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# CONGO ON YSER THE 32 CONGOLESE SOLDIERS IN THE BELGIAN ARMY IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

GRIET BROSENS

In 1916 Pierre Orts, adviser to the Belgian Minister of the Colonies Jules Renkin, suggested that the latter bring soldiers over from Congo for deployment on the Iron Front. He argued that the Congolese army was the biggest in the region and that the soldiers had experience of being at war. He reiterated that Great Britain and France had let major contingencies of soldiers from the colonies come over: Spahis from Morocco, Zouaves and infantry men from North and West Africa, Sikhs from India and soldiers from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc. Why weren't there any Congolese? Renkin dismissed the plan: "... personally I am not for deploying colonial troops outside of Africa. The colony has already made a major sacrifice in this war. This is why the idea of our blacks getting caught up in battles between Europeans revolts me. It's bad for their civilisation and the prestige of the white race in Africa. It is even our moral obligation not to involve the people, whom we must protect and watch over, in this terrible mess. In addition, I share the governor-general, Mr. Henry's conviction, that all these blacks who would come and fight on the European and Asiatic front return to the fatherland."<sup>1</sup> What was meant by this last sentence was that the whites would lose their moral superiority in the Congo if it became known that they had also been knee-deep in mud. Once again the dossier was shelved.

<sup>1</sup> VANGANSBEKE J., « *Afrikaanse verdedigers van het Belgisch grondgebied 1914-1918* », in *Belgische bijdragen tot de militaire geschiedenis*, Royal museum of the Army, Brussels, 2006. Nr. 4, p 123-134, and ETAMBALA Z.A., « *In het land van de Banoko. De geschiedenis van de Kongolese/Zairese aanwezigheid in België van 1885 tot heden* », in *Steunpunt Migranten-Cabiers*, Nr. 7, Louvain, 1993, p 33.

On 2 January, 1918, before the war was over, the Belgian military headquarters sent out a question to the commanding officers of all the army divisions: how many blacks have served in your units and how many blacks do you currently have in your units?<sup>2</sup> Logically, given Renkin's deliberate policy, the answer had to be none. The first division however appeared to have known of four and still had two in service in 1918. The commander of the second division could vaguely remember two. Three had fought in the third division in the past and one remained in 1918. Each of the seven answers revealed at least one black. The headquarters concluded that twenty-seven black soldiers had served in the Belgian army during the First World War.

That figure was incorrect. Some divisions of the army, such as the reinforcements, had not been asked the question. The army administration clearly had difficulties with the spelling of some Congolese names. Congolese soldiers who had earned a name for themselves in the history books did not feature in the list; others were mentioned twice. Soldiers who had disappeared from the scene before the end of the war had already been forgotten by January 1918. At least 32 Congolese served in the Belgian army during the First World War. Who were these young men? Why were they in Belgium? How did they end up in the army? What did they experience? Did they survive?

### Pre-war Congolese society in Belgium

On 4 August, 1914 German troops crossed the Belgian border, a serious violation of Belgian neutrality. Twenty thousand Belgian volunteers, thirty-one of whom were Congolese, came forward to recruitment centres. How did these young men come to be in Belgium?

In 1885 Leopold II became the sole owner of the Congo, a country eighty times the size of Belgium, but undeveloped. The King needed money and strong men to help develop his colony. A few hundred Belgians went to the Congo. So, if migration to the Congo was minimal, migration in the other direction was even smaller. The voyage was too expensive. Around the turn of the century the Congolese would only come to Belgium as sailors on board a ship belonging to the *Compagnie Maritime Belge* or as a boy, that's to say

<sup>2</sup> Royal museum of Army and of military history, Brussels, Archives of Moscow, fonds 185, Box 58.

domestic help for a white colonial<sup>3</sup>. Joseph Adipanga made the crossing with Jacques Collins, who worked as a state inspector in the Congo. In 1913 Lieutenant Henri Orquevaux brought his boy Honoré Fataki with him to Belgium.

By far the best known amongst them was Paul Panda Farnana, Jules Derscheid's boy. When Jules brought Paul Panda back to Belgium with him, he entrusted the young man to the care of his sister, Louise Derscheid. She taught him how to draw and play musical instruments and sent him to the *Athénée Royale d'Ixelles* and the horticultural college in Vilvoorde. Farnana was one of the lucky ones, in time the majority of boys were turned out onto the street; sometimes they even ran away. In those days there was no real Congolese society for them to fall back on. These young men headed for the cities. Jean-Baptiste Jessy and Antoine Manglunki remained in Antwerp. Joseph Lopiko lived in Hasselt and Albert Kudjabo worked as a boy in Ghent. Jean Jacob Ilanga was left behind in Namur.

The majority, at least nineteen out of the thirty two, returned to Brussels, often to the St Géry district. There they lived anonymously. People in that part of town were somewhat less surprised when they saw a black person in the street. They had a better chance of survival there and found shelter more easily, sometimes in the same street, sometimes even in the same house. They sought and found work in order to earn money. Some of them worked as domestic help. Others had learnt a profession in the meantime. Lisasi, Bayon, Boïmbo and Soumbou made a living as Carabouya salesmen. Dressed in a straw skirt and with a bare torso they sold Carabouyas, aniseed-flavoured sweets, on the markets of Brussels. "Carabouya, carabouya. Bolle vi de valing. Bolle vi den oest. Alleman moo leve. Wit en zwet. Carabouya!"<sup>4</sup> (Carabouya, carabouya. Sweets for a cold. Sweets for a cough. Everyone has to make a living. White and Black. Carabouya!) The Congolese had lovers, got married and had children. They frequently moved house, sometimes got into trouble with the police. In short: they pretty much merged into Belgian pre-war society.

<sup>3</sup> ETAMBALA Z.A, « *In het land van de Banoko. De geschiedenis van de Kongolese/Zairese aanwezigheid in België van 1885 tot heden* », in *Steunpunt Migranten-Cabiers*, nr. 7, Louvain, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> DUPREZ M., « Un confiseur de la rue de Flandre inventa un jour le carabouya », *Le Soir*, June 21, 1993.

## Wartime volunteers

How did the Congolese end up in the army? All but one of them served as wartime volunteers<sup>5</sup>. François Mabilla signed up for the 9<sup>th</sup> Line. On 4 August, 1914 Antoine Manglunki joined the 15<sup>th</sup> Siege Battery in Antwerp as a wartime volunteer. Paul Bayon left his wife Madeleine and their new-born daughter Elisabeth behind and joined the Namur Garrison Artillery. On 1 August, 1914 Lieutenant Orquevaux's boy, Honoré Fataki, was already knocking on the doors of the barracks. At the time he was not yet sixteen years of age and actually too young for the army. Around five Congolese from Charleroi also rushed to help the nation. Antoine Boïmbo, Pierre M'Bimba, Thomas Seres, Honoré Kulu and Jean Jacob Ilanga all signed up in the first week of the war. Why anyone would choose to subject themselves to such misery is a puzzle. Patriotism and a sense of duty were good reasons for many of these 20,000 men to sign up, but it is unlikely that this would have convinced the Congolese. Many of them had only just arrived or had only been living in Belgium for a few years; they did not have a real bond with the country. It is more likely that Balamba, Simba and the others wore uniform in order to improve their material situation. Farnana and Droeven had a wealthy upbringing, but the majority of them lived in working class neighbourhoods, did not have a permanent job and had to move house regularly. The prospect of free clothing, three meals a day and pay must have been very inviting. Peer pressure also appears to have played a role. The majority knew one another. Another reason why Belgians and Congolese were so happy to write off their future was the incorrect assessment of the situation. Everyone thought the war would soon be over.

## The war of movement

Some Congolese volunteers immediately returned to the existing units, others had first to go to a training camp in Northern France and yet others were placed in the newly established volunteer regiments. With the exception of Liège and Halen, the Congolese soldiers were present at every major Belgian scene of action of the war of movement. Four of them fought in the Battle of Namur: Paul Panda Farnana and Albert Kudjabo with the Korps der Congolese Vrijwilligers (Congolese Volunteers Corps), Léon De Cassa with

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Droeven, son of a Belgian father and a Congolese mother, had been serving as a serviceman with the Grenadiers since 1913.



the 8<sup>th</sup> Line Regiment and Paul Bayon in the fort of St. Héribert. The Korps der Congolese Vrijwilligers (Congolese Volunteers Corps), a special unit, consisting of around three hundred old colonials and colonials on holiday, fought between 20 and 23 August, 1914 to keep Namur. On 23 August Farnana and Kudjabo, along with their comrades-in-arms, were taken prisoner in Liège. Kudjabo was wounded in the head. They were disarmed and transported to the German prisoner of war camp, where they spent the remainder of the war<sup>6</sup>. Léon De Cassa managed to escape to France with the 8<sup>th</sup> Line. There were long days of marching under a blazing sun. They were starving, but found nothing to eat. The German troops were hot on their heels. In Le Havre Léon boarded a ship that took him back to Ostend, where he joined the Belgian troops in Antwerp.

On 28 September the German army opened fire and began the siege of Antwerp, the national redoubt, the last hope. The sound of the bombs was deafening! Pierre M'Bimba could feel the ground under his feet shake. Antoine Yoka was also there on that day in Walem and Antoine Mona fought in Sint-Katelijne-Waver. He received a bullet in his right arm and was led away. The Antwerp fortresses could do little to protect them from the German artillery. On 6 October Albert I decided to evacuate the field army to the Yser. The army built two pontoon bridges over the Scheldt. By 8 p.m. all units had been told to leave the city. Simon Lisasi, François Mabilla and Yoka crossed the Scheldt and marched to Sint-Niklaas. We know that fifteen Congolese soldiers fought to defend Antwerp. Antoine Manglunki took part in the Siege of Antwerp in the Fort of Merksem. The stronghold itself never saw any action and was blown up by the Belgians on 9 October, before the city capitulated.

Antoine Manglunki escaped with the field army to the coast or went back to the Netherlands and from there returned to the field army. We know that at the end of October 1914 he turned up in the artillery depot in Ardres in Le Nord-Pas-de-Calais for an artillery training course. Pius Bouclou returned to the Engineer Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Engineering Corps as a 2<sup>nd</sup> class soldier. He built bridges over the Dyle which he had to blow up afterwards. Sébastien Simba joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Guides in Antwerp. He was a machine gunner in the second squadron. From 10 October he covered the Belgian army's retreat to the Yser.

<sup>6</sup> VAN CAUTEREN W., *La guerre et la captivité. Journal d'un prisonnier de guerre en Allemagne*, Brussels and Paris 1919.

## Battle of Tervate (Battle of Yser)

From 18 till 31 October, 1914 there was heavy fighting on the Yser and the Germans reached the other side for the first time on 22 October, close to the hamlet of Tervate. At sunrise, they attacked Adipanga's company in the flank. All available reserves were now deployed in order to chase the enemy back over the Yser. Under the leadership of major d'Oultremont, Kulu set off with his battalion in the direction of Tervate. They crossed Pervijze at the double, zigzagging and ducking to avoid the projectiles and on one occasion they had to wait a whole hour before they saw a chance of advancing further. Soumbou went to Stuivekenskerke. Joseph Droeven was to assemble in Pervijze, but when he heard that he was destined for the front, he deserted and fled to France.

In the meantime Soumbou fought for his life in Stuivekenskerke. He moved from trench to trench, while he was shot at from various farms which the Germans had occupied. His battalion suffered serious losses and barely held out. Yoka and the 2nd Infantrymen went to help, but it was not easy to reach them. The landscape surrounding the Yser was littered with trenches, ditches and brooks; many were too wide to jump over or too deep to wade through.

The army leadership informed them that at 4 p.m. there would be a large-scale counter attack. At that time Eugène Bonkakou was unlucky enough to be passing through Pervijze. He was held back by the 8th Line and claimed for the battle in Tervate. Every soldier was of vital importance and was thrown into battle. The Infantrymen attacked, bayonets on their rifles. Soumbou had plenty of experience, but Adipanga was new to all this. He feared for his life, and he had good reason to. Bonkakou clambered over the edge of the trench and attacked. Every few metres Kulu had to duck down to avoid a volley of bullets. Following a sign from the major he sat up surprised and walked a few steps further. The unlucky ones were left behind.

Tervate was a bloodbath for the Belgians. Bonkakou later wrote: "The great battle, contested with the bayonet, was a full-blown massacre"<sup>7</sup>. Commander Von Stockhausen considered Kulu to be one of his best soldiers and had called him to his side before the attack. They stormed the banks of the Yser and attacked every German they came across with their bayonets. Honoré

<sup>7</sup> Archives of Belgian Defence, notary, file Eugène Bonkakou.

saw d'Oultremont fall to the ground and shortly afterwards Von Stockhausen was also lying lifeless in the mud. Kulu remained wonderfully alive and waited until nightfall to return. In the course of the afternoon Bonkakou was sent back to fetch weapons and other equipment. While doing so he was hit by a bullet, fell to the ground and remained there. His fleeing comrades left him behind for dead. He lay unconscious for hours in a pool of water, barely alive and he would have certainly been written off for dead if a few gendarmes from the Pervijze-Ramskapelle post had not happened to pass by. They saw him lying there, went to take a look and realised he still had a heartbeat. They took him with them and sent him to a hospital in Calais.

Honoré Kulu managed to reach the rear guard and sought an officer to whom he could announce the death of major d'Oultremont and Commander Von Stockhausen. The officer didn't believe him and sent Kulu back to the battlefield to search for the men's kepis, as proof of their death. Honoré turned around and once again faced the rain of bullets. He succeeded in his suicide mission, but, as one of his superiors later said of him: "this Grenadier was always very courageous and actively held danger in contempt"<sup>8</sup>. That evening the Belgians were forced to admit that all the day's heroic deeds had been in vain. The Germans still held out strongly on the left bank of the Yser. Hundreds of comrades had died, and not a single metre of territory had been gained in exchange. Three days later the Belgians decided to flood the Yser plain. The front was established.

## The Holy Wait

Of the thirty two Congolese soldiers only nine were in the Westhoek in November 1914. The others convalesced in hospitals, underwent military discipline in training camps in France or remained as prisoners of war in Germany. The long years between the Battle of the Yser and the Liberation offensive were referred to in Belgian historiography as the stabilisation period or the "Holy Wait", because relatively little happened.

That's not to say that the Congolese soldiers didn't experience anything. In the course of the next four years they often changed unit, hospital, training centre, function, sector and more besides. The entire stabilisation period was a coming and going and it would have been easy to lose one's way in the

<sup>8</sup> Archives of Belgian Defence, notary, file Honoré Kulu.



Antoine Mona, w.d.



Honoré Kulu, w.d.

jumble of military institutions which mushroomed in France and Great Britain during the course of the war and with which they would all come into contact.

However, they surfaced at the most important moments, such as the Christmas Truce, the first gas attack in Steenstrate, the construction of the trench of death or the Battle of Merkem. They were swallowed up in the mass of troops. They were wounded, but more often they fell ill, a growing trend in the whole Belgian army. They followed training courses and got promoted. They were awarded medals. They could take holidays and enjoyed the affection of the war godmothers. A few even got married during the war. Some of them got into mischief and a few had to be court-martialled. There were the courageous and the less courageous. They all suffered from the cold climate in the trenches of the Westhoek and eight of them were so fed up that they submitted a request to return to Congo. Some of them died before the end of the war, sometimes on the battlefield, but mainly in hospital beds. A lot can happen in four years of war. We have selected one story, that of Camille Bolofo.

At the end of April 1915 the Germans launched the Second Siege of Ypres. On 22 April the soldiers in Steenstrate saw a green-yellow cloud of smoke escape from the German trenches before spreading across no-man's-land to the French trenches. The Germans had introduced a new weapon: poison gas. Camille Bolofo was relaxing in De Panne when in great haste he received the order to leave. Camille stationed himself in a wood in the vicinity of Pijpegale. Over the coming days Bolofo had a hard time of it there in the woods. The bombs fell constantly and mustard gas hung over the fields. From 26 April the allies organised an offensive. The attack was planned for just before the evening, so Camille waited in the trenches. It was a quiet afternoon and he told the man next to him that he was going to spend a penny. He returned with a bullet wound! Camille's superior believed it was his own doing: "My Company was in Steenstrate, near Lizerne, connection with the 418<sup>th</sup> of the French. In the course of the evening Lizerne was to be taken from the Germans. In the course of the afternoon complete calm reigned. No shells or rifle shots in our sector. More towards the south where there was heavy gunfire. At some point Bolofo left the trench to spend a penny in a cornfield and came back wounded. Everyone was in agreement that this soldier had wounded himself. It was known that he was afraid of gunfire and as a consequence it was strange that he would have taken his weapon with him into the cornfield"<sup>9</sup>. Bolofo had wounded himself so he wouldn't have to take part in the imminent attack. One day later the Second Battle of Ypres was over, Bolofo was taken to the temporary hospital in St-Méan in France. In April 1916 he was sent on unpaid leave. Two years later, still before the end of the war, he was discharged.

## The Victory

In the first half of 1918 the German army organised a series of attacks, but the allied forces were also planning a major offensive. On the morning of 17 April François Mabilla was at work in the Merkem sector. By 6 a.m. the Germans were attacking the major outposts. Mabilla ran through Merkem with the bayonet on his rifle, the shells flying round his ears. He tried to find shelter behind a shed. A shell exploded and one of the shards got him in the head. Mabilla fell to the ground, dead. By the end of the day the village was once again in Belgian hands. A few soldiers who were sent to pick up the dead found François behind the shed and took his body with them. On 22 April, 1918 he was buried in Westvleteren.

<sup>9</sup> Archives of Belgian Defence, notary, file Camille Bolofo.

Mabilla was not the only Congolese soldier to die in the final year of the war. In August Jessy was standing too close to an exploding grenade and died on the spot. A few Congolese went on to take part in the liberation offensive, often with serious consequences. Sergeant Mona was wounded during fighting in Moorslede in October. On 1 November, 1918 Jules Moké received two bullets in his neck, another bullet went straight through his chest. He was taken to a hospital in Paris where he remained until after the war. Later on Honoré Fataki inhaled poisonous gas during fighting in Zomergem. On 11 November it was over, the armistice was signed.

### After the war

In 1919 the Congolese who had survived the war had a difficult mission ahead of them: that of getting their life back on track. Before the war few of them had a permanent job or accommodation. They had served as volunteers in the hope of improving their material situation, but were more destitute than ever before. Anything they might have owned before the war, they no longer had. They stood on the street. They had left their youth behind in the trenches. They had breathed in poisonous gas, been shot down or contracted chronic bronchitis in the quagmire that was Westhoek. Nobody came out of this war undamaged, physically or psychologically.

Almost all of them settled in Brussels and were soon reunited. Many Congolese found accommodation in the well-known Matonge district, even if it was almost forty years before it became known as such. The Congolese war veterans joined together and formed *L'Union Congolaise, Société de Secours et de Développement Moral et Intellectuel de la Race Congolaise*. The Union stood for mutual aid and emancipation, sometimes lent money and organised evening classes. The survivors tried to make something of their lives. They followed training courses, looked for work, fell in love and had children.

During the war Antoine Manglunki married a local girl, Julia Caron, in Calais. When he was called back to Belgium in 1919, his wife and daughter Antoinette moved with him. The couple initially found accommodation with a friendly man in Rue le Tintoret. At the end of that year the Manglunkis and Albert Kudjabo shared an apartment on Avenue de la Reine in Schaerbeek. Less than a year later Kudjabo moved to Liège. In 1921 Antoine and Julia moved into Rue de Londres in Ixelles. He worked again as a mechanic, she

did the housekeeping. On 27 July, 1929 their daughter Antoinette got a little brother, Julien Eugène Antoine Manglunki, and a third child, Paul Panda Pierre Louis, followed a few years later. On 20 June, 1935 fate struck when Antoinette died as a result of surgery. She was just nineteen years old. On 6 January, 1939 Antoine Manglunki passed away. Julia was left behind with her two sons. She never remarried and died in 1979 in an old people's home in Etterbeek.

They all suffered from lung disease. The majority didn't breathe their last breath, they coughed it. They died a merciless death, not under a starry sky, but in the sterile light of a cold hospital lamp. They had been destined to end their days on the banks of the Congo River, but were swept away in a war which didn't concern them, on a continent they had never heard of. They got little in return. Saviours of the nation and a role in the history books? No. All those killed in battle had already been forgotten by 1918. Their legacy was their children and grandchildren. That is how their stories live on, both good and bad. Fragments of them, because the memory of their wartime did not survive two generations. The Congolese returned to oblivion sooner than was expected. Their names were forgotten, their traces washed away by time or overwritten by new events. But every tale, each and every one of the thirty-two, deserves a platform and an audience. Everything except run-of-the-mill, which is probably all they would have been destined for otherwise

The 32 Congolese soldiers: Joseph Adipanga, Pierre Alomon, Jean Balamba, Paul Bayon, Antoine Boïmbo, Édouard Bolia, Camille Bolofo, Antoine Bomjo, Eugène Bonkakou, Pius Bouclou, Léon De Cassa, Joseph Droeven, Honoré Fataki, Jean Jacob Ilanga, Jean-Baptiste Jessy, Albert Kudjabo, Honoré Kulu, Simon Lisasi, Michel Longo, Joseph Lopiko, François Mabilla, Antoine Manglunki, Pierre M'Bimba, Jacques M'Bondo, Jules Moké, Antoine Mona, Paul Panda Farnana, Pierre Sangwali, Thomas Seres, Sébastien Simba, Pierre Soumbou and Antoine Yoka.



Antoine Manglunki, w.d.