

# Dutch Entrepreneurs in Congo

## Navigating ‘Belgian’ Imperialism in the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo (1870s-1920s)

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Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised that European imperialism was largely a transnational phenomenon, as actors from various nations participated in different empires through for example capital investments or (maritime) labour. Foreigners also played a role in ‘Belgian’ imperial expansion from the start. Drawing on these insights, this article analyses the role played by Dutch entrepreneurs in ‘Belgian’ imperial expansion, more specifically in the build-up and expansion of the Congo Free State under the Belgian King Leopold II, as well as the early years of Belgian Congo. The article seeks to answer why and how Dutch entrepreneurs from the port city of Rotterdam participated in imperial expansion in the Congo Basin between the 1870s and the 1920s, and shows how they profited from transimperial opportunities in the ‘empire of others’.

Recent onderzoek heeft in toenemende mate aangetoond dat Europees imperialisme grotendeels een transnationaal fenomeen was, bijvoorbeeld door middel van kapitaalinvesteringen of (maritieme) arbeid. Buitenlanders speelden vanaf het begin ook een rol in de ‘Belgische’ imperialistische expansie. Gebaseerd op deze inzichten beoogt dit artikel de rol te analyseren die Nederlandse ondernemers speelden in het ‘Belgische’ imperialisme, meer specifiek in de opbouw en uitbreiding van de Congo-Vrijstaat onder de Belgische koning Leopold II, en in de beginjaren van Belgisch Congo. Het artikel onderzoekt waarom en hoe Nederlandse ondernemers uit de havenstad Rotterdam tussen de jaren 1870 en de jaren 1920 deelnamen aan de imperialistische expansie in het Congobekken, en laat zien hoe zij profiteerden van transimperiale mogelijkheden in het ‘rijk van anderen’.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On 21 January 1879, Maximiliaan Strauch sent a letter to Lodewijk Pincoffs, inviting him to dinner in Brussels with the Belgian King Leopold II.<sup>2</sup> Strauch, one of Leopold's most trusted advisors regarding imperial affairs, was tasked with finding relevant contacts across Europe to further Leopold's goal to establish a colony in West Central Africa. Among the potentially helpful contacts was Pincoffs, an entrepreneur from the Dutch city of Rotterdam, who as co-director of the Afrikaansche Handels-Vereeniging (African Trading Company, AHV) had accumulated knowledge about trade in the coastal areas of the Congo Basin from 1857 onwards, when the firm started its activities there.<sup>3</sup> Pincoffs attended the dinner with Leopold in Brussels soon after, and agreed to invest in expeditions to the Congo Basin set up under the banner of the Comité d'Études du Haut-Congo (CEHC), with Strauch assuming the role of the organisation's president.<sup>4</sup> In May 1879, however, it turned out that Pincoffs had committed substantial fraudulent activities, and the AHV was declared bankrupt soon after.<sup>5</sup>

This short-lived contact between Leopold II and Pincoffs set the scene for Dutch entrepreneurial involvement in the Leopold-ruled Congo Free State (1885-1908), as well as in Belgian Congo after 1908. The successor to the AHV, the Nieuwe Afrikaansche Handels-Vennootschap (New African Trading Company, NAHV), was among the largest firms active in the Congo Free State in the 1880s and remained active in various capacities in Belgian Congo until the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> With a few exceptions, scholarship on the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo has either overlooked or downplayed the Dutch role, perhaps

- 1 I would like to thank the team of the *Exploiting the Empire of Others* project, the guest editors of this special issue, Janne Schreurs and Eline Ceulemans, the participants (in particular Kevin Goergen) of the *Pathways to Empire* conference, the editorial board of *BMGN – LCHR*, and the anonymous peer reviewers for comments on previous drafts and stimulating questions and suggestions. Research for the article has been made possible by NWO VICI project *Exploiting the Empire of Others* (Grant number VI.C.191.027).
- 2 Stadsarchief Rotterdam (hereafter NL-SAR), Handschriftenverzameling Gemeente Rotterdam, aanvullingen 1988-1996, cat. nr. 33-02, inv. nr. 9552, Letter Strauch to Pincoffs, 21 January 1879. A duplicate of the letter can be found in: Nationaal Archief Den Haag (hereafter NL-HANA), Archief van de NAHV, (1854) 1880-1959 (1981) (hereafter

Archief NAHV), cat. nr. 2.18.10.09, inv. nr. 655, Letter Strauch to Pincoffs, 21 January 1879.

- 3 Kamiel Franssens, 'De vestiging van "Kerdijk en Pincoffs" te Banana, 1857-1859', *Mededelingen der zittingen van de Koninklijke Akademie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen* 22 (1976) 683-697.
- 4 Strauch had already been the secretary-general of the Association Internationale Africaine, a predecessor to the CEHC.
- 5 Bram Oosterwijk, *Ik verlang geen dank. Lodewijk Pincoffs (1827-1911)* (Douane 2011) 145-150.
- 6 Herman Obdeijn, 'The New Africa Trading Company and the Struggle for Import Duties in the Congo Free State, 1886-1894', *African Economic History* (hereafter AEH) 12 (1983) 195-212; Laurens Van der Laan, 'Trading in the Congo: The NAHV from 1918 to 1955', *AEH* 12 (1983) 241-259.

because of the dominance of infamous (Anglo-)Belgian concession companies such as the Anglo-Belgian Indian Rubber Company (ABIR) or Anversoise during the late 1890s and early 1900s, as well as conglomerates such as Société Générale in the imperial economy of the 1920s onwards.<sup>7</sup> Yet as this article demonstrates, imperial expansion under the Congo Free State relied from the start on foreign private individuals, including Dutch entrepreneurs, for their knowledge, their capital, and the taxes they paid, even if this relationship was not necessarily symbiotic at all times.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, these developments took place in a time of economic transition on the African continent as a result of the transformation from an economy that was mainly based on the slave trade to the so-called ‘legitimate commerce’ in agricultural commodities.<sup>9</sup>

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised that imperialism was very much a transnational phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Belgians were active in European imperial expansion, for example through capital investments or collecting scientific knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Foreigners also played a significant role in ‘Belgian’ imperial expansion, in positions ranging from military service to civil servants, entrepreneurs, and investors.<sup>12</sup> Building and expanding on these insights, this article demonstrates that the ‘Dutch’ contribution to empire-building in imperial Congo was mostly through

- 7 See for example Frans Buelens, *Congo 1885-1960. Een financieel-economische geschiedenis* (EPO 2007) 103. Exceptions are: Jules Marchal, *L'État Libre du Congo. Paradis perdu. L'histoire du Congo 1876-1900* (2 Vols.) (Bellings 1996); Bas De Roo, ‘The Trouble with Tariffs: Customs Policies and the Shaky Balance between Colonial and Private Interests in the Congo (1886-1914)’, *TSEG-Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 12:3 (2015) 1-21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/tseg.61>.
- 8 De Roo, ‘The Trouble with Tariffs’.
- 9 See in general Peter Cain and Antony Hopkins, ‘Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas II: New Imperialism, 1850-1945’, *The Economic History Review* 40:1 (1987) 1-26.
- 10 Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, ‘Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition’, *Journal of Modern History* 16:4 (2018) 429-452. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2018-4-429>.
- 11 Rene Alltmont, ‘Belgian Overseas Expansion during the Nineteenth Century’ (PhD Dissertation, University of Delaware 1969); Jan-Frederik Abbeloos, ‘Belgium’s Expansionist History between 1870 and 1930: Imperialism and the Globalisation of Belgian Business’, in: Mary N. Harris and Csaba Lévai (eds.), *Europe and its Empires* (Plus 2008) 105-127; Jan Vandersmissen, *Koningen van de wereld. Leopold II en de aardrijkskundige beweging* (Acco 2009); Tobit Vandamme, ‘Beyond Belgium: The Business Empire of Edouard Empain in the First Global Economy (1880-1914)’ (PhD Dissertation, Ghent University 2019). See also the contributions in this special issue.
- 12 Mathias Broeckaert, ‘Het blank personeel van de Kongo-staat 1885-1908. Recruitering – profiel – carrières?’ (PhD Dissertation, Ghent University 1988). See also Janne Lahti and Kevin Goergen in this issue: Janne Lahti, ‘Finns in Congo: Opportunities and Colonial Experiences in a Foreign Empire’, *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.20006>; Kevin Goergen, ‘Negotiating Assimilation: Luxembourgers in the Congo Basin During the Interwar Period (1918-1939)’, *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgnlchr.20005>.

entrepreneurial knowledge and capital investments. The Congo Free State presented an ‘empire of opportunity’ to foreigners in many ways, partly due to its status as an international colony under Leopold’s rule rather than Belgian administration.<sup>13</sup> These Dutch entrepreneurs at first operated (often unsuccessfully) in the Dutch East Indies before branching out to West Africa and the West of Central Africa, as imperial Congo presented opportunities not available to those entrepreneurs in the Dutch empire. They shared resources and capital across empires, including the Dutch and ‘Belgian’ empires.<sup>14</sup>

The article departs from the conceptual premise of the entrepreneur, defined as ‘being those taking risks in matters of trade or production, introducing innovations, making decisions based on information that others did not possess and searching for opportunities where most perceived risk’.<sup>15</sup> Cátia Antunes, Susana Münch Miranda, and João Paulo Salvado have argued that (economic) participation in (early modern) foreign colonial empires could be divided into three categories: labour specialists (such as seamen), investors, and merchants.<sup>16</sup> In this case of Dutch entrepreneurs in late nineteenth-century Congo, the line between investors and merchants in particular was vague at best, as they diversified from ‘merchant’ to ‘merchant-investor’ in the space of twenty years. Yet, as their core business was trade and production, the article assumes the concept of the entrepreneur as its premise.

The article follows a chronological structure to analyse three important moments in Dutch commercial involvement in imperial expansion in the Congo Basin: first, the (financial) participation of Pincoffs and his associates in the initial ‘expeditions’ sent by Leopold to the Congo Basin in the late 1870s; second, the role of the NAHV in the period before and briefly after the Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference of 1889–1890; and third, the

13 See Bernhard C. Schär, ‘Introduction: The Dutch East Indies and Europe, ca. 1800–1930: An Empire of Demands and Opportunities’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 134:3 (2019) 4–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10738>; Moritz von Brescius, ‘Empires of Opportunity: German Naturalists in British India and the Frictions of Transnational Science’, *Modern Asian Studies* 55:6 (2021) 1926–1971. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X19000428>.

14 See also the introduction of this issue, in particular the reflections regarding ‘transimperial opportunities’: Janne Schreurs and Eline Ceulemans, ‘Transimperial Opportunities? Small

State Colonisation of Congo (1876–1940)’, *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.22632>.

15 ‘Exploiting the Empire of Others: Dutch Investment in Foreign Colonial Resources, 1570–1800’, NWO, 1 Aug. 2020, [www.nwo.nl/en/projects/vic191027](http://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/vic191027). Accessed 15 April 2024.

16 Cátia Antunes, Susana Münch Miranda, and João Paulo Salvado, ‘The Resources of Others: Dutch Exploitation of European Expansion and Empires, 1570–1800’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* (hereafter *TvG*) 131:3 (2018) 501–521, 503–504. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2018.3.006>. ANTU. See also the article of Lahti in this issue for an example

NAHV's participation in the Compagnie du Kasai (CDK) after 1901 in the Congo Free State and, from 1908 until the mid-1920s, in Belgian Congo.<sup>17</sup> These three moments highlight the difficulties, risks and opportunities for Dutch entrepreneurs associated with 'exploiting the empire of others'.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on diplomatic archives, the archives of the AHV and NAHV, and published pamphlets, the article's two main contributions lie in analysing the enduring role of the Dutch entrepreneurs between the 1870s and the 1920s in the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo and in presenting new archival evidence for Dutch 'commercial' as well as 'government' views with regards to the Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference of 1889-1890 and Dutch participation in the CDK. By demonstrating the importance of foreigners in the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo, the article also contributes to the study of the often transimperial nature of empire-building across Africa, with an eye to 'national' differences between empires as well.<sup>19</sup>

### The Afrikaansche Handels-Vereeniging and Leopold II (1870s)

Dutch private involvement with West Africa through trade preceded the process known as the Partition of Africa, which mostly took place in the decennium between 1875 and 1885, by some thirty years. In light of the Dutch lack of interest in establishing a colony in Africa throughout the majority of the nineteenth century, the engagement of Dutch entrepreneurs in the Congo Basin from the late 1850s onwards may cause some surprise. After the abolition of the slave trade in 1814, the Dutch State retained sovereignty over various fortifications on the Gold Coast. As Dutch nineteenth-century imperial policy was largely focused on expansion in the Indonesian archipelago, the Dutch State displayed a distinct disinterest in the African continent, ultimately transferring sovereignty over the Gold Coast fortifications to the British in 1871-1872.<sup>20</sup> Efforts by entrepreneurs from Amsterdam to revive trade with the Gold Coast in the 1830s were

of the first: Lahti, 'Finns in Congo'. Of course, participation in foreign empires went beyond the economic space as well, but this will not be dealt with in this article.

17 Daniel Vangroenweghe, *Leopold II en Kongo. Het evenaarsdistrict en het Kroondomein, 1885-1908* (Copytheek 1985); idem, *Voor rubber en ivoor. Leopold II en de ophanging van Stokes* (Van Halewyck 2005); idem, *Rood rubber. Leopold II en zijn Congo* (De Geus 2010); Jules Marchal, E.D. Morel tegen Leopold II en de Kongostaat (EPO 1985); idem, *L'État Libre du Congo*.

18 See <https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/vic191027>. Accessed 15 April 2024.

19 See, for example, Ulrike Lindner, 'Colonialism as a European Project in Africa Before 1914? British and German Concepts of Colonial Rule in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Comparativ* 19:1 (2009) 88-106.

20 Reinder Storm, '1871: Kust van Guinea verdwijnt van de Nederlandse kaart', in: Lex Heerma van Voss et al. (eds.), *Nog meer wereldgeschiedenis van Nederland* (AmboAnthos 2022) 397-402. In general, see: Maarten

unsuccessful, partly owing to a lack of state support.<sup>21</sup> Yet the transition in West Africa from slave trade to 'legitimate commerce' in palm oil and other raw commodities attracted new entrepreneurs, in the Dutch case mostly those from the growing port city of Rotterdam.<sup>22</sup> In 1845, Huibert van Rijckevorsel established a trade in palm oil in Elmina, and when his brother-in-law Hendrik Muller Szn. took over the family firm Van Rijckevorsel & Zoonen in the early 1860s, he refocused efforts to Liberia in an effort to move away from the Gold Coast and renamed it as Muller & Co.<sup>23</sup>

Following this lead, two Rotterdam entrepreneurs, the aforementioned Lodewijk Pincoffs and Henry Kerdijk, outfitted ships to the Niger and Congo Rivers in 1857, and subsequently established factories in the coastal areas of both streams.<sup>24</sup> The factory on the Niger River was soon disbanded, but the firm Kerdijk & Pincoffs quickly expanded in the coastal Congo Basin.<sup>25</sup> In 1866, its name was changed to the Afrikaansche Handels-Vereeniging (AHV), and the firm competed in the Congo Basin with British, Portuguese, and French firms. The AHV traded primarily in palm oil and, to a lesser extent, in other commodities such as palm nut kernels and peanuts, in exchange for arms and alcohol.<sup>26</sup> Henry Morton Stanley, who visited the factory in Banana at the mouth of the Congo River in 1879, spoke of the 'great Dutch Company', indicating that the AHV was among the larger firms in the Congo Basin.<sup>27</sup>

These Dutch entrepreneurs active in West (Central) Africa (the region roughly from Liberia to northern Angola) were united by several factors, including their Rotterdam heritage, their failed attempts to break into the Dutch East Indies trade which was dominated by Amsterdam-based merchants, a focus on the trade in raw commodities, and strong ties to British entrepreneurs from Manchester and Liverpool who were already operating

Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst van het moderne imperialisme. Koloniën en buitenlandse politiek 1870-1902* (De Bataafsche Leeuw 1985).

21 René Baesjou and Pieter Emmer, 'The Dutch in West Africa: Shipping, Factories and Colonisation, 1800-1870', in: John Everaert and Jan Parmentier (eds.), *International Conference on Shipping, Factories and Colonization* (Paleis der Academiën 1996) 191-213.

22 For the transition: Angus Dalrymple-Smith, *Commercial Transitions and Abolition in West Africa 1630-1860* (Brill 2020). For Rotterdam's rise, see Paul van de Laar, *Stad van formaat. Geschiedenis van Rotterdam in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Waanders 2000).

23 Baesjou and Emmer, 'The Dutch in West Africa', 198-205; Hendrik Muller, *Muller. Een Rotterdams zeehandelaar Hendrik Muller Szn (1819-1898)* (Interbook International 1977) 107-214.

24 Franssens, 'De vestiging', 689-695; Oosterwijk, *Ik verlang*, 31-54.

25 Niek Joosse, *Afrikaanse droom: De handel van Henry P. Kerdijk en Lodewijk Pincoffs in Afrika, 1857-1879* (MA thesis in History, Erasmus University Rotterdam 2016) 23-25.

26 Oosterwijk, *Ik verlang*, 31-54.

27 Henry Morton Stanley, *The Congo and the Founding of its Free State: A Story of Work and Exploration* (New York NY: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington 1885) ix, 72.

in the palm oil trade in West (Central) Africa since the 1830s.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, except for Muller Szn., these men never set foot in Africa. Instead, they relied on their trade networks with British entrepreneurs, and on local Portuguese-speaking middlemen, often of Portuguese-African descent, known as *corradores* or *capitas*.<sup>29</sup>

Until the mid-1870s, the Congo Basin aroused neither interest nor tension or conflict amongst European imperial powers. This changed rapidly in the years to follow, as the Belgian King Leopold II and his supporters sought to establish a colony, crucially inspired by the cultivation system operative in the Dutch East Indies.<sup>30</sup> In 1876, Leopold organised the Brussels Geographical Conference, but no Dutch actors in public or private capacity were invited. Subsequently, Pincoffs reached out to Leopold to discuss cooperation.<sup>31</sup> Following the conference, Leopold set up his Association Internationale Africaine (AIA) to muster support for his colonisation plans in Central Africa. Following further discussions with Leopold, on 27 April 1877 Pincoffs set up the Dutch department of the AIA, the Nederlands Afrikaans Comité (Dutch-African Committee), under the chairmanship of the Dutch Prince Henry.<sup>32</sup> The AIA, chaired by Leopold, ostensibly aimed to further European humanitarian motives in West Central Africa, but in reality mostly functioned as a vehicle for Leopold and imperial propagandists in Belgium to gain support for the colonisation of the Congo Basin. Under the banner of the AIA, the Comité d'Études du Haut-Congo (CEHC) was formed with financial backing from Belgian as well as foreign investors, including Pincoffs.<sup>33</sup> The CEHC appointed Stanley to lead its 'explorations' in the Congo Basin, with the goal to assess opportunities for trade and the navigability of the Congo River.<sup>34</sup>

28 This aligns with: Cain and Hopkins, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism II'.

29 Oosterwijk, *Ik verlang*, 31-54; for the *corradores*, see Edouard Destrain, 'Bassin du Quilou Niadi. Le District de Stéphanieville', *Bulletin de Société Royale belge de Géographie* 15 (1891) 485-513, 504-506.

30 Henk Wesseling, 'Nederland als koloniaal model', in: Henk Wesseling (ed.), *Indië verloren, rampspoed geboren. En andere opstellen over de geschiedenis van de Europese expansie* (Ooievaar 1988) 140-176; Jean Stengers, 'Léopold II et le modèle colonial hollandais', *TVG* 90 (1977) 46-71. See also: Vincent Viaene, 'King Leopold's Imperialism and the Origins of the Belgian Colonial Party, 1860-1905', *The Journal of Modern History* 80:4 (2008) 741-790. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/591110>.

31 Kamiel Franssens, 'Nederland Aardrijkskundige Conferentie van Brussel (1877-1879)', in: Pierre

Staner and Jean Stengers (eds.), *Bijdragen over de Aardrijkskundige Conferentie van 1876* (Koninklijke Academie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen 1976) 501-516, 505-509.

32 Franssens, 'Nederland', 505-509.

33 Jean Stengers, 'Leopold II and the Association Internationale du Congo', in: Stig Förster, Wolfgang Mommsen and Ronald Robinson (eds.), *Bismarck, Europe and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition* (German Historical Institute 1988) 229-244.

34 Neal Ascherson, *The King Incorporated: Leopold II in the Age of Trusts* (George Allen & Unwin 1963) 107-109; Stengers, 'Leopold II and the Association', 238-239; Tim Jeal, *Stanley: The Impossible Life of Africa's Greatest Explorer* (Faber and Faber 2007) 233-240.





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**Figure 1.** Cartoon entitled 'Vooruit!! En niet terug!!' ('Move ahead!! And do not return!!') by monogrammist JH (the Netherlands) on the fraud of Lodewijk Pincoffs and his flight to the United States carrying bags of money that belonged to the AHV, 1879. © Rijksmuseum, RP-P-08-89.270. Public Domain, available at <https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/200598344>.



Pincoffs and Leopold II had an interest in supporting each other.<sup>35</sup> The AHV promised to pay 145,000 guilders to the funds of the CEHC.<sup>36</sup> During their already mentioned dinner in January 1879, they decided to expand trade at the mouth of the Congo River. It appears that this agreement offered the men mutual benefits. For Pincoffs, it meant an exploration of the trading opportunities upstream of the Congo River, which was a dire necessity given the financial situation of his firm. For Leopold, it meant financial backing, while he would also receive knowledge of the commercial opportunities on the coast. The Dutch State's lack of interest in imperial ventures in Africa made Dutch private participation less threatening than the involvement of British or French actors. Nationality thus mattered here, yet mostly for what the Dutch entrepreneurs were *not*.

On 17 May 1879, however, the collaboration scheme between Pincoffs and Leopold II fell apart. The AHV commissioner and banker Marten Mees received news of Pincoffs requesting short-term loans on the London capital market, with extremely high interest rates.<sup>37</sup> Once Mees confronted Pincoffs, the latter fled first to Brussels and subsequently to New York, while his co-director Henry Kerdijk retracted to Brussels and Antwerp but was caught and extradited back to the Netherlands (Figure 1).<sup>38</sup> The AHV's shareholders in Rotterdam, meanwhile, were faced with substantial losses.<sup>39</sup> In late 1879, the AHV was re-established as the Nieuwe Afrikaansche Handels-Vennootschap (NAHV) under the directorship of Muller Szn., Rotterdam's most experienced entrepreneur in the West African trade at this point.<sup>40</sup> The NAHV retained all the assets of the AHV, including factories, ships, and employees. The impact of this affair would have largely been confined to Rotterdam, except for the fact that Pincoffs's financial commitment inevitably also had international consequences: the AHV had various investors from Britain and Germany who had lost money.<sup>41</sup>

Literature on Pincoffs's involvement with Leopold's early efforts to obtain an African colony has generally highlighted the burden of this unsuccessful collaboration with Pincoffs, rather than the opportunity for Leopold that resulted from the bankruptcy.<sup>42</sup> A remarkable letter from 26 November 1890 by the King to Joseph Wolseley Garnet, a British general, encapsulates this emphasis within the historiography to date. Leopold railed against Pincoffs's financial malversations, claiming the CEHC was saddled with significant deficits after the promised sum did not materialise. At the same time, Leopold claimed, the AHV had always paid out substantial dividends

35 Oosterwijk, *Ik verlang*, 145-150.

36 Ibid., 147; Franssens, 'Nederland', 505-508.

37 Oosterwijk, *Ik verlang*, 151-154.

38 Ibid.

39 Joost Jonker, MeesPierson, *schakel tussen verleden en toekomst. Traditie en vernieuwing in het*

*Nederlandse bankwezen* (MeesPierson 1997)

36-37.

40 Muller, Muller, 303-340.

41 Oosterwijk, *Ik verlang*, 178-226; Franssens, 'Nederland', 505-513.

42 See, for example, Oosterwijk, *Ik verlang*.



**Figure 2.** Stock Certificate of the NAHV, 1879. © Francoisdjvr, cco, via Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NAHV\\_Stock\\_Certificate\\_\(front\).tif](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NAHV_Stock_Certificate_(front).tif).

and the NAHV declined to make up for the sum.<sup>43</sup> While these statements are largely true, this account neglects the opportunity the bankruptcy of the AHV had presented to Leopold.<sup>44</sup> With the exception of the Dutch, foreign investors received their money back, as Leopold set up a new, third organisation: the Association Internationale du Congo (AIC), an organisational smokescreen to further his colonisation plans and essentially ‘nationalise’ his nominally international project.<sup>45</sup> In a sense, the AHV bankruptcy thus presented Leopold, Strauch, and their supporters with the opportunity to advance their goals, notwithstanding the fact that the support of the Dutch entrepreneurs had been crucial earlier.<sup>46</sup>

### The NAHV at the Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference (1889-1890)

After the bankruptcy of the AHV, various Rotterdam entrepreneurs already engaged through investments got to work to resurrect the Dutch trade with the Congo Basin. Led by Muller Szn., a restructuring and recapitalisation led to the (re-)establishment of the NAHV in late 1879 (Figure 2). Political developments quickly necessitated the firm to adapt to the new circumstances, particularly with efforts to colonise parts of Africa gaining momentum in Europe’s political capitals. The NAHV, with some support of the Dutch State and other ‘foreign’ firms operating in the region, lobbied for a free trade zone in the Congo Basin during the run-up to the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885.<sup>47</sup> The Berlin Conference was primarily concerned with free trade and navigation in the Congo Basin, giving the NAHV an obvious interest in the outcome: indeed, its new director Muller Szn. attended the Berlin Conference.<sup>48</sup> A new state under Leopold’s rule was formally established on 1 July 1885, with Leopold announcing on 1 August that the powers had been transferred from the AIC to the Congo Free State.<sup>49</sup> In 1886, the NAHV

43 Archief van het Koninkrijk Paleis, Brussels, Cabinet de Léopold II, LI, Archives relatives au développement extérieur de la Belgique sous le règne de Léopold II, 1865-1909, cat. nr. 543-158, inv. nr. 377, piece nr. 11, Letter Leopold II to Joseph Wolseley Garnet, 26 November 1890; see also Cornelis Vermeulen, *De Afrikaansche handels-vereeniging en haar werkring. Rapport aan den Hogen Raad der Nederlanden* (Rotterdam: Wyt 1880) 22-35.

44 Jean Stengers, ‘Leopold II et la rivalité franco-anglaise en Afrique, 1882-1884’, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 47:2 (1969) 425-479, 433-438.

45 Ibid., 437.

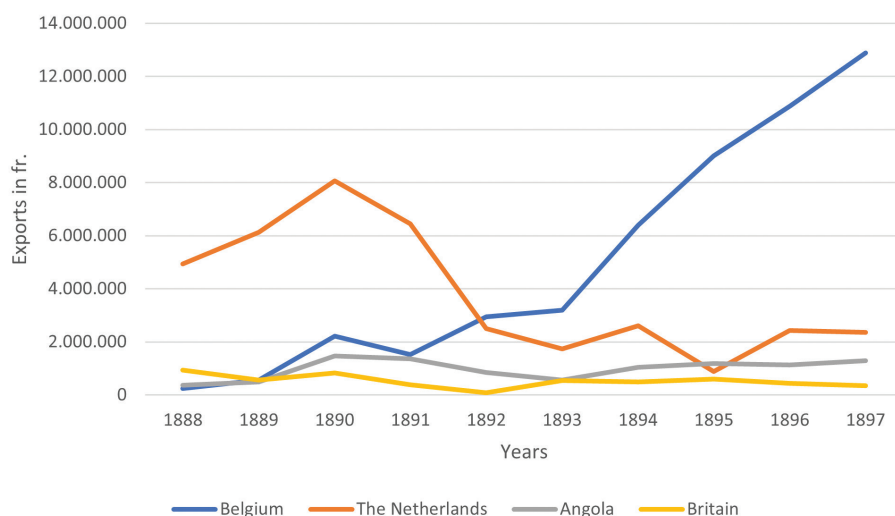
46 Marchal, *L’État Libre du Congo*, 49-51.

47 Matthew Craven, ‘Between Law and History: The Berlin Conference of 1884-1884 and the Logic of Free Trade’, *London Review of International Law* 3:1 (2015) 31-59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/lril/lrv002>; Henk Wesseling, ‘Nederland en de Conferentie van Berlijn, 1884-1885’, *TVG* 93 (1980) 559-576, 570-571; Muller, *Muller*, 371-372.

48 Muller, *Muller*, 371-372.

49 Jean Stengers, ‘Leopold II et la fondation de l’État Indépendant du Congo’, in: Jean Stengers (ed.), *Congo, mythes et réalités. 100 ans d’histoire* (Editions Ducolot 1989) 41-78; Pierre-Luc Plasman, ‘L’État indépendant du Congo et Léopold II (1876-1906). Étude sur le paradoxe de

Graph 1: Exports from the Congo Free State (in fr.), 1888-1897



**Graph 1.** Exports from the Congo Free State (in Belgian fr.), 1888-1897. Source: Alphonse-Jules Wauters, *L'État indépendant du Congo; historique, géographie physique, ethnographie, situation économique, organisation politique* (Librarie Falk 2008) 484.

successfully led opposition to the establishment of a tax on possessions in the Congo Free State, bringing together French, British, and Portuguese firms to lobby against these levies.<sup>50</sup> As Graph 1 shows, the NAHV was the largest firm active in the Congo Free State during the 1880s: even if the numbers are not overly reliable, the absence of other Dutch firms in the Congo Free State makes it clear that exports by the NAHV to the Netherlands made up a significant part of the exports from the Congo Free State in this decade.

All this changed with the convention of the Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference in November 1889 organised by Leopold, following a campaign by Charles Lavigerie – a French cardinal, Archbishop of Algiers and founder of the White Fathers missionary organisation – to definitively eradicate slavery from the Congo Basin.<sup>51</sup> Lavigerie showed that the slave trade had not been banned from the Congo Basin despite previous promises. Rather than fighting these allegations, Leopold used the moment to shore up his

la gouvernance léopoldienne' (PhD Dissertation, UCLouvain 2015) 38. See also: Guy Vanthemsche, 'The Historiography of Belgian Colonialism in the Congo', in: Harris and Lévai, *Europe and its Empires*, 89-119.

50 De Roo, 'The Trouble with Tariffs', 10-11; see also Archief Buitenlandse Zaken, Brussels, Archives

Africaines, Classement Provisoire, cat. nr. 2571, Pièce nr. 9, Letter De Bloeme et al., 30 June 1886.

51 See Luc Chatelet, 'Het humanitaire optreden van Leopold II in Kongo-Vrijstaat. De anti-slavernijconferentie van Brussel (1889-1890)', *Afrika Focus* 4:1-2 (1988) 5-47.

international support, with the underlying aim of consolidating power.<sup>52</sup> Concerned with the 'humanitarian issue' of slavery, most other European powers agreed with Leopold's proposal to convene in Brussels to take measures against the slave trade, slavery, and alcohol trafficking in the region.<sup>53</sup>

Import duties had been prohibited by the agreements made in Berlin for the duration of the first twenty years of the Congo Free State's existence.<sup>54</sup> At the Brussels Conference, however, the Congo Free State's administration proposed to levy import duties on firms operating within the State's territory, so the revenues could be used to combat slavery and the slave trade. In truth, Leopold would mostly use the money to improve the dire financial situation of the Congo Free State.<sup>55</sup> Many of the affected firms argued the proposed tariffs went against the Berlin agreements, but to no avail.<sup>56</sup> Even if France and Germany viewed the imposition of tariffs as contravening the Berlin Acts, practical considerations trumped previous arrangements: apart from humanitarian considerations, the agreements also allowed Britain and France to levy new tariffs themselves.<sup>57</sup>

As a result, firms operating in the Congo Free State were mostly left without support from the countries present at the Brussels Conference. Even Britain, traditionally the main proponent of free trade, was on the State's side, favouring humanitarian motives over economic ones.<sup>58</sup> The Dutch State, as had been the case in Berlin, opposed the proposed agreement for a long time, proclaiming on the one hand a commitment to free trade and support for the NAHV, and on the other hand an unwillingness, shared by the NAHV, to contribute financially to putting an end to the slave trade.<sup>59</sup> In the end, only the Dutch delegation led by the Dutch ambassador in Brussels, Baron Louis Gericke van Herwijnen, the NAHV, the United States, and the French firm Daumas remained firmly opposed.<sup>60</sup>

52 Ibid., 10-12.

53 Ibid., 18-20.

54 Bas De Roo, 'Taxation in the Congo Free State, an Exceptional Case? (1885-1908)', *Economic History of Developing Regions* 32:2 (2017) 97-126, 106. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20780389.2017.1327807>.

55 De Roo, 'The Trouble with Tariffs'; idem, 'Customs Law in the Congo: On the Fiscal Bargaining Process Between the Colonial State and Private Enterprise in the Making of Commercial Law', in: Serge Dauchy et al. (eds.), *Colonial Adventures: Commercial Law and Practice in the Making* (Brill 2021) 316-343.

56 See Craven, 'Between Law and History'; Immanuel Geiss, 'Free Trade,

Internationalization of the Congo Basin, and the Principle of Effective Occupation', in: Förster, Mommsen and Robinson, *Bismarck, Europe and Africa*, 263-280.

57 NL-HANA, Archief Buitenlandse Zaken A-Dossiers (hereafter BZ A-Dossiers), cat. nr. 2.05.03, inv. nr. 207, Congo-aangelegenheden I en II, Letters Gericke van Herwijnen to Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 November 1890 and 13 November 1890, with Attachments by NAHV.

58 NL-HANA, BZ A-Dossiers, inv. nr. 207, Letter Salisbury to Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11 October 1890.

59 Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland*, 91-92.

60 Chatelet, 'Het humanitaire optreden', 33.

The NAHV not only lobbied the Dutch government to represent its interests at the Brussels Conference,<sup>61</sup> but also set up a more general public relations campaign against the Congo Free State's proposals.<sup>62</sup> Several Dutch authors published pamphlets that criticised the tariffs. In an anonymous essay, NAHV director Willem Schalkwijk, for instance, stressed that Leopold had promised tariff-free trade to the NAHV in 1884.<sup>63</sup> He claimed total exports from the Congo Free State had dropped after 1885, thereby implying that Leopold's policies hindered rather than aided trade.<sup>64</sup> In another anonymous pamphlet, Schalkwijk stated that the NAHV had to pay no less than 24 types of taxes and duties, arguing that this also kept other firms from investing.<sup>65</sup> In opposition to the Dutch position, several pamphlets were published in Belgium as well, mostly emphasising the importance of raising money to combat the slave trade, and arguing that the fourth article of the Acts of the Berlin Conference did not preclude the establishment of tariffs if strictly necessary.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, comparisons were made with Java in the Dutch East Indies, where the Dutch colonial government had imposed a similar tax burden on (foreign) companies.<sup>67</sup> Even worse for the NAHV, various other Dutch authors published pamphlets in support of the Congo Free State, citing humanitarian motives.<sup>68</sup>

As a result, the NAHV-backed campaign lacked impact and weakened the NAHV's and the Dutch position in Brussels. In December 1889, Gericke van Herwijnen appeared to succumb to international pressure, but at the last moment withheld his permission by order of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Eventually, faced with momentous international pressure and a lack of allies, the Dutch lobbyists gave in and the Brussels Acts were signed in July 1890, establishing 10 per cent *ad valorem* import tariffs on firms

61 NL-HANA, BZ A-Dossiers, inv. nr. 207, Letter NAHV to Gericke van Herwijnen, 12 November 1890.

62 See for a more elaborate analysis Jean-Luc Vellut, 'The Congo Mirror (River Congo, No. 1, 22 April 1891): Glimpses at the Entry of Congo on a Global Scene', in: Patricia van Schuylenbergh and Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi (eds.), *The Congo Free State: What Could Archives Tell Us? New Lights and Research Perspectives* (Peter Lang 2022) 337-356.

63 Anonymous [Willem Schalkwijk], *De Anti-Slavernij-Conferentie en invoerrechten in den Congo-Staat* (Rotterdam: D. Van Sijn & Zoon 1890) 4. Later versions were published under Schalkwijk's name.

64 Ibid., 11-13.

65 Een koopman [Willem Schalkwijk], *De Kongo-Vrijstaat en de handel: Antwoord op de brochure "La Conférence de Bruxelles et les Pays-Bas" par "un Ami de la vérité"* (Rotterdam: D. Van Sijn & Zoon 1890) 23-24 and 29-30.

66 Un ami de la vérité [Anonymous], *L'État indépendant du Congo et la compagnie du Congo* (Rotterdam, par un ami de la vérité (Antwerp: Max Ruef 1890) 14-15; Un ami de la vérité [Anonymous], *La conférence de Bruxelles et les Pays-Bas par un ami de la vérité* (Antwerp: Max Ruef 1890) 9 and 12.

67 Un ami de la vérité [Anonymous], *L'État*, 5; Un ami de la vérité [Anonymous], *La conférence*, 22.

68 Joan Bohl, *Nederlands Congo-belang* (Amsterdam: Brinkman & Van der Meulen 1890) 6; Een



operating in the Congo Free State.<sup>69</sup> In the aftermath of the Conference, Gericke van Herwijnen wrote that the Congo Free State's administration now complained that most firms had moved to then Portuguese-dominated Angola, supposedly as the result of the high tax burden in the Congo Free State.<sup>70</sup> The Portuguese, although nominally supportive of the proposed Acts, spied an opportunity to lure business away from the Congo Free State. Among the relocating foreign companies was the NAHV, whose business had originally started in Northern Angola. In 1892, the NAHV also officially moved its headquarter to Cabinda, the Angolan enclave north of the Congo River, and subsequently to Brazzaville, located in French Congo, in 1893.<sup>71</sup>

Since then, most of the NAHV business interests were pivoted to French Congo, but the firm felt unable to leave the Congo Free State for good. It stayed in business in the Kasai region, which after 1892 remained as one of the few free trading areas, as well as in Eastern Congo, where the infamous Arab-Swahili slave trader, Hamad bin Muhammad al-Murjabi – who was known in Europe as Tippu Tip – had a strong hold on the ivory trade. Initially an ally of the Congo Free State, Al-Murjabi turned against Leopold in the late 1880s, and following the Brussels Conference, the NAHV allied with the Arab-Swahili slave trader in an effort to monopolise the ivory trade against encroachment by the imperial state.<sup>72</sup> As the largest slave trader in Congo and near-monopoly holder on the ivory trade from the interior, Al-Murjabi's business model was obviously threatened by the proposals of the Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference.<sup>73</sup> The Force Publique, the Congo Free State's army, set up various campaigns against Al-Murjabi during the so-called Congo Arab War of 1892–1894, eventually ending in victory for the Congo Free State.<sup>74</sup>

Nederlander [Anonymous], *Bedenkingen tegen Nederland's verzet in de Congo-kwestie* (Amsterdam: De Erven van Munster 1890) 17.

69 De Roo, 'The Trouble with Tariffs', 13–16.

70 NL-HANA, BZ A-Dossiers, inv. nr. 207, Letter Gericke van Herwijnen to Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 March 1891; Letter Van Heeckeren van Kell to Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 April 1891.

71 Obdeijn, 'The New Africa Trading Company', 206; Van der Laan, 'Trading in the Congo', 241.

72 Paul Ceulemans, *La question arabe et le Congo (1883–1892)* (Duculot 1959) 169–170; Philippe Maréchal, *De 'Arabische' campagne in het Maniema-gebied (1892–1894). Situering binnen het kolonisatieproces in de Onafhankelijke Congostaat* (Royal Museum for Central Africa 1992) 273; Pierre Salmon, 'L'État Indépendant du Congo

et la question arabe (1885–1892)', in: Koninklijke Academie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen (ed.), *Bijdragen over de honderdste verjaardag van de Onafhankelijke Kongostaat* (Koninklijke Academie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen 1988) 437–460; Robert Harms, *Land of Tears: The Exploration and Exploitation of Equatorial Africa* (Basic Books 2019) 320–321.

73 Giacomo Macola, 'Warlordism in the Congo Basin between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 56:1 (2023) 1–19, 7–9; François Renault, *Tippo Tip. Un potentat arabe en Afrique centrale au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer 1987) 248–259; Vangroenweghe, *Rood rubber*, 17.

74 Ceulemans, *La question arabe*; Maréchal, *De 'Arabische' campagne*.



The State could now much more effectively tax ivory exports, depriving the NAHV of one of its most profitable business dealings.

Confronted with the inevitable loss of control over the ivory trade, the NAHV tried to aid Leopold's opponents by feeding them information about the 'red rubber' scandals caused by the concession companies.<sup>75</sup> Ironically, the man responsible for most of the campaigning on behalf of the NAHV, Anton Greshoff – who was the firm's main agent based in Africa – changed course by defending Leopold's rule after 1900, even receiving a medal from the Belgian King in 1901.<sup>76</sup> This flip-flop by Greshoff, likely fueled by business motives and a wish to remain in operation within the Congo Free State, neatly encapsulates the opportunistic relationship of the Dutch entrepreneurs with Leopold and the Congo Free State, which in the end mostly benefited the latter two.

### The NAHV and the Compagnie du Kasai (1901-1920s)

A final contribution of the Dutch entrepreneurs to Leopold's empire-building was their often overlooked participation in the Compagnie du Kasai (CDK).<sup>77</sup> The CDK, which was established in 1901, was one of the concession companies in the Congo Free State, albeit less well known than the ABIR or Anversoise. The concession company system in the Congo Free State originated in 1892, when Leopold reorganised the land tenure system, creating a state domain that gave the state full control over parts of the territory that formed the Congo Free State.<sup>78</sup> In 1896, Leopold also announced the creation of the so-called Crown Domain (*Domaine de la Couronne*), amounting to almost 28 per cent of the Congo Free State territory, where only appointed agents could collect commodities such as rubber.<sup>79</sup>

Leopold subsequently expanded this system, allowing private firms to receive monopolies over large swathes of land and the labour supply of its inhabitants.<sup>80</sup> This was not only a violation of previous agreements, the concession companies also quickly became associated with the violent practices later known as the red rubber scandals.<sup>81</sup> The Kasai area, a vast

75 Marchal, *L'État Libre du Congo*, 116-131.

76 Ibid., 332.

77 See for the colonisation of the Kasai: Daisy Martens, 'A History of European Penetration and African Reaction in the Kasai Region of Zaire, 1880-1908' (PhD Dissertation, Simon Fraser University 1980).

78 Vangroenweghe, *Leopold II en Kongo*, 265-298.

79 Emizet François Kisangani, *The Belgian Congo as a Developmental State: Colonialism Revisited* (Routledge 2023) 51.

80 Vangroenweghe, *Leopold II en Kongo*, 91; Harms, *Land of Tears*, 279-285.

81 Robert Harms, 'The End of Red Rubber: A Reassessment', *The Journal of African History* 16:1 (1975) 73-88. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700014110>; idem, 'The World ABIR Made: The Margina-Lopori Basin, 1885-1903', *AEH* 12 (1983) 125-139. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3601320>.

territory in the south-west of the Congo Free State (Figure 3), remained one of the few 'free trade' areas in the colony after 1892, but by 1899 was selected to become a concessionary territory as well.<sup>82</sup> The State owned substantial shares in all these concession companies.<sup>83</sup>

The NAHV once again led opposition to Leopold's plans and cooperated this time with the Belgian firm Société Anonyme de Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo (SAB), one of the Congo Free State's largest firms. Both companies had made substantial investments in the region in the years prior.<sup>84</sup> The Kasai region was primarily known for its wild rubber: as a result, the NAHV and SAB had invested substantially in the region, even if other firms joined the race for rubber as well after 1892.<sup>85</sup> The NAHV and SAB jointly lobbied against the establishment of a monopolistic firm in the region through SAB director Albert Thys, one of the Congo Free State's major business tycoons.<sup>86</sup> Threatening the revocation of operating licenses in the Kasai, the Congo Free State eventually bullied the firms into the formation of the CDK.<sup>87</sup> This presented the NAHV with a dilemma: either they would have to leave the Congo Free State entirely, or they would have to go along with the efforts to establish the CDK against their wishes. In the end, the NAHV again opted to remain in the Congo Free State following Greshoff's advice, who argued that the opportunities to make money on the rubber trade were too great to leave the Kasai for good.<sup>88</sup>

Negotiations between the various parties took some time, with the NAHV and SAB negotiating for a somewhat favourable position within the CDK. The NAHV wanted a fair deal for the factories it held in the Kasai. The Congo Free State and fourteen private firms eventually agreed that the CDK would equally divide its capital shares of just over one million Belgian francs between the Congo Free State (owning shares worth 500,000 francs) and the fourteen firms upon its establishment in 1901.<sup>89</sup> The NAHV and SAB were the largest private shareholders, as Table 1 shows, with the NAHV holding shares worth 85,000 francs.

SAB and NAHV together owned slightly less than 20 per cent of the total number of shares, which means their influence within the CDK had been diminished substantially. The NAHV was allowed to have one director, Georges Philippi, on the board of the CDK.<sup>90</sup> Having agreed to the establishment of

82 Mathieu Zana Etambala, *Veroverd. Bezet. Gekoloniseerd. Congo 1876-1914* (Sterck & De Vreese 2020) 35-37.

83 See for an overview: Heinrich Waltz, *Das Konzessionswesen im Belgischen Kongo* (G. Fischer 1917).

84 Martens, 'A History', 108.

85 Ibid., 106-138.

86 Jean-Luc Vellut, 'Réseaux transnationaux dans l'économie politique du Congo Léopoldien, c. 1885-1910', in: Laurence Marfaing and Brigitte

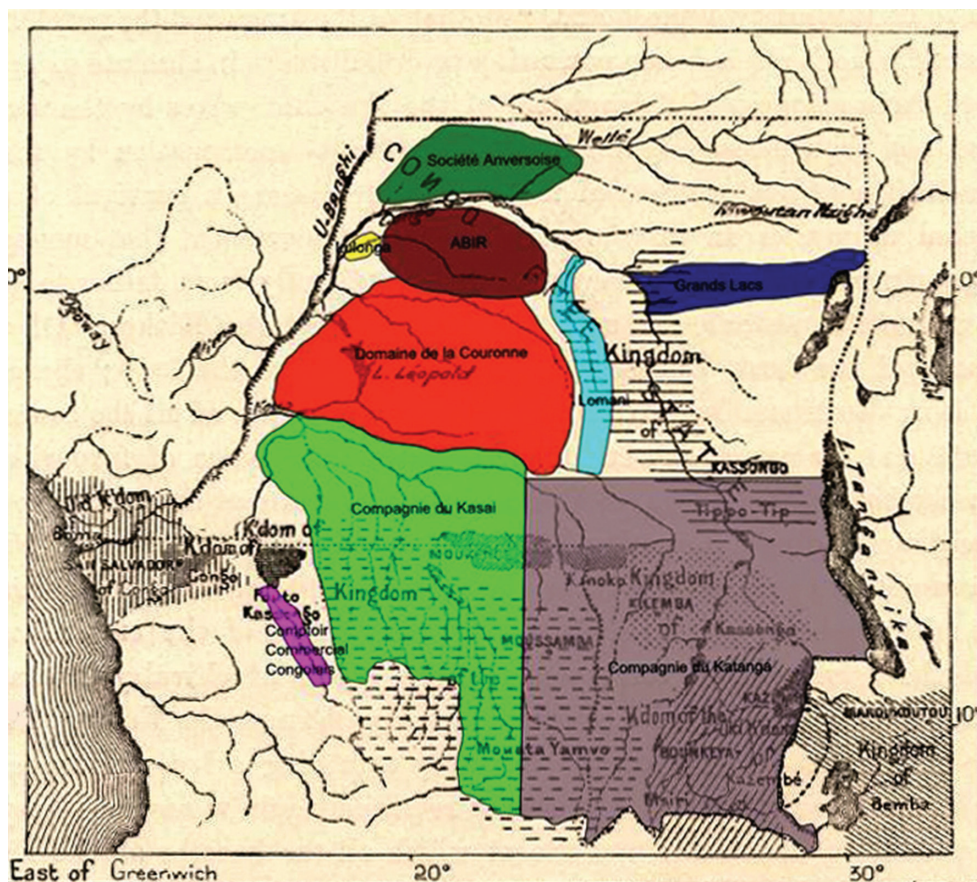
Reinwald (eds.), *Afrikanische Beziehungen, Netzwerke und Räume* (Lit Verlag 2001) 131-146.

87 Martens, 'A History', 83-85.

88 See for example the various correspondences in NL-HANA, Archief NAHV, inv. nr. 678.

89 Martens, 'A History', 114.

90 NL-HANA, Archief NAHV, inv. nr. 678, Letter Georges Philippi to Secretary-General of the Congo Free State, 12 December 1901; Letter Philippi to Compagnie du Kasai, 7 August 1902.



**Figure 3.** Congo Free State concession companies overlain on an old 1890 map of the area. © Roxanna, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Congo\\_concessions.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Congo_concessions.JPG).

Shareholder	Capital Investment in fr.	Shares
Congo Free State	502.500	2010
NAHV	85.000	340
SAB	85.000	340
Produits Végétaux du Haut-Kasaï	63.750	255
Compagnie Anversoise des Plantations du Lufebu	54.250	217
Plantations Lacourt	51.000	204
La Belgika	49.750	199
Comptoirs Congolais Velde	19.250	77
La Kassaïenne	18.750	75
La Djuma	18.500	74
L'Est du Kwango	15.500	62
La Loanje	14.500	58
La Centrale Africaine	13.750	55
Compagnie des Magasins Généraux	7.750	31
Le Trafic Congolais	5.750	23
Total	1.005.000	4020

Table 1. Shares in the Compagnie du Kasaï (1901). Source: Waltz, *Das Konzessionswesen*, 243.

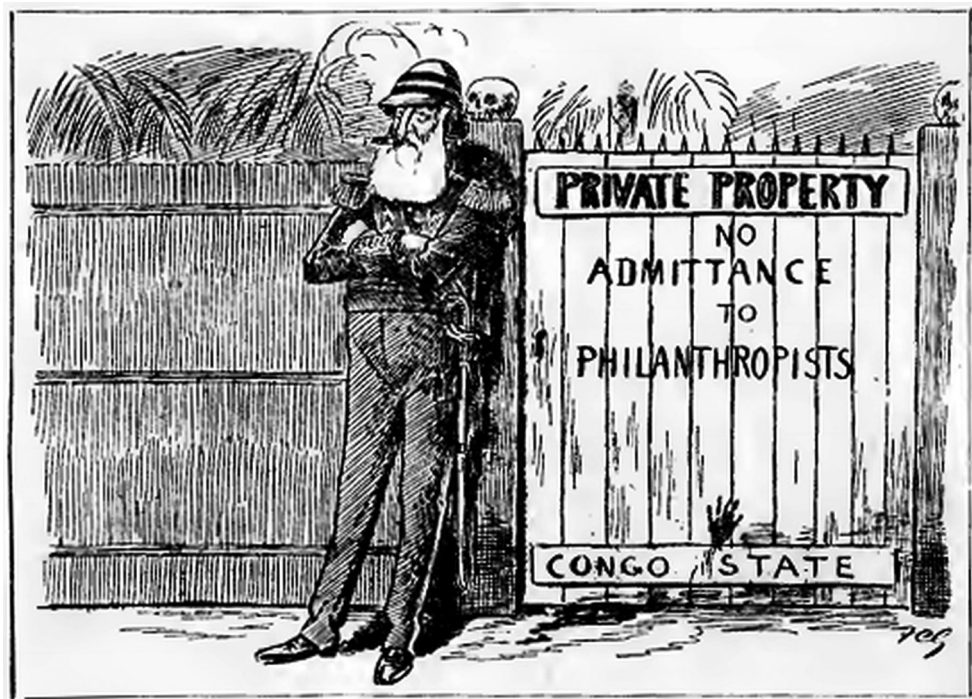
the CDK at least appeared to have made Leopold somewhat more favourable towards the NAHV, as it was allowed to buy a number of factories and adjacent concessions in the Kasaï after 1900, which had not been the case in 1898.<sup>91</sup> In December 1903, the Congo Free State agreed to allow the NAHV to retain its concession in Luebo and some private trade in CDK territory, as long as it did not interfere with the State's rubber trade monopoly.<sup>92</sup> Strife between the NAHV and the administration, however, soon returned.<sup>93</sup> With Philippi being but one of the many directors, the NAHV was unable to sway policy within the CDK. Moreover, many of the NAHV agents on the ground did not participate with the CDK – for example by refusing to hand over rubber to the Company – leading to increasing tensions.<sup>94</sup> After 1904, Philippi appears to have opted to simply collect the dividends flowing from the CDK on behalf of the NAHV, without much effort to influence CDK policy (Figure 4).

91 NL-HANA, Archief NAHV, inv. nr. 125, Letter Greshoff to Secretary-General of the Congo Free State, 11 January 1899 and 2 June 1899; idem, inv. nr. 664, Letter Greshoff to Secretary-General of the Congo Free State, 1895.

92 NL-HANA, Archief NAHV, inv. nr. 125, Letter NAHV to CDK, 1 December 1903.

93 See for the CDK and the red rubber scandals: Etambala, *Veroverd*, 108-116; Martens, 'A History', 342-402; Jan Vansina, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960* (UW Press 2010) 108-119.

94 NL-HANA, Archief NAHV, inv. nr. 678, Letter Cooper to Greshoff, 28 April 1902 and Letter Cooper to Greshoff, 18 July 1902.



▲  
**Figure 4.** Cartoon by Francis Carruthers Gould depicting King Leopold II and the Congo Free State, July 1906. © Francis Carruthers Gould, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cartoon\\_by\\_British\\_caricaturist\\_%27Francis\\_Carruthers\\_Gould%27\\_depicting\\_King\\_Leopold\\_2,\\_and\\_Congo\\_Free\\_State.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cartoon_by_British_caricaturist_%27Francis_Carruthers_Gould%27_depicting_King_Leopold_2,_and_Congo_Free_State.jpg).

After the Belgian take-over of the Congo Free State in 1908, the new Belgian administration took away the CDK's de facto monopoly in 1910.<sup>95</sup> This diminished the opportunities of Dutch entrepreneurs to exploit Belgian Congo's commercial potential, as the CDK was the NAHV's key means of engagement in the region. Moreover, the economy of Belgian Congo was increasingly dominated by large Belgian conglomerates. The NAHV retained some shares in the CDK for some years, but by 1926 had sold all its remaining shares.<sup>96</sup> It was during this period that the NAHV also rebuilt trade relations in Belgian Congo on its own, indicating a thaw in relations between the NAHV and the nascent administration of Belgian Congo.<sup>97</sup> The NAHV remained active in Belgian Congo until the 1950s, when it merged with the Dutch East Indies-originating company Lindeteves.<sup>98</sup> Yet compared to its role in the period of the Congo Free State, the NAHV would not play an active role in the political economy of empire anymore, returning to its initial activities of trade in raw agricultural commodities. By having actively worked to establish the CDK in its early years, however, the NAHV contributed again to empire-building on behalf of the Congo Free State.

## Conclusion

This study of Dutch entrepreneurs in the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo until the mid-1920s presents us with a complex case of transimperial opportunities and operations in the 'empire of others'. Ambivalence, caution, and conflicting interests run deep within the history presented here. At some points in time, there was cautious support for Leopold's imperial ambitions, for example between 1877 and early 1879, when Pincoffs decided to finance Leopold's early expeditions to the Congo Basin. At other points, they offered resistance towards monopolising measures proclaimed by Leopold, as was the case during and after the Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference of 1889-1890. Finally, in the era of the concession companies, Dutch entrepreneurs were bullied into the establishment of the *Compagnie du Kasai*, but, despite misgivings, they decided to pocket the dividends, even after the Belgian State took over Leopold's ailing project in 1908. It is therefore clear that there was no easy way to exploit the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo by Dutch entrepreneurs and investors. In contrast, economic, political and diplomatic interests were always intertwined with each other and exploitation ran both ways: for Dutch entrepreneurs, the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo were an empire of opportunity *and* demand at the same time.<sup>99</sup>

95 Etamabala, *Veroverd*, 125-128.

96 Van der Laan, 'Trading in the Congo', 248.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Schär, 'Introduction'; Von Brescius, 'Empires of Opportunity'.



From the perspective of ‘Belgian’ imperial expansion, this article has shown that Leopold II shrewdly used foreign entrepreneurs and investors, firstly to gain legitimacy and funds for his imperial ambitions and secondly to establish and expand control over the Congo Free State’s economy. Knowledge of trade, contacts with middlemen, and capital investments, which the Dutch entrepreneurs handily provided, were crucial for building up the imperial state. The fact that they were Dutch – and *not* British or French – made them both less threatening in terms of the competition between the great powers and useful insofar as they could be discarded when they were no longer necessary. For some twenty-five years, the role Dutch entrepreneurs played was of substantial importance for empire-building in the Congo Free State. It is, then, another reminder that European imperialism was not a strictly national attempt, but that building, establishing, maintaining, and expanding empire was a transnational effort.

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