Arming the Periphery*, 86.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴Maurice Ansiaux, *L’industrie armurière liégeoise. Extrait de la Revue de Belgique* (P. Weissenbruch, 1905), 6.

¹⁰⁵Herslet, *Report on the Arms Industry of Liège*, 7. On the role of women and children, see Ansiaux, *L’industrie armurière liégeoise*, 8.

¹⁰⁶Fraikin, *L’industrie armurière liégeoise*, 60. Since guns could be proofed more than once, these figures do not correspond to the total number of proofs, which is higher. (See the relevant *Annuaire Statistique de la Belgique*.) The 1880s quantities given in ‘Artifex’ and ‘Opifex’, *The Causes of Decay*, 279 (and reprised in Bailey and Nie, *English Gunmakers*, 109), are not fully reliable, as they mix data from the two sets of figures.

¹⁰⁷I owe this information to Paul Dubrunfaut (telephone interview, 29 January 2024). ‘Artifex’ and ‘Opifex’, *The Causes of Decay*, 128–9—followed by Chew, *Arming the Periphery*, 87—were wrong in assuming that trade guns belonged to the latter group only.

¹⁰⁸Figures inferred from the tables published in Ministère de l’Intérieur, *Annuaire Statistique de la Belgique. Quatorzième Année—1883* (Imprimerie Félix Callewaert Père, 1884), 336, and Ministère de l’Intérieur et de l’Instruction Publique, *Annuaire Statistique de la Belgique. Vingt et unième Année—1890* (Imprimerie Ad. Mertens, 1890), 280.

¹⁰⁹Fries, ‘British Response to the American System’, table 4, 396 (based on Harris, *The History of the Birmingham Gun-Barrel Proof House*, 152–5).

increase. In 1890, for instance, gunmaker Samuel B. Allport estimated that, of the 176,000 ‘African barrels’ tested in Birmingham, ‘as many as 100,000 [were] exported direct from the Proof House to Belgium, to be there made up into guns’.¹¹⁰

Export figures, too, bear out Birmingham’s loss of the African market. If, in 1850–54, ‘West Africa’ had still absorbed, on average, 17.8% of British firearms exports, that percentage more than halved in twenty years, reaching 7.7% in 1870–74. It then climbed back a little in 1880–84 (10.3%) but plummeted to a mere 6.3% during the succeeding five years (1885–89).¹¹¹

The monetary worth of gun exports from Britain and Belgium tells the same story. If the value of the two countries’ exports was still broadly comparable in the five-year period between 1860 and 1864 (£3,137,448 [UK]; £3,530,691 [Belgium]), and if the UK could still have the edge over Belgium in select years (e.g., in 1870, when the guns exported from Britain were worth £871,419, as against Belgium’s £562,720), by 1880, Belgium’s supremacy was well established (£579,320 vs. £307,059). By 1890, the gap had become unbridgeable, as Belgian gun exports (£654,250) were worth more than twice the value of British exports (£273,280).¹¹² In ca. 1900, the value of the Belgian gun trade to Africa would be estimated at £80,000 per year (roughly equivalent to today’s £12,000,000), more than 10% of the total worth of Belgium’s gun exports at the time.¹¹³

Birmingham’s ouster from the African market in the last quarter of the nineteenth century contributed greatly to the fading away of its time-honoured subdivided contract system, which survived only on the outer edges of a trade that was now moving steadily in the direction of the mechanised production of interchangeable arms. Conversely, Liège’s ability, first, to make significant inroads into, and then to dominate, the same market goes a long way towards explaining the endurance and ‘unquestionable prosperity’ of its arms industry, which—withstanding its ‘outmoded organisation’ (*organisation vieilote*)—was still believed, in 1896, to provide a living to almost 9,000 cottage workers (out of a total sector workforce of 13,000, up from about 9,500 in 1856).¹¹⁴

Conclusion

‘Africanist researchers’, Patrick Manning wrote in 2013, ‘have been slow to assert an integral place for the continent in world affairs.’¹¹⁵ More than ten years down the line, the continent’s modes of incorporation into nineteenth-century globalising trade networks remain insufficiently researched. Still less well understood is the impact of Africa itself on such networks and the industries that fed them. This is regrettable, since ‘mutual interaction’, as opposed to ‘unilateral diffusion’, is what genuine global histories should ultimately be about, lest they reprise the old imperial emphasis on the dominant influence of western outsiders on African development.¹¹⁶

Unlike in the North American and Indian textile sectors examined by Prestholdt,¹¹⁷ west-central Africa’s continuing demand for trade guns did not accelerate processes of industrial mechanisation. Precisely the opposite was true: at least in Belgium, it proved highly instrumental in keeping alive (and well) a traditional craft industry that was disappearing elsewhere. This finding foregrounds a somewhat paradoxical feature of nineteenth-century globalisation—one

¹¹⁰Cited in ‘Artifex’ and ‘Opifex’, *The Causes of Decay*, 130. See also Bailey and Nie, *English Gunmakers*, 22.

¹¹¹Fries, ‘British Response to the American System’, table 6, 398.

¹¹²For the value of British arms exports, see Fries, ‘British Response to the American System’, table 3, 395; for the value of Belgian arms exports, see ‘Artifex’ and ‘Opifex’, *The Causes of Decay*, 281–2. Goodman, ‘The Birmingham Gun Trade’, 417, provides a higher aggregate figure for the UK—£3,648,399—for the period 1860–64.

¹¹³‘Artifex’ and ‘Opifex’, *The Causes of Decay*, 17, 131.

¹¹⁴Ansiaux, *L’Industrie armurière liégeoise*, 9, 14 and n. 1. For the 1856 figure, see Gaier, *Quatre siècles d’armurerie liégeoise*, 126.

¹¹⁵Patrick Manning, ‘African and World Historiography’, *Journal of African History* 54, no. 3 (2013): 330.

¹¹⁶Adam McKeown, ‘Periodizing Globalization’, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 63 (2008): 224.

¹¹⁷Prestholdt, ‘On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism’.

which has not received sufficient attention, but which becomes clearly visible once the research focus moves away from British industry to other, comparatively neglected, European productive centres, such as Liège.

The effects of African consumer demand were thus ambivalent, promoting innovation in some sectors and discouraging it in others. From the perspective of global historians, however, the demonstrable influence of this demand itself is arguably even more consequential than the duality of its outcomes. The industrial and social history of Liège—to put it clearly—would have been significantly different in the absence of the African gun trade, and this should be of interest to all students of the dialectical relationship through which African and extra-African locales shaped one another over the course of the nineteenth century. The story of this town, then, serves as a reminder that it was not only as producers of primary commodities, or by being forcefully removed from the continent, that Africans could affect the globalisation process. A focus on African consumption practices, in sum, might be what is needed to break away from what Omar Gueye has memorably termed ‘the fetishism of the slave trade and colonialism as the only way to study African history in global terms’ and to demonstrate that Africans were more than bit players in the construction of the modern economy.¹¹⁸

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¹¹⁸Omar Gueye, ‘African History and Global History: Revisiting Paradigms’, in *Global History, Globally: Research and Practice around the World*, eds. Sven Beckert and Dominic Sachsenmaier (Bloomsbury, 2018), 96.