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THE CONGO DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

NATHALIE TOUSIGNANT

Remembrance events are of interest to researchers, insofar as there is a greater social demand for history. This demand, driven by a number of received ideas or unspoken assumptions¹, tends to involve a quest to confirm what we already think we know of those years. The narrative must be compatible with the meta-narrative adopted by the communities organising and funding the work of remembrance. Thus, the Congo is partly absent from the high mass of remembrance. The only issue that seems for the moment to hold the attention of those involved in remembrance revolves around the presence of Congolese troops in military operations in Europe and Africa, in the trenches, alongside metropolitan soldiers and troops from the other empires². Otherwise, we must refer to the critical edition of the reports drafted by the Minister for Colonies, Jules Renkin, for the King³. In all modesty, we must acknowledge that we do not have a very clear idea of what was happening in the Congo in June 1914, apart from the account of the military operations and

- ¹ The expression “unspoken assumptions” occurs tangentially in the work of James Joll, including *The Origins of the First World War*, New York, Routledge, 2013 (1984), with a chapter devoted to imperial rivalries (p 219-253). We would re-read PROST A. and WINTER J., *Penser la Grande Guerre. Un essai d'historiographie*, Paris, Seuil, 2004 for the various issues relating to writing about the war experience.
- ² BROSENS G., *Congo aan den Yzer. De 32 Congolese soldaten van het Belgisch leger in de eerste Wereldoorlog*. Antwerp, Manteau, 2013 ; CATHERINE L., *Loopgraven in Afrika (1914-1918). De vergeten oorlog van de Congolezen tegen de Duitsers*, Antwerp, EPO, 2013.
- ³ VANTHEMSCHE G., *Le Congo belge pendant la Première Guerre mondiale. Les rapports du ministre des Colonies Jules Renkin au roi Albert I^{er} – 1914-1918*. Brussels, Palais des Académies, 2009.

the exchanges between Renkin and the King⁴. Therefore, only the archives, source works and eyewitness accounts, mainly photographs, can shed new light. Collected here are the fragments of an initial phase of analysis. Finally, I had not intended to “do 1914-18”, as a colleague kindly prompted at the official launch of the remembrance in French-speaking Belgium, in Namur, in November 2013. The evolution of colonial society can be understood only in a perspective that includes the First World War. However, to avoid having to open a new front of investigation, the episode was carefully avoided, like a parenthesis. Now, the research agenda is needed, to support young researchers⁵, at the request of foreign colleagues wishing to document the global history of the contribution of empires to this conflict and in the desire to find a new balance in a historiography dominated by the horrors of the trenches.

When the Congo became Belgian: 15 November, 1908

“However, from 1906, the anti-Congolese campaign inspired by the lost children that Britain pitched into the march of its imperialism managed to divide our editing team. And what bickering there was between Henri Jaspas, head of the anti-Léopoldians, and myself, already leading the resistance of the colonial and maritime powers” (Leon Hennebicq)⁶.

The takeover of the Congo by Belgium was the founding act of the African adventure. Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign King of the Congo Free State (1885-1908), decided to take that step, after the loans granted him

⁴ In the context of the seminar on contemporary history, devoted to Congo in the First World War, the students, assistants and I endeavoured to establish the historiographical balance during the autumn of 2013. For some, this journey to delineate the topics to be explored amounted to mapping an empty space, confirming the usefulness of the work undertaken.

⁵ At the Research Centre for the History of Law and Institutions (CRHiDI, www.crhidi.be), it involved Erika Ngongo and Berengaria Piret, accompanied by Amandine Lauro (ULB), Anne Cornet and Patricia Van Schuylenbergh (MRAC).

⁶ HENNEBICQ L., “Leopold II”, *Journal des Tribunaux*, 1935, 297 and “Henri Jaspas”, *Journal des Tribunaux* 1939, 125. I am grateful to Sebastiaan Vandenbogaerde (FWO-UGent) for giving me this information. When he wrote these notes, Hennebicq (1871-1940) was the senior editor of the magazine, having taken over from his mentor, Edmond Picard. For a relevant biographical note, see CAMBIER R., “Leon Hennebicq”, *Biographie coloniale belge*, pt. III, 1952, col. 429-431.

by the Belgian State and the international campaign led by Edmund Dene Morel and the *Congo Reform Association*, among others. There were heated debates in Brussels circles, as Hennebicq testifies. The Chamber voted overwhelmingly for the takeover, opposed only the Belgian Labour Party, while its leader, Émile Vandervelde, travelled to the Congo from July to October 1908. From April to August 1909, Prince Albert also travelled in the new colony⁸.

The discussions reveal a desire to move on from Leopold's Congo, notably standing back from the excesses reported and substantiated by the Commissions of Inquiry. For some, it was finally a chance to prove the capabilities and skills of the Belgians, to provide new opportunities for capital and industry and to establish a model colony in the heart of Africa. The Congo Free State bequeathed to the Belgian Congo a modest infrastructure, a legal framework, and an administration centralised in Boma in the hands of the Governor-General, assisted by two Vice-Governors-General, one in Katanga, the other in Orientale province. The *Force publique*, which was both the colonial police force and the Territorial Army, supported the takeover of the territory and the population. It had about 17,000 men in 1910, including 403 whites and 16,333 blacks⁹. A network of Catholic and Protestant missions

⁷ VANDERVELDE E., *Les derniers jours de l'État du Congo : journal de voyage (juillet-octobre 1908)*, Mons, Société nouvelle, 1908, and an essay based on that journey: *La Belgique et le Congo : le passé, le présent, l'avenir*, Paris, Alcan, 1911. He travelled at the same time as journalist Fritz Van Der Linden, who recounts his experience in *Le Congo, les noirs et nous*, Paris, Augustin Challamel, 1909.

⁸ The Prince kept a travel diary, the manuscript of which is preserved in the archives of the Royal Palace. Émile Vandewoude establishes the critical context *Le voyage du Prince Albert au Congo en 1909*, Brussels, Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, 1990 (Section of Moral and Political Sciences, Papers in-8vo, new series, vol. 50, No 4). Raymond Buren offers the text in printed form in *Journal de route du Prince Albert en 1909 au Congo*, Bierges, Mols, 2008, without critical commentary.

⁹ GANN L.H. and DUIGNAN P., *The Rulers of Belgian Africa, 1884-1914*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979, table 5, p 67. In 1914, it had 17,833 men. These figures come from the official directory of the Ministry of Colonies. While the use of the categories "White" and "Black" may shock in 2014, we must remember that the Belgians were supported by other Europeans (Italians, Danes and Norwegians, for example). The Africans provided the contingent of soldiers and some NCOs. These numbers do not include African porters, a crucial logistical resource during military operations.

completed the network, by taking responsibility for education and public health. The last pillar of the colonial trilogy, the major companies, including those created in 1906, was to ensure the development of the Congo. The new colonial charter made the Congo budgets independent of those of the metropolis. In short, Belgium, measuring some 30,000 km², took over a territory eighty times its own size. It was populated by 5,926 whites, including 3,551 Belgians¹⁰ and some 10 million Congolese (figure for 1925¹¹).

The takeover took place with an eye on continuity: in the Congo, most of the staff carried on their contractual obligations to the full term. In Brussels, the Ministry of Colonies was set up and headed by Jules Renkin. It can therefore be considered that the situation was fairly well under control in June 1914¹².

Defending the Belgian Congo: the challenges of the summer of 1914

The key people in the Congo belonged to the executive inherited from the Congo Free State. In June 1914, Felix Fuchs¹³ was Governor-General, based in Boma until December 1915. He was assisted by Charles Tombeur¹⁴, Vice-Governor-General for Katanga, based in Élizabethville, and Justin Malfeyt¹⁵, Governor of Orientale Province, based in Stanleyville. Eugene Henry¹⁶ took over from Fuchs from January 1916 until January 1921. The colonial administration in Boma reported to the Ministry of Colonies its minister,

¹⁰ Figures provided by the Statistical Yearbook and compiled by VANTHEMSCHE G., *La Belgique et le Congo: empreintes d'une colonie*, Brussels, Complexe, 2007, p 353.

¹¹ Estimate provided by I. N'Daywel è Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo: de l'héritage ancien à la République du Congo*, Brussels, De Boeck, 1998, p 302.

¹² GANN L.H. and DUIGNAN P., *The Rulers of Belgian Africa, 1884-1914*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979, p 141-213.

¹³ PLASMAN P.-L., "Fuchs (Felix)" *Biographical Dictionary of Overseas Belgians*, http://www.kaowarsom.be/fr/notices_fuchs_felix; DELLICOUR F., "Fuchs (Félix-Alexandre)" *Belgian Colonial Biography*, pt. I, 1948, col. 389-394.

¹⁴ DELLICOUR F., "Tombeur (Charles-Henri-Marie-Ernest)", *Belgian Overseas Biography*, pt. VI, 1968, col. 1022-1026.

¹⁵ ENGELS A., "Malfeyt (Justin-Prudent-François-Marie)", *Belgian Colonial Biography*, pt. III, 1952, col. 588-592.

¹⁶ DELLICOUR F., "Henry (Eugène Joseph-Marie)", *Belgian Colonial Biography*, pt. IV, 1955, col. 390-394.

Jules Renkin. However, following the German occupation, the government of Charles de Broqueville was relocated from Brussels to Antwerp and moved to Sainte-Adresse in October 1914. The occupier closed the Ministry of Colonies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior¹⁷. This rift complicated the management of colonial affairs, especially since the first clashes around the eastern frontier, which bordered on the territories of the German East Africa and formed by lakes Kivu and Tanganyika, required a firm and rapid response from the authorities¹⁸.

In a cable dated 30 July, 1914, Renkin gives instructions to Fuchs: “Take all necessary measures to safeguard the neutrality of Belgium, keep watch over the mouth of the Congo”¹⁹. Further instructions came on 6 August. Renkin authorised the Congolese naval forces to lend assistance to French and British forces²⁰. On 28 August, the Minister specified the scope of the orders: “In the event of a direct German attack against the Belgian Congo, especially the port of Lukuga, the Government orders you to take military action to defend Belgian territory. You may therefore allow Allied troops to enter Belgian territory, accept offers for Belgian troops to cross allied territory, take any offensive with Belgians alone or in cooperation with allied troops, even in German territory. Where necessary to defend integrity of Belgian territory. Am cabling same message to Katanga. Renkin”²¹.

The military action of the Force Publique was focused in three areas: Cameroon, alongside French troops, in Northern Rhodesia and German East Africa, alongside British troops. However, these reinforcements did not come from the commanders active in Congolese territory. On several occasions during the autumn of 1914, Renkin recalled the need not to take

¹⁷ DUMOULIN M., *L'entrée dans le XX^e siècle (1905-1918)*, Brussels, Complexe, 2006. (Nouvelle Histoire de Belgique, vol. 2.1).

¹⁸ WILLEQUET J., “Frontière orientale, réformes de Renkin et ‘Kongo-Liga’”, *Le Congo et la Weltpolitik (1894-1914)*, Brussels, Brussels University Press, 1962, p 227-276.

¹⁹ “Cable from Renkin to Fuchs”, Brussels, 30 July, 1914, MRAC, Tervuren, *Felix Fuchs archives*, HA.01.038 I.29, N^o 527.

²⁰ “Cable from Renkin to Fuchs”, Brussels, 6 August, 1914, MRAC, Tervuren, *Felix Fuchs archives*, HA.01.038 I.28, N^o 510.

²¹ “Cable from Renkin to Fuchs”, 28 August, 1914, MAEB, Brussels, *African Archives*, Force Publique, FP N^o 1119.

the initiative without the Belgian Government first consulting its British counterpart and the King, at La Panne, as he was still chief of the armed forces²².

The far-away war

Military operations were occasional and limited in scope. The distance, some 3,000 km between Boma and Lake Tanganyika, altered the perception and understanding of what was happening. It is therefore not surprising to find a wealth of information painstakingly collected and collated by the services based in Stanleyville and Élisabethville²³, relaying the briefs that the front managed to send, as the telegraph line was sometimes cut.

The measures taken against German nationals, the initial hesitations over the interpretation of the neutrality of the Congo basin and the breakdown of the chain of command prior to the recovery that Renkin attempted to correct, complicated management in the early months of the war. The central government, still established in Boma, hence oriented towards the colony's Atlantic seaboard, had to correspond with Sainte-Adresse and London, where an office with the structure and powers of the Ministry of Colonies was set up in February 1915.

In this close-knit network that was the former executive of the Congo Free State, where men with a military background held sway, the logistical difficulties added to the climate of distrust in Felix Fuchs who was pressed into retirement. Fuchs, of Prussian origin and naturalised in 1862, studied law at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* from 1876, and began a career at the Bar of Brussels before embarking on his African adventure in 1888. Accordingly, he was quite a different personality from Malfeyt and Tombeur,

²² For instance: "Cable from Renkin to Tombeur", October 22, 1914, MAEB, Brussels, *Archives africaines, Force publique*, FP No 1119: "Cable whether you ordered withdrawal of Belgian troops from Rhodesia and report if and when High Commissioner personally requested sending them to or keeping them on British territory. British government (two words illegible) Belgian unnecessary requested by unqualified subordinate authority. Belgian army remains on Belgian territory repelling German attacks."

²³ FETTER B., "The War and Its Aftermaths: Economic Development and Belgian Nationalism", *The Creation of Élisabethville 1910-1940*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1976, p 56-71.

both professional soldiers and close to Albert I²⁴. The policy he adopted in the early days of the conflict was criticised by the settlers and State officials. He was accused of a lack of character and alacrity and of “passive obedience”²⁵ to orders from Brussels. The official reasons given were Fuchs’ age (56 in the summer of 1914) and his health after a 26-year colonial career. Going back to the Congo in the context of the war would have been too hard on him, felt Renkin²⁶. Eugene Henry took office in January 1916. The effervescence of the first weeks subsided; the communication circuits and the hierarchy were well established²⁷.

²⁴ According to Pierre-Luc Plasman, a previous witness of these tensions between Fuchs, acting Governor (September 1892 and May 1893) representing the “civil government”, and the “military administration” in the “difficult context of armed conflict with the Arab-Swahilis” including Édouard Fivé, the Le Marinel brothers and Francis Dhanis. P.-L. Plasman, “Fuchs (Felix)” *Biographical Dictionary of Overseas Belgians*, http://www.kaowarsom.be/fr/notices_fuchs_felix.

²⁵ MOULAERT G., *Souvenirs d’Afrique*, Brussels, Dessart, 1948.

²⁶ I am grateful to Piret Bérengère for the information collected when drawing up the inventory of the Fuchs papers kept at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren.

²⁷ VANHOVE J, “Le ministère dans la tourmente”, *Histoire du ministère des colonies*, Brussels, Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, 1968, p 31-33. (Section of Moral and Political Sciences, Papers in-8vo, new series, vol. 35, N° 3).