

Negotiating Assimilation

Luxembourgers in the Congo Basin During the Interwar Period (1918-1939)

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The interwar period (1918-1939) is a valuable timeframe to examine the entanglement of empire and nation-state, and thus the dynamics of national identity and citizenship within transimperial and colonial contexts. The increased nationalisation of the Belgian Congo led to a strong integration of Luxembourgers – unlike all other white European communities – into the Belgian colonial state from the early 1920s onwards, making them, as they described themselves, the most ‘assimilated’ Europeans in the Belgian colony. Luxembourg’s participation in Belgian colonial ventures was motivated by aspirations for colonial and national prestige, access to transnational networks, economic opportunities, and alignment with a broader pan-European colonial ideology – one that certainly included European states without colonies. Driven by wide-ranging interests, such as those of the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union, closer ties were developed between Brussels, Luxembourg, and Leopoldville. This article addresses two themes through the lens of Luxembourg’s involvement in the Belgian empire during the interwar period. First, it examines the imperial, colonial, and national tensions that arose between Belgian metropolitan ambitions and colonial realities, with a particular emphasis on the contested issue of the ‘assimilation’ of Luxembourgish subjects. Second, it analyses how Luxembourgers themselves navigated and negotiated their colonial roles and identities in response to the promises of becoming equal to Belgian colonisers – and the contrasting reality they sometimes faced.

Het interbellum (1918-1939) is een waardevolle periode om de verwevenheid van imperium en natiestaat te onderzoeken, en zo ook de dynamiek tussen nationale identiteit en burgerschap in een transimperiale en koloniale context. De toenemende nationalisering van Belgisch Congo leidde immers tot een sterkere integratie van Luxemburgers – in tegenstelling tot andere witte Europeanen – in de Belgische koloniale staat, waardoor zij, zoals zij zichzelf omschreven, de meest ‘geassimileerde’ Europeanen in de Belgische kolonie werden. De Luxemburgse deelname aan het Belgische koloniale project werd ingegeven door een verlangen naar koloniaal en nationaal prestige, toegang tot transnationale netwerken, economische kansen en het zoeken naar aansluiting bij een bredere pan-Europese koloniale ideologie – een ideologie die zeker ook Europese staten zonder formele kolonies aantrok. Gedreven door uiteenlopende belangen, zoals die van de Belgisch-Luxemburgse Economische Unie, werden nauwere banden ontwikkeld tussen Brussel, Luxemburg en Léopoldville. Dit artikel behandelt twee thema’s vanuit het perspectief van de betrokkenheid van Luxemburg bij het Belgische kolonialisme tijdens het interbellum. Ten eerste onderzoekt het de imperiale, koloniale en nationale spanningen die ontstonden tussen de ambities van het Belgische moederland en de koloniale realiteit, met bijzondere aandacht voor de omstreden kwestie van de ‘assimilatie’ van Luxemburgers. Ten tweede analyseert het hoe Luxemburgers zelf hun koloniale rollen en identiteiten vormgaven en daarover onderhandelden in reactie op de beloften om gelijkgesteld te worden aan Belgische burgers – en de contrasterende realiteit waarmee ze soms werden geconfronteerd.

Unprecedented transnational opportunities

Despite its small size, Luxembourg – having become a Grand Duchy under Dutch rule in 1815 and attaining full independence in 1890 – was engaged in various colonial ventures.¹ By the late nineteenth century, skilled workers

1 Ulbe Bosma and Thomas Kolnberger, ‘Military Migrants: Luxembourgers in the Colonial Army of the Dutch East Indies’, *Itinerario* 41:3 (2017) 555-580. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115317000687>; Sandra Camarda, Arnaud Sauer, and Denis Scuto (eds.), *Légionnaires. Parcours de guerre et de migrations entre le Luxembourg et la France* (Silvana Editoriale/ Musée national d’histoire et d’art 2020); Änder Hatz, *Emigrants et rémigrants Luxembourgeois de 1876 à 1900. Etats-Unis d’Amérique, Argentine et pays extra-européens* (Archives nationales de Luxembourg 1994); Thomas Kolnberger

(ed.), *August Kohl, Ein Luxemburger Söldner im Indonesien des 19. Jahrhunderts. Kommentierte Edition der Reise- und Lebensbeschreibungen des Soldaten August Kohl* (Centre National de Littérature 2015); Pablo Mariano Russo and Thomas Armand Diederich, *Luxembourgeois en Argentine. Histoire d’une migration humaine* (Editorial Minerva 2024); Claude Wey, ‘Luxembourgers in Latin America and the Permanent Threat of Failure: “Return Migration” in the Social Context of a European Micro-Society’, *AEMI Journal* 1 (2003) 94-105.

and educated personnel from the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg moved within imperial and colonial spaces in East Asia, South America, and Central Africa. Although Luxembourg never possessed formal colonies, Luxembourgers were nonetheless engaged in colonial enterprises. Their mobility reveals the transnational dynamics and pan-European nature of colonial entanglements. As Janne Schreurs and Eline Ceulemans argue in the introduction to this special issue, a transimperial perspective from the vantage point of smaller European states enables a more nuanced reading of colonial Congo, shedding light on the complexities of the Belgian empire and the history of the Congo Basin.²

Throughout the period of the Congo Free State (1885–1908), at least 83 Luxembourgish citizens were present in various capacities. This number rises to nearly 90 when including those who had adopted Belgian citizenship.³ While the Luxembourgish presence was limited in the British and Portuguese empires, it was more significant in the French, German, and Belgian empires. Until 1914, Luxembourgish communities in the French and German African colonies mainly consisted of missionaries. In contrast, the Congo Free State and the early Belgian Congo welcomed few Luxembourgish missionaries; a slightly larger number of Luxembourgers served in the army of the Force Publique, others worked as agents and officials, and the majority were employed by companies.

During the interwar period, the Luxembourgish community in the Belgian Congo grew more than tenfold – from 22 in 1920 to 222 in 1930.⁴ In 1939, 250 Luxembourgish citizens were recorded in the Belgian Congo, making them a mid-sized community comparable to the Swiss (198) and the French (415). They predominantly belonged to a higher class than other European foreigners such as the Finns.⁵ Their professional or academic qualifications, social backgrounds – many came from Luxembourg's elite – and access to transnational networks often secured them placements, typically through personal or professional recommendations. Apart from that, the Luxembourg State supported its nationals, particularly through its ties with Belgium.

The occupations of the Luxembourgish community deeply changed during the interwar period. While private employees continued to constitute the largest segment, there was a significant increase in the proportion of officials and agents. The equal treatment of Luxembourgers and Belgians within the colonial administration – first promised in a 1922 letter from

2 Janne Schreurs and Eline Ceulemans, 'Transimperial Opportunities? Small State Colonisation of Congo (1876–1940)', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* (hereafter *BMGN – LCHR*) 140:4 (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.22632>.

3 Léo Lejeune, *Les pionniers coloniaux d'origine luxembourgeoise (Grand-Duché)* (Éditions de l'Expansion Coloniale 1933); 'Pionniers

luxembourgeois d'avant 1908. Congo Belge', *Bulletin du Cercle Colonial Luxembourgeois* 4 (1952) 12–13.

4 *Bulletin Administratif du Congo Belge* (1920–1930).

5 Cf. Janne Lathi's article in this special issue, 'Finns in the Congo: Opportunities and Colonial Experiences in a Foreign Empire', *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.20006>.

the Belgian Minister of the Colonies, Louis Franck, to Luxembourg's Prime Minister – provided Luxembourg with an unprecedented opportunity to pursue its own colonial ambitions.⁶ Despite the process of nationalisation or 'Belgianisation' of the Congo, Luxembourgers were admitted under the same conditions as Belgians. In 1947, Belgian or Luxembourgish citizenship became a formal requirement to apply for positions in the colonial administration.⁷

After the First World War, Luxembourgers became the most 'assimilated' white community in relationship to the Belgian colonisers – a term that reflects the heterogeneity of the colonisers' communities.⁸ The notion of 'assimilation' is found in the historical sources. Apart from Luxembourgers themselves, Belgian administrators used this term when discussing the latter's position in the Belgian Congo, as the following example of the aforementioned Louis Franck in 1922 shows: 'They [Luxembourgers] will be assimilated to Belgians in all respects.'⁹ This implies the integration of Luxembourgers, while this statement also stresses the significant role of Belgian interests in the incorporation of Luxembourg in its empire.

In this article, however, the term 'assimilation' is employed analytically to examine the processes through which Luxembourgers adopted colonial identity patterns and positioned themselves within the Belgian colonial framework. Rather than implying a passive or one-sided adaptation of Luxembourgers to Belgian standards, the word 'assimilation' highlights the active role played by these actors in shaping colonial structures and sustaining colonial identities.¹⁰ Therefore, the term 'assimilation' is preferred over

6 Archives nationales de Luxembourg (hereafter ANLUX), Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (hereafter AE) 03449, Letter from Belgian Minister of the Colonies Louis Franck to Luxembourg's Prime Minister, Émile Reuter (7 July 1922).

7 Louis De Clerck, 'L'administration coloniale belge sur le terrain au Congo (1908-1960) et au Ruanda-Urundi (1925-1962)', *Annuaire d'histoire administrative européenne* 18 (2006) 187-210, 189-191.

8 Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, 'Le passé colonial dans le rétroviseur congolais. Du caoutchouc rouge au coltan rouge', in: Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro, and Guy Vanthemsche (eds.), *Le Congo colonial. Une histoire en questions* (La Renaissance du livre 2020) 413-429, 415.

9 Original: 'Ils seront en tous points assimilés aux Belges'. ANLUX, AE, 03449, Letter from Franck to Reuter, 7 July 1922.

10 Harald Fischer-Tiné and Susanne Gehrmann, 'Introduction: Empires, Boundaries, and the Production of Difference', in: idem (eds.), *Empires and Boundaries: Rethinking Race, Class, and Gender in Colonial Settings* (Routledge 2009) 1-22; Ruth Frankenberg, 'Introduction: Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness', in: Ruth Frankenberg (ed.), *Displacing Whiteness* (Duke University Press 1997) 1-33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822382270-001>; Sibö Rugwiza Kanobana, 'How the Flemings Became White: Race, Language, and Colonialism in the Making of Flanders', *Dutch Crossing* 46:3 (2022) 259-273. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2022.2144606>; Bart Luttikhuis, 'Beyond Race: Constructions of "Europeanness" in Late-Colonial

‘integration’ as it captures the negotiating agency of Luxembourgers within the Belgian empire.

This article contributes to a deeper understanding of Belgian, Luxembourgish, and European colonialism, as well as the power dynamics and hierarchies inherent in broader ‘pan-European endeavours’.¹¹ The assimilation of Luxembourgers into Belgian colonialism serves as a revealing case study of how European nation-state formation was deeply entangled with imperial dynamics, as Susan Legêne argues.¹² In what ways did Luxembourg, as a small European state with no colonies, participate in and shape colonial projects of others through the agency of its own citizens? How can the case of Luxembourgish colonial actors contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the transnational dynamics of European colonialism?¹³ The article aims to shed light on the broader pan-European colonial project by examining the transnational dynamics and communal configurations of the colonisers themselves.

By examining the entanglements between Belgium, Luxembourg and the Congo, this article highlights the imperial, colonial, and national divergences within this complex amalgamation, using sources from Belgian and Luxembourgish archives. The analysis excludes Luxembourgish missionaries from the discussion, given their limited presence during the period under study and their marginal role in the assimilation of Luxembourgers within the Belgian Congo. The data concerning Luxembourgers employed in the colonial administration are based on research conducted on individual personnel records from the Africa Personnel Service (SPA).¹⁴ These personal records enable a bottom-up analysis of colonial dynamics, centring the lived experiences and active roles of individual Luxembourgish colonialists on the ground.

Legal Practice in the Dutch East Indies’, *European Review of History – Revue Européenne d’histoire* 20:4 (2013) 539–558. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2013.764845>; Diana M. Natermann, ‘To Maintain or Adjust? On the Whiteness of Swedish Men in the Congo Free State (1884–1914)’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (hereafter *JICH*) 51:3 (2023) 464–486, 480. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2023.2205746>.

11 Bernhard C. Schär, ‘Introduction: The Dutch East Indies and Europe, ca. 1800–1930: An Empire of Demands and Opportunities’, *BMGN – LCH* 134:3 (2019) 4–20, 6–7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10738>.

12 Susan Legêne, ‘The European Character of the Intellectual History of Dutch Empire’, *BMGN*

– *LCH* 132:2 (2017) 110–120, 116. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10344>.

13 Stephen Howe (ed.), *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (Routledge 2010); Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné (eds.), *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins* (Palgrave Macmillan 2015). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137442741>.

14 The archives of the African Personnel Service (SPA), part of the Belgian ‘Archives africaines’ (AA), hold around 110,000 files on colonial agents and officials with various nationalities – including at least 200 Luxembourgers – who served in the Congo Free State and/or under the Belgian Ministry of Colonies.

Personal correspondence offers valuable insights into European colonial experiences, especially into aspects often hidden from official records – such as individual emotions, anxieties, and the ways these feelings were expressed, suppressed, or negotiated. It reveals how colonialists perceived social hierarchies in their everyday life. Its subjective and ‘ordinary character’ enables nuanced, micro-level analysis of colonial dynamics. This article therefore also draws on letters from the Kraus-Barblé family as an illustrative example.¹⁵ Jean Kraus took advantage of the opportunities offered to Luxembourgers within the Belgian colonial administration. Formerly employed at the Banque Générale du Luxembourg, he went to the Belgian Congo as a territorial agent, accompanied by his wife, Louise Kraus (née Barblé), in February 1930.¹⁶ Louise’s case offers the voice of a woman who accompanied her husband to Africa. By 1935, women made up around 30 per cent of the Luxembourgish community in the Congo, the majority having accompanied their husbands to the colony.¹⁷

The first section of this article examines the economic union between Belgium and Luxembourg, including how it involved the Congo. The Belgian commitment to equality impacted colonial ambitions in Luxembourg, as discussed in the second section. Differing opinions between Brussels and Leopoldville on the assimilation of Luxembourgers are highlighted in the third section, as well as the experiences and critiques of Luxembourgish colonialists in the fourth and fifth section. Finally, the construction of a Luxembourgish identity in the Congo Basin, as shaped by broader colonial dynamics, is investigated.

From economic cooperation to promised equality

Nicolas Grang was the first Luxembourger involved in the pan-European colonisation of the Congo in 1882 and the first European to be buried at the Cimetière des Pionniers at Mont Ngaliema. The construction of the Matadi-Leopoldville railway from 1890 until 1898 attracted the first Luxembourgish engineers to the Congo Basin. Nicolas Cito, for example, drove the first locomotive to N’Dolo and played a key role in connecting his compatriots

15 The correspondence analysed in this article, primarily the part written by Louise Kraus (née Barblé) to her family in Luxembourg, covers the period from March 1930 to September 1940 and comprises approximately 160 letters. These documents are preserved in the personal archive of Mr. Jean-Louis Nurenberg (hereafter: PA Nurenberg).

16 AA, Dossiers individuels du Service du Personnel d’Afrique (hereafter SPA), Métropole 7005, Kraus Jean Nicolas.

17 Diana Natermann, *Pursuing Whiteness in the Colonies: Private Memories from the Congo Free State and German East Africa (1884-1914)* (Waxmann 2018) 42.

with employment prospects in Africa (Figure 1).¹⁸ But it was from the early 1920s onwards that the Belgian colonial state provided Luxembourgers with unprecedented opportunities to engage in colonial projects.

After the Great War, Belgium aimed to form an economic union with Luxembourg, which had previously been a member of the German *Zollverein*.¹⁹ In 1919, the Luxembourg government intended to hold a referendum to choose whether to develop an economic partnership with France or Belgium. The referendum was postponed following Belgian intervention, which ignited patriotic and partially anti-Belgian sentiments in Luxembourg. The referendum was finally held on 28 September 1919, and 73 per cent of Luxembourgers voted in favour of economic cooperation with France. Owing to France's lack of interest, however, Belgium remained the only option. The agreement establishing the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union (BLEU) was signed on 25 July 1921 and took effect on 22 December 1922. Proponents of the economic agreement with Belgium framed the Belgian empire as the opportunity for Luxembourg to participate in colonial projects.²⁰

During negotiations over BLEU in 1924, Luxembourg agreed to duty-free exports from the Belgian Congo to Luxembourg, provided that Luxembourgers received equal treatment in the Congo's civil service.²¹ On 28 January 1924, Belgian Foreign Minister Henri Jaspar informed the Chairman of the Higher Council of BLEU, Henry Carton de Wiart, that the government was granting equal status to Luxembourgish citizens in the Congo civil service alongside Belgians, except for the positions of governor-general and provincial governor, which were reserved for Belgians by birth or naturalisation.²² For the employment of Luxembourgers by private companies, similar recommendations were formulated.

The new possibility of pursuing a career as an agent or official in the Belgian colonial administration led to a shift in the professional composition of the Luxembourgish community in the Belgian Congo. While private employees remained the largest group, there was a notable increase in the number of civil servants. From 1885 to 1920, only about 24 Luxembourgers were employed in

18 A. Lederer, 'Cito Nicolas', *Biographie Belge d'Outre-mer*, VII-c (Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer 1989) 83-88.

19 Gilbert Trausch, 'Du Zollverein à l'Union économique belgo-luxembourgeoise (1914-1922). Un virage difficile pour un petit pays', *Hémecht – Revue d'Histoire luxembourgeoise/Zeitschrift für Luxemburger Geschichte* 3:36 (1984) 343-390.

20 See speech by Henri Vannérus in Brussels, in: *L'indépendance luxembourgeoise* 50:251 (7

September 1920) 1; 'Chambre des Députés. Séance du 25 novembre 1921', in: *L'indépendance luxembourgeoise* 51:330/331 (26 November 1921)

1; ANLUX, AE, 11128, Note for the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the admission of Luxembourg nationals on an equal basis with Belgians to the administration of the Congo, 18 May 1960.

21 ANLUX, AE, 11128, *idem*.

22 ANLUX, AE, 11128, quoted in the note to the Foreign Minister, 30 December 1959.



Figure 1. The first locomotive ‘in service’ from 1898 at today’s station Kinshasa-Est was driven by the Luxembourger Nicolas Cito to N’Dolo. Over 1,800 African and Asian workers died building the Matadi-Léopoldville railway – exposing the reality of colonial capitalism. Cito played a key role in forging colonial ties between Luxembourg and Belgium. In 1948, during the 50th anniversary of the railway’s inauguration, Luxembourg’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joseph Bech, and Luxembourg’s ambassador in Brussels, Robert Als, took part in the event – marking the first official visit of Luxembourgish state representatives to the Belgian Congo. © Photo by Kevin Goergen in 2024.

the public sector. However, between 1922 and 1930, at least 55 Luxembourgers entered the civil service, with the majority doing so in 1924 – the year the Belgian government granted Luxembourgers equal status. Consequently, BLEU not only strengthened links between Belgium and Luxembourg; it also established a connection between Luxembourg and Leopoldville.

Based on research conducted on the individual records of the SPA, 25 out of 55 Luxembourgish civil servants were employed as territorial agents. The Territorial Service, made up of agents and administrators (the latter requiring a university degree), acted as intermediaries between the colonial administration and local Congolese populations (Figure 2). Agents operated under the authority of administrators, who were responsible for territorial governance, tax collection, public works, and ‘indigenous relations’. These Luxembourgish men were mostly single, on average 27 years old, and had completed their education at Belgian institutions such as the Colonial School, Colonial University or Institute of Tropical Medicine. During the interwar period, the Luxembourgish community was predominantly composed of members of the socio-economic upper middle class and upper class. This applies to employees in companies who, in most cases, held advanced educational qualifications or university degrees. Some applications were rejected if the applicant did not hold a university degree.²³

The initial commitment to equality for Luxembourgers with Belgians was expressed in the abovementioned letter from the Minister of the Colonies, Louis Franck, to Luxembourg’s Prime Minister, Émile Reuter, on 7 July 1922.²⁴ Franck confirmed measures to allow Luxembourgish recruits into roles such as physicians and technicians alongside their Belgian counterparts. Ultimately, this letter served as a written confirmation of prior discussions, reflecting both the negotiations and economic rapprochement between Belgium and Luxembourg and the interest of the Ministry of the Colonies in promoting the Belgian colonial project in Luxembourg. Furthermore, Franck emphasised that BLEU extended beyond economic integration, asserting that the colonial endeavour was also a moral mission to spread civilisation and enhance the moral stature of the Belgian nation.²⁵

Colonial ambitions of a small state

From the early 1920s onwards, Luxembourg’s colonial ambitions in Africa were significantly bolstered by the transnational opportunities presented

23 ANLUX, Ministère des Travaux publics (hereafter TRP), 05457, Candidature pour un emploi au Congo-Belge.

24 ANLUX, AE, 03449, Note on the dossier and letter from Louis Franck to Émile Reuter, 7 July 1922.

25 ‘Luxembourg et Belgique. Une importante délégation de Luxembourgeois rends visite aux journalistes belges’, *Journal de Bruxelles* 102:221 (9 August 1922) 1.



Figure 2. This photograph, titled ‘Marché de Cotton’, is part of the private album of a Luxembourgish territorial agent in the Belgian Congo and was taken in December 1934 in Bili (Bas-Uélé District). It shows the officer with his wife, child, and a Belgian colleague. Among the European individuals, no visible distinctions can be observed – they appear as part of the same social group. In contrast, the Congolese are clearly spatially separated from the Europeans, through the depiction of their roles and positions within the production relations. This separation is further emphasised by clothing, activities, and the composition of the image, staging and reproducing colonial power structures. The publication of such photographs requires ethical reflection: they are not merely historical documents, but visual expressions of colonial hierarchies that may be perpetuated through their dissemination. © Personal archive.

within the Belgian empire. Luxembourg simultaneously developed its own colonial narrative, as evidenced by the establishment of a Luxembourgish colonial association, the Cercle Colonial Luxembourgeois (CCL) in late 1925. Mathias Thill, one of the CCL's founding members, was a former employee of the Compagnie du Kasai, and helped to establish an organised colonial milieu in Luxembourg through public lectures and slide shows about the Congo.²⁶ The first members were primarily former employees from the private sector in the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo. On 8 September 1930, the first bulletin of the CCL was published to promote colonial careers and ambitions, particularly for the Belgian Congo.

Leading figures, including members of the grand-ducal family, industry leaders, and ministers, supported and joined the CCL, reflecting the fact that colonial endeavours were also pursuits of prestige, irrespective of actual colonial possessions. Belgium showed a keen interest in intensifying colonial propaganda efforts in Luxembourg, facilitated through the Belgian Consulate in Luxembourg and the Ministry of the Colonies in Brussels. Connections were also forged with similar Cercles in Belgium, particularly those situated near Luxembourg, such as the one in Arlon.

The composition of the growing membership of the CCL changed in the early years, with an increasing number of colonialists. This shift was partly due to the growth of the Luxembourgish population in the Belgian Congo. The colony provided a labour market for well-educated men who had difficulties securing employment or professional perspectives in Luxembourg because of the challenging economic context, the relatively small domestic market, or personal and family circumstances. Luxembourg's expanding presence can be analysed through the lens of transimperial and pan-European dynamics, shaped by the colonial demand for white labour and the professional opportunities afforded to Europeans.²⁷ This engagement was further influenced by domestic structural constraints, such as the limited availability of high-ranking positions, which incentivised individuals from the upper classes to pursue careers abroad. While neighbouring countries in Europe and other overseas regions also offered imperial opportunities, the Congo was particularly attractive because of its competitive salaries and the promise of equal treatment with Belgian colleagues in both the public and private sectors.²⁸

Jean Schaffner, the son of a Luxembourg Member of Parliament and mayor of Echternach, worked for the Congo-based mining companies Forminière and Kilo-Moto in the late 1920s. However, his contract was not

26 Mai na m'Putu Mayele [Mathias Thill], 'Quarante ans de Cercle Colonial Luxembourgeois', *Société Grand-Ducale Cercle Colonial Luxembourgeois, 1925-1965* (Luxembourg 1965) 37.

27 Cf. Schreurs and Ceulemans, 'Transimperial Opportunities?.'

28 AA, SPA, Dossier Général (hereafter DG), 127, Comparison of civil servants' salaries in the Belgian, German, French, and Dutch colonies.

renewed, prompting his return to Luxembourg. During his job search, Schaffner received support from the Luxembourg government, which reached out to companies on his behalf, and also contacted the *Fédération française des anciens coloniaux* to find a position for Schaffner within French colonial enterprises.²⁹

Potential social problems in Luxembourg – less about unemployment and more about the prospects for the upper classes – could be mitigated through access to the Belgian overseas territories, and this also offered Luxembourg nationals greater opportunities for social mobility. Louise Kraus noted that the savings Jean Kraus and herself had accumulated from Jean's earnings in the Congo would have been impossible to achieve in Luxembourg.³⁰ Like Jean Kraus, many Luxembourgers who applied for positions as civil servants in the territorial service had previously worked as employees in Luxembourg.

The unique position of Luxembourgers within the Belgian colonial project not only provided them professional and economic opportunities; it also shaped the cultural and social dynamics within Luxembourg, embedding colonial perspectives into the national consciousness – particularly after the Second World War. Consequently, Luxembourg society itself was influenced by colonial ambitions, ideas, narratives, and imaginaries. 'Colonial pioneers' from Luxembourg also became involved in Belgium's efforts to reshape the historical narrative of the Congo through processes of nationalisation.³¹ The names of Luxembourgers were inscribed on the memorial inaugurated in 1934 to honour the Belgians who died in the Congo between 1876 and 1908 at the Colonial Museum of Tervuren.³² Furthermore, European states regarded colonial projects as prestigious endeavours, regardless of whether they had colonial possessions themselves.³³ Consequently, Luxembourg also constructed a narrative in which all 'colonial pioneers' from Luxembourg were given national recognition, even if they had only tenuous links to the Grand Duchy and did not possess Luxembourgish citizenship – merely being born in the Grand Duchy could suffice.³⁴ Aubry Lenger, born in Altwies, Luxembourg, to a Belgian father and raised in Flanders, travelled to the Congo Free State in

29 ANLUX, AE, 03450, Luxembourgeois au Congo-Belge: Affaire Schaffner.
30 PA Nurenberg, Letter from Louise Kraus to her mother, 31 July 1930.
31 Matthew Stanard, 'La propagande coloniale. L'éveil d'un esprit colonial belge?', in: Goddeeris, Lauro, and Vanthemsche, *Le Congo colonial*, 349-360, 350; Guy Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885-1980* (Cambridge University Press 2012) 57. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139043038>.

32 Ligue du souvenir congolais, *À nos héros coloniaux morts pour la civilisation, 1876-1908* (Neirinck 1931).

33 Bernardino Tavares and Aleida Vieira, 'Black Luxembourg', in: Natasha A. Kelly and Olive Vassel (eds.), *Mapping Black Europe* (transcript 2023) 93-113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839454138-005>.

34 Léo Lejeune, *Les pionniers coloniaux d'origine luxembourgeoise (Grand-Duché)* (Éditions de l'Expansion Coloniale 1933); Cercle colonial Luxembourgeois, *Bulletin du cercle colonial luxembourgeois* 4 (1952) 12-13.

1888 and died there by suicide in 1890; likewise, Curt von François, a German born in Luxembourg City in 1852, joined Hermann von Wissmann on an expedition to the Congo Basin in 1883.

In 1933, the CCL organised the Exposition d'Art Colonial et Exotique in Luxembourg City to which almost exclusively Belgian artists contributed (Figure 3).³⁵ In this context, the CCL collaborated with Belgian institutions such as the Office Colonial in Brussels, and received financial support from the Belgian Minister of the Colonies, Paul Tschoffen.³⁶ The exhibition was inaugurated by Luxembourg's Prime Minister Joseph Bech in the presence of high-ranking representatives from Belgium, France, and Italy, highlighting its political and cultural significance and reflecting a deliberate effort to position Luxembourg within broader colonial networks. Moreover, as noted in the exhibition catalogue, the event was also conceived to underscore the close relationship between Luxembourg and Belgium.³⁷

Tensions within the Belgian empire

A handwritten note from the Belgian colonial authorities in May 1923 – following Franck's promise in July 1922 but preceding the confirmation to BLEU in January 1924 – reveals conflicting interests between different Belgian authorities regarding the commitments towards Luxembourgers.³⁸ The note questioned whether Luxembourgers should be treated equally in private companies in the Congo that were required to employ Belgians, fearing competition and negative impact on Belgian applicants. Furthermore, the author – or authors, since no names are mentioned on the note – doubted that, 'from a Belgian point of view', Luxembourgers would be the best choice of foreigners, because they were strongly attached to their Luxembourgish identity and appeared to be keen to set themselves apart from their Belgian colleagues.³⁹ This reflects a strengthening of national identities in both Belgium and Luxembourg during the interwar period, as well as Luxembourg's partial anti-Belgian stance as it asserted its sovereignty, particularly during the early negotiations for an economic union.⁴⁰

35 AA, Office Colonial (hereafter OC), 464, List of items sent to the CCL in Luxembourg under the auspices of the Ministry of the Colonies.

36 Ibid., Letter from the Consulate General of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg to Paul Tschoffen, Minister of the Colonies, 7 December 1933.

37 'Avant-propos', in: Le Comité du Cercle Colonial Luxembourgeois, *Exposition d'art colonial et exotique à Luxembourg* (1933) 13.

38 AA, AE/II, 3247, Handwritten note by the Second General Directorate (Interior), Luxembourgers and Belgians, 23 May 1923.

39 Ibid.

40 Jan-Frederik Abbeloos, 'Belgium's Expansionist History between 1870 and 1930: Imperialism and the Globalisation of Belgian Business', in: Csaba Lévai (ed.), *Europe and Its Empires* (Plus 2008) 105-127, 116-118; Ingrid Brühwiler and Matias Gardin,



Figure 3. Poster designed by Émile Probst advertising the Colonial Exhibition d'Art Colonial et Exotique organised by the CCL in Luxembourg City in 1933. To promote the event and stimulate public curiosity, Lucien Wercollier created a series of 'African heads' that were placed in public spaces throughout the city. As a consequence, so-called ethnographic art, which perpetuated racist stereotypes, was presented in Luxembourg. The exhibition itself predominantly featured art by Belgian artists who worked in service of the Belgian colonial propaganda, reflecting Luxembourg's entanglements with Belgian colonialism. © Les 2 Musées de la Ville de Luxembourg.

The *Belgian Report on the Administration of the Belgian Congo during the Year 1921* by the Ministry of Colonies highlighted the scarcity of personnel as a main challenge and the decisive reason for the limited expansion of colonial power.⁴¹ The report also presented the numbers of Belgians and other Europeans and argued that qualified personnel for the colony could definitely be found in Belgium. Despite this conclusion and the abovementioned letters from the colonial authorities in Leopoldville, Luxembourgers were integrated into the process of the 'Belgianisation' of the Congo, in preference to other European foreigners. This decision clearly served the interests of Brussels; it did not come from Leopoldville, which was quite critical of this policy.

The discrepancy between the stance in the Belgian metropole and the colony was further highlighted in a letter from the Belgian Prime Minister to the Ministry of the Colonies in May 1927.⁴² The Prime Minister emphasised the need to consider the economic union between Belgium and Luxembourg, warning that neglecting equal treatment of Belgian and Luxembourgish interests could harm Belgium's image in Europe. This concern related to how Belgium was perceived by other European powers, and, as Guy Vanthemsche argues, reflected the development of a Belgian 'defensive attitude' towards its colony.⁴³ Consequently, the image of Belgium and its colony in the eyes of European nations played a significant role in the debate on the assimilation of Luxembourgers.

In 1929, the Luxembourgish company Duchscher, which exported palm oil presses to the Congo, cited the terms of BLEU to facilitate its exports. The Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs clarified that the agreement applied solely to mainland Belgium but also declared to be open to align with Luxembourg's interests, as it viewed the latter's economic engagement as beneficial for Belgian colonial interests.⁴⁴ Although Belgian colonial authorities saw equal opportunities for Luxembourg as unfavourable competition to national interests, goods and materials manufactured in Luxembourg were considered of Belgian origin and could thus be exported to the Congo duty-free.⁴⁵

'Fabricating National Unity in Torn Contexts: World War I in the Multilingual Countries of Switzerland and Luxembourg', in: Gearóid Barry, Enrico Dal Lago, and Róisín Healy (eds.), *Small Nations and Colonial Peripheries in World War I* (Brill 2016) 140-156; Trausch, 'Du Zollverein', 352-367, 372-375; Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo*, 115.

41 Louis Franck, 'Rapport sur l'Administration du Congo belge pendant l'année 1921', *Parlementaire stukken van de Kamer* 162 (20 February 1923) 12, 19, 58. <https://www.dekamer.be/digidoc/DPS/K3081/K30811846/K30811846.PDF>. Accessed 3 December 2025.

42 AA, AE/II, 3247, Letter from the Prime Minister's Private Office to the Minister of the Colonies, 5 May 1927.

43 Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo*, 271.

44 AA, AE, 2944 – 683, Note to the First General Directorate, 15 July 1929; ANLUX, Commerce et Industrie (hereafter FCI) 0457, Letter from the Director of Commerce and Industry in Luxembourg to their Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, 11 September 1929.

45 Ibid., Note for the General Administrator, 7 March 1934.



Figure 4. This photograph of Louise Kraus was enclosed in a letter to her mother. At the centre of the image are her clothes and boots, which she made herself while living in the Belgian Congo – a detail that carries not only practical but also symbolic significance. The attire appears carefully chosen and staged, suggesting a deliberate presentation of her identity as female, European, and colonial. She presents herself as slender and well-groomed, a recurring theme in her correspondence with her mother. Clothing and outward appearance function here as markers of colonial self-positioning: they convey both a distinction from the Congolese people and from other white individuals. The photograph can be read as a visual staging of colonial femininity. © Personal archive.

The interplay between Belgium's imperial interests in binding Luxembourg to itself and Luxembourg's transnational opportunity to pursue its own colonial projects through Belgium is exemplified by the activities of the Comité Luxembourgeois Grand-Ducal pour la création d'établissements coloniaux. In January 1928, following a lecture by the above-mentioned Nicolas Cito who was appointed as the Luxembourgish consul general in Brussels, Prince Félix of Luxembourg approached Cito to enquire about obtaining a concession in the Congo.⁴⁶ In the efforts to receive a concession, leading Luxembourgish figures both in the Belgian metropole, such as Cito, and in the Congo, such as Pierre Miny who was employed as an agricultural advisor at Forminière, played noteworthy roles.⁴⁷ But also the Belgian Prime Minister Henri Jaspar strongly advocated a Luxembourgish concession:

The [Belgian] colonial government, very happy to see Luxembourgers taking an interest in the development of the colony, will very much welcome requests from them and, in principle, will do its best to follow up on them.⁴⁸

Jaspar disclosed that the colonial government in Brussels would even be willing to exempt Luxembourg from a new Belgian policy imposing tighter restrictions on new concessions in the Congo.⁴⁹ However, the Comité abandoned its initial plans in 1929 and turned to Portuguese Mozambique where they founded the Société Coloniale Luso-Luxembourgeoise (LUSO-GRANDUCOL).⁵⁰

In sum, Luxembourg's colonial opportunities were closely linked to Belgium's interests and imperial ambitions. Yet, Brussels and Leopoldville did not agree on whether – and where – Luxembourgers should have the same professional opportunities as Belgians. Furthermore, while Luxembourgers could pursue careers as civil servants in the Congo, they were denied the same opportunities within Belgium itself. The colony served as a tool for the Belgian metropole in order to integrate Luxembourg into the Belgian empire, with Luxembourgers being both instruments and targets of the Belgian

46 'Conférences. Conférence de M. Cito', in: *L'indépendance luxembourgeoise* 58:11 (11 January 1928) 3; AA, Régime Foncier (hereafter RF) 4598 – 18, Groupe Luxembourgeois au CSK.

47 Ibid., Notes for the Prime Minister, Projet de colonisation agricole luxembourgeoise au Congo belge, 24 January 1928.

48 Original: 'Le Gouvernement de la Colonie fort heureux de voir les Luxembourgeois prendre intérêt au développement de celle-ci, accueillera très

favorablement les requêtes de ceux-ci et, en principe, il s'efforcera d'y donner suite.' Ibid., Letter from Henri Jaspar to Prince Félix of Luxembourg, n.d.

49 Ibid., Note for Prime Minister: Concessions demandées par un groupe luxembourgeois, 24 February 1928.

50 'Archives grand-ducales, Fonds Granducol; Estatutos da Société Coloniale Luso-Luxembourgeoise, in: *Republic Diary*, 227:1933 (10 June 1933) 1711-1715.

imperial policy.⁵¹ However, the Belgian nationality, whether by birth or naturalisation, remained a prerequisite for attaining the highest positions in the Congo.

Loyalty to the colonial state

The Great War significantly altered colonial governance and mobility, particularly when it came to travel documents such as passports.⁵² In 1917, the Dutch consulate in Boma asked the Luxembourg government about the issuance of Luxembourgish passports, as the Dutch consulate managed Luxembourg's consular affairs in the Belgian Congo prior to the establishment of BLEU. Luxembourgish passports were frequently requested, yet individuals often failed to provide sufficient proof of their Luxembourgish citizenship.⁵³ Additionally, there were delays in entering the colony due to issues with travel documents.⁵⁴

During the First World War, the rise of the nation-state and its ideologies raised questions about the loyalty of foreigners who lived in colonial states ruled by others.⁵⁵ Some Luxembourgers were expelled from African colonies on suspicion of espionage or of pro-German sympathies – often in connection with indigenous uprisings. Pierre Jentgen, known for his administrative career in the Belgian Congo, managed a plantation in Portuguese-ruled Angola.⁵⁶ During the 1917–1918 uprisings by the Seles and Amboim against Portuguese rule, he was suspected of instigating the rebellion as a German spy.⁵⁷ In 1921, he was expelled after a renewed

- 51 Régis Moes, 'Cette colonie qui nous appartient un peu'. *La communauté luxembourgeoise au Congo belge 1883-1960* (Éditions d'Letzeburger Land 2012) 106.
- 52 Daniela Luigia Caglioti, *War and Citizenship: Enemy Aliens and National Belonging from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Cambridge University Press 2021) 320–321.
- 53 ANLUX, AE, 03450, communicated in the letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague to the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, 3 July 1917.
- 54 For the case of Jean-Pierre Sosson, see: AA, SPA, Métropole 2620; AA, SPAC 7142 – 14015.
- 55 Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, 'Empires After 1919: Old, New, Transformed', *International Affairs* 95:1 (2019) 81–100, 87; Legêne, 'The European Character', 112; Raita Merivirta,

- 'Nordic Settler Identities in Colonial Kenya: Class, Nationality and Race in Bror and Karen Blixen's Transimperial Lives', *JICH* 51:3 (2023) 487–509, 495–498; Guy Vanthemsche, 'Les deux guerres mondiales. Un tournant dans l'histoire du Congo et des Congolais?', in: Goddeeris, Lauro, and Vanthemsche, *Le Congo colonial*, 69–78, 75–78.
- 56 AA, SPA, Métropole 562, Jean Pierre Désiré Jentgen; André Durieux, 'Jentgen Jean-Pierre-Désiré', in: *Biographie Belge d'Outre-mer*, vi (Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer 1968) 547–550.
- 57 René Pélissier, 'Résistance et Révoltes en Angola (1845–1961) I.' (PhD thesis, University of Lille III 1976) 474.

investigation into the uprising.⁵⁸ However, by 1923, Jentgen had acquired Belgian citizenship and left for Boma, likely due to his previous experiences in the Portuguese colony.⁵⁹

If individuals possessed a citizenship different from that of the colonial power, this could lead to doubts about their loyalty to the colonial state, complicating careers and mobility. The question of loyalty among Luxembourgers in the Belgian Congo was further exacerbated by the relatively uncomplicated process for Luxembourgers to obtain Belgian citizenship. However, most retained their Luxembourgish nationality, as this proved sufficient to embark on a colonial career in the Congo, like Jules Campill did, who in 1923 set out to serve in the magistracy.⁶⁰ Despite the promise of equality, Campill experienced this differently, arguing that his citizenship hindered his career in the colony. He complained that after applying for the position of presiding judge in Coquilhatville, the job was given to a 'less experienced Belgian colleague'.⁶¹ In a letter to his former school friend and then Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Joseph Bech, Campill wrote that he was appalled to be told to acquire Belgian nationality to further his career.⁶² Bech wrote to the Belgian Foreign Ministry, advocating for Campill and noting that his thriving career would impress the many Luxembourgers in the Belgian Congo.⁶³ The letters written by Louise Kraus to her mother also show that Campill was seen as an example, as he was a successful Luxembourger in the colony, and they were 'proud' that he was Luxembourgish.⁶⁴ However, Campill's career was more than once hindered by accusations of disloyalty, as he allegedly favoured France and Germany over Belgium. In 1931, he was blamed for corruption and espionage.⁶⁵

The Belgian policies offered Luxembourgers career opportunities while ensuring they had to acquire Belgian citizenship before reaching high-ranking positions. Like Campill, Léopold Mousel complained in a letter to the Luxembourgish Prime Minister that he felt hindered in his career as a district commissioner due to his nationality, which was contrary to the promise of assimilation.⁶⁶ He referred to François Wenner as an example of someone

58 ANLUX, AE, 02298, 'Expulsion de Pierre Jentgen de l'Angola': Letter from Gustave Ziegler de Ziegleck, Lawyer at the Court of Appeal of Brussels, to the Minister of State, President of the Luxembourg government, Émile Reuter, 17 December 1921.

59 AA, SPA, Colonie 10518, Jean Pierre Désiré Jentgen.

60 Ibid., Métropole OJ, 468, Jules Edmond Joseph Campill.

61 ANLUX, AE, 03450, Letter sent from Leopoldville, 18 May 1928.

62 Ibid.

63 AA, SPA, Métropole 468, Copy of the note, 3 July 1928.

64 PA Nurenberg, Letter from Louise Kraus to her mother, 1 March 1932; idem, 14 April 1932.

65 AA, SPA, Métropole 468, Affairs of Coquilhatville, Accusations against Campill, 4 March 1931.

66 ANLUX, AE, 03450, Letter sent from Yanonghe, 12 June 1929.

who faced no such hindrances because he was naturalised as a Belgian before embarking his colonial career in 1920.⁶⁷ Wenner was ultimately appointed as provincial governor of Lusambo in 1941, a position that required Belgian citizenship.

Some Luxembourgers criticised their perceived unfair treatment compared to their Belgian colleagues even before entering the service of the colonial state. In 1935, Marcel Buchmann complained to Prime Minister Joseph Bech that, despite having graduated from the Colonial School in Brussels a year earlier, he was still waiting to start as a territorial agent.⁶⁸ His complaint was forwarded to the Luxembourgish consul general in Brussels, Cito, who contacted the Belgian Colonial Ministry. Buchmann was informed that, similar to his Belgian colleagues, he could not travel to the colony until it was his turn, which would only be in 1936.⁶⁹

Georges Brausch was more explicit in his criticism in a letter to Bech.⁷⁰ He started his studies in October 1933 at the Colonial University in Antwerp and completed them three years later. However, the university's board of directors delayed the start of his career in the Congo by a year because, unlike his Belgian peers, he did not have to complete military service in his country.⁷¹ Brausch objected that Belgian graduates exempt from military service were granted to travel to the colony a year earlier than their peers.⁷² He therefore raised the question of a possible double standard and whether he was being disadvantaged because of his nationality:

Why does the Colonial University have double standards [...]? Would it maybe be because I am Luxembourgish? Can we no longer enjoy the legal benefits to which we are entitled?⁷³

Buchmann finally arrived in the Congo in August 1936 and started his more than twenty-year career in the colony.⁷⁴ Brausch arrived a year later and served the colonial state until February 1960.⁷⁵ In 1961, he published the book *Belgian Administration in the Congo*, in which he criticised the Belgian colonial

67 AA, SPA, Colonie 5225, François Wenner.

68 ANLUX, AE, 03449, Letter from Buchmann to the Minister of State, 29 August 1935.

69 Ibid., Correspondence regarding the Buchmann case.

70 Ibid., Letter from Georges Brausch to the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, 14 April 1937.

71 Ibid., Letter from Gaston d'Ansembourg to the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, 28 April 1937.

72 Ibid., Letter from Georges Brausch to the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, 14 April 1937.

73 Original: 'Pourquoi l'Université Coloniale a-t-elle deux poids et deux mesures [...] ? Serait-ce parfois parce que je suis luxembourgeois? Ne pouvons-nous plus profiter des avantages légaux auxquels nous avons droit?' Ibid.

74 AA, SPA, Colonie 25456, Marcel Jean Buchmann.

75 Ibid., Colonie 42704, Georges Edouard Jean-Baptiste Brausch.

policies, particularly highlighting the paternalistic character of Belgian colonialism towards the Congolese.⁷⁶

Discord among Luxembourgish colonialists

During and after the Great Depression, Luxembourgers increasingly lodged complaints with their authorities about breaches of the Belgian commitment to equal treatment, suggesting that these were related to their nationality. Following a critical article in the *Luxemburger Zeitung* in 1933, Bech discussed the matter with Cito in his capacity of consul general in Brussels.⁷⁷ In his response, Cito referred to the *Rapport de la Commission des Colonies du Sénat belge* from 1933, which stated that Luxembourgers were not classified as foreigners but were admitted under the same conditions as Belgians.⁷⁸

The CCL also played a significant role in defending Luxembourgish colonialists and their interests in the Congo. On 18 November 1935, the CCL addressed Bech:

We would like to draw your attention to a loophole in the agreement establishing the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union regarding the situation of Luxembourgers in the Belgian colonies. Unfortunately, the agreement governing the economic relationship between the two countries does not mention the colonies. [...] Luxembourgers who do not have Belgian citizenship inevitably fall into the category of foreigners. [...] Luxembourgers in the colony are denied any consular assistance. A Luxembourg in difficulty has no official body to which he may turn for help and assistance, since the same authorities are both judge and defendant.⁷⁹

The CCL criticised the informal nature of the assimilation policy, which they believed was not laid down in any formal agreement.⁸⁰ They further wrote:

76 Georges Brausch, *Belgian Administration in the Congo* (Oxford University Press 1961).

77 'Eine lehrreiche Statistik', in: *Luxemburger Zeitung* 66:215 (3 August 1933) 2.

78 ANLUX, AE, 03449, Letter from Cito to Bech, 26 August 1933.

79 Original: 'Nous avons l'honneur d'attirer votre attention sur une lacune qui existe dans la convention belgo-luxembourgeoise d'Union Économique concernant la situation des Luxembourgeois dans les colonies belges. La convention réglant la situation des deux pays au point de vue économique ne fait

malheureusement pas mention des colonies. [...] Les Luxembourgeois n'étant pas de nationalité belge tombent fatalement dans la catégorie des étrangers. [...] les Luxembourgeois dans la colonie sont privés de tout secours consulaire. Un Luxembourgeois se trouvant en présence d'une difficulté n'a aucune instance auprès de laquelle il pourrait trouver aide et assistance étant donné que ce sont les mêmes autorités qui sont juge et partie.' Ibid., Letter from the President and Vice-President of CCL (18 November 1935) 1.

80 Ibid., 2.

‘Although we hear that Luxembourgers are assimilated with Belgians, we have observed that in practice, they have often been placed in the category of foreigners.’⁸¹ In support of their arguments, the CCL cited colleagues who, in their view, had suffered discrimination in the Congo because of their Luxembourgish nationality.

Cito responded with a heated letter dated 30 December 1935 in which he stated his intention to renounce his title as ‘président d’honneur’ from the CCL because of false or untenable complaints of discrimination.⁸² He defended the Belgian position, urging Luxembourgers to proceed cautiously in the Congo, and argued that they should be grateful for being made to feel at home there.

I advised you on this occasion to proceed with great caution and not to lose sight of what you already have in pursuit of some illusory goal, since we must not forget that for us the Belgian Congo is like being at home, and that is not and never will be the case elsewhere. [...] There is nothing unusual in the fact that, both in the Belgian Congo and in Belgium, Luxembourgers are considered as such and not as Belgian nationals, but although they are therefore considered as foreigners, they enjoy real, indisputable advantages that other foreigners do not have and it would be wrong not to recognise that.⁸³

Later on, similar to his letter to Bech in 1933, Cito presented statistics from 1935 and 1936 that refuted the claims of the CCL.⁸⁴ Contrary to the CCL’s statements that Luxembourgers, like other foreigners, were being laid off and had to leave the colony during the Great Depression, Cito’s data demonstrated that Luxembourgers in the Congo were actually less affected by the economic downturn.⁸⁵ However, this situation was not related to their nationality, but rather to the fact that Luxembourgers in the colony belonged to a higher class than other foreigners.

Cito, a former colonialist living in Brussels, countered the criticism from Luxembourg colonialists who were working in the Congo with

81 Original: ‘Bien qu’on entende dire que les Luxembourgeois sont assimilés aux Belges, on a dû constater que, pratiquement, ils ont souvent été rangés dans la catégorie des étrangers.’
Ibid., 1.

82 Ibid., Letter from Cito, 30 December 1935.

83 Original: ‘Je vous ai recommandé à cette occasion de rester très prudents et de ne pas lâcher la proie pour l’ombre, car nous ne pouvons oublier qu’au Congo belge, nous sommes comme chez nous, ce qui n’est pas et ne sera jamais le cas ailleurs. [...] Il n’y a rien d’anormal à ce que, tant au

Congo belge qu’en Belgique, les Luxembourgeois soient considérés comme tels et non comme des nationaux belges, mais s’ils sont de ce fait considérés comme étrangers, ils jouissent d’avantages réels, indiscutables, que n’ont pas les autres étrangers et qu’il serait déplacé de ne pas vouloir reconnaître’. Ibid., 3.

84 Ibid., correspondence between Cito, Bech and CCL (1935/1936).

85 Ibid., Letter from Cito, 30 December 1935, 4-6; Letter from Cito to CCL, 2 January 1936, 1-4.

statistics and official documents. Therefore, this example highlights the gap between the official policy and the actual conditions experienced on the ground. The discussion also reveals the divergent interests of former and active Luxembourgish colonialists. Actors like Cito played a crucial role in maintaining certain boundaries for their compatriots overseas. From 1892, when he arrived in the Congo Free State as an engineer, Cito's career had become closely tied to the Belgian colonial project. Motivated in part by personal ambition, he positioned himself as the intermediary of Luxembourg's colonial interests within the Belgian empire. Therefore, his actions were less motivated by a sense of 'national unity' and more by the alignment of his own interests as consul general with those of the Belgian colonial power. In contrast, those who lodged complaints, such as the CCL, were mostly concerned with advocating Luxembourg's position.

This discord is also evident in the discussion on the Luxembourgish consular representation in the Congo. The CCL requested consular presence, while Cito argued that establishing a consulate in the colony would disadvantage Luxembourgers, as they would lose the support of the Belgian authorities – they would be perceived as foreigners and treated as such.⁸⁶ Even though the CCL already proposed experts that could take on the role of consul, Cito ultimately convinced the Luxembourg government not to appoint a consular representative. Again, Cito deliberately tried to retain control over Luxembourg's colonial engagement from his own position in Brussels.

It is important to note that most members of the Luxembourgish community in the Congo did not submit complaints to their authorities. Those who did were primarily motivated by the desire to advance their own interests or to suggest that specific obstacles they encountered were indicative of a broader systemic injustice. They often highlighted individual grievances as evidence of widespread discrimination, thereby seeking to promote their personal advantages while simultaneously drawing attention to perceived inequities within the European colonial elite.

Being Luxembourgish in the Belgian Congo

The construction of the 'white race', as argued by Ann Stoler, served as a tool for social control, supporting imperial rule and capitalist labour divisions.⁸⁷ The correspondence between Louise Kraus and her mother reflects a sense

86 ANLUX, AE, 03449, Letter from CCL, 18 November 1935, 1; Letter from Cito, 30 December 1935, 7-8; Letter from CCL to Bech, 17 January 1936.

Rule', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31:1 (1989) 134-161. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500015693>.

87 Ann Laura Stoler, 'Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of

of colonial superiority and the trivialisation of the desires and tastes of the Congolese.⁸⁸ Moreover, they illustrate how colonial dominance was perpetuated through the idealisation and suppression of African agency, alongside white racial self-confidence and underlying anxieties.⁸⁹

The interplay of class and race as tools for the colonial-capitalist hierarchical structure is evident in the interactions between European supervisors and African employees.⁹⁰ In letters to her family, Louise Kraus does for instance mention her cook, Wawaya, who expressed a desire to travel to Europe.⁹¹ Nevertheless, the vast majority of African employees remain depersonalised, as their names are frequently omitted – unlike white individuals, who are consistently identified. In the colonial context, maintaining distance from the ‘Other’ was essential for reinforcing white superiority.

Etienne Heinen, also a Luxembourger, arrived in the Belgian Congo in 1926 and spent nearly three decades in Bas-Congo. In his work for the Société de Colonisation Agricole au Mayumbe (SCAM), he stood in direct contact with African employees.⁹² Probably through these professional contacts, he met his future wife, Amélia Lopes da Cruz, the child of an Angolan woman and a Portuguese man.⁹³ Moreover, Lopes da Cruz was one of the very few female People of Colour present in Luxembourg during the colonial period, when she travelled to the country with her husband.⁹⁴

The conscious racialisation of Africans by Europeans, as Ruth Frankenberg argued, did not necessarily involve a conscious racialisation of their own whiteness.⁹⁵ Within white communities in colonial Africa, distinctions were drawn along lines of class and national identity – both of which were often interwoven and manifested in individuals’ socio-economic positions.⁹⁶ During the interwar period, the Luxembourgish community in the Belgian Congo – apart from the missionaries – was part of a higher

88 PA Nurenberg, Letter from Louise Kraus to her mother, 28 May 1930; idem, 24 August 1931.

89 Clive Gabay, *Imagining Africa: Whiteness and the Western Gaze* (Cambridge University Press 2018) 54.

90 Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (Rowman & Littlefield 2018); Stoler, ‘Rethinking’, 134–161; Immanuel Wallerstein, *Le capitalisme historique* (La Découverte 2011 [1983]) 76–81.

91 PA Nurenberg, Letter from Louise Kraus to her mother, 1 November 1930.

92 Personal Archive of Raymond Heinen, Brussels (hereafter PA Heinen), Certificate of Etienne Heinen, service for the SCAM, 13 December 1955.

93 AA, Gouvernement Général (hereafter GG), 907 ME AIMO, Dossier 49886; PA Heinen, marriage certificate, Tshela, 6 August 1955.

94 On the history of the Heinen-Lopes da Cruz family, see Kevin Goergen, ‘Unearthing Migration Pathways: A Journey from Angola, Across the Congo to Luxembourg’, in: Elisabeth Boesen et al. (eds.), *Changing Lusospheres: Europe, Brazil, Africa. On Old and New Connections Between Centers and Peripheries* (Melusina Press 2025) 202–213. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26298/1981-5708>.

95 Frankenberg, ‘Introduction’, 6.

96 Ndaywel è Nziem, ‘Le passé colonial’, 415.

socio-economic class. This was the result of their assimilated status alongside Belgian nationals in the public sector, as well as their recruitment as skilled workers, educated personnel and directors.

Louise Kraus's letters also reveal her disdain for certain Europeans. She complained to her mother about an Italian doctor who flirted with her, calling men pigs who are involved with as many black women as they want, yet still chase after white women.⁹⁷ Sexual relationships between European men and African women were characterised by violence and power dynamics serving the men's sexual gratification.⁹⁸ Additionally, according to the SPA files, several Luxembourgish officials – including Charles Warker, the CCL president from 1930 to 1931 – were implicated in cases of sexual violence against African women.⁹⁹ In contrast, Louise Kraus wrote: 'Black people would never harm a white woman; they respect her too much.'¹⁰⁰

Luxembourgish colonialists leveraged the agreements between Luxembourg and Belgium to negotiate their positions within the Belgian Congo. In 1934, Jean-Pierre Wampach complained to the Association Catholique du Luxembourg that the company Kilo-Moto did not extend his contract after three years because it had a full quota of staff.¹⁰¹ Wampach claimed to have been replaced by a Russian colleague, despite the fact that he was a good worker and a Catholic.¹⁰² Furthermore, 'as a Luxembourger I can consider myself as practically Belgian, given the economic agreement between the two countries'.¹⁰³

However, as evidenced by Kraus's letters, Luxembourgers also distinguished themselves from their Belgian peers. With few exceptions, Louise Kraus referred to Belgians with the derogatory term 'Peggys', describing them as whiny and deceitful.¹⁰⁴ She felt that Belgians begrudged the presence of Luxembourgers in the colony. In contrast to Belgians, whom she claimed to undermine each other, she described Luxembourgers as united, regardless of their social status.¹⁰⁵

97 PA Nurenberg, Letter from Louise Kraus to her mother, 1 June 1931.

98 Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo* (Duke University Press 2016) 41–47.

99 AA, SPA, Colonie 24225, Warker Charles Antoine Joseph Jean-Pierre.

100 Original: '[...] die Schwarzen täten überhaupt nie einer weissen Frau was zuleide, sie respektieren sie zu sehr'. PA Nurenberg, Letter from Gemena, Ubangi District, Équateur, 16 October 1930.

101 ANLUX, AE, 03449, Letter from Jean-Pierre Wampach to the President of the

Association Catholique du Luxembourg, 27 August 1934.

102 Ibid.

103 Original: 'En tant que Luxembourgeois je puis me considérer comme pratiquement belge, vu l'accord économique des deux pays'. Ibid.

104 Original: '[...] mit den andern Peggys ist nichts zu machen, die sind verlogen und heuchlerich'. PA Nurenberg, Letter from Louise Kraus to her mother, 24 August 1931.

105 Ibid., Letter from Louise Kraus to her mother, 27 September 1933; idem, 26 December 1938.

Of particular interest to the significance of being a Luxembourger in the Belgian colony is the correspondence about the upbringing of Jean Kraus and Louise Kraus's child. On more than one occasion, Louise wrote that it was time for their child to go to Europe, as she was as 'wild' as black children and had no white children to play with.¹⁰⁶

She just speaks too much Bangala. We have to forbid her from speaking Bangala with us, otherwise she will forget the little Luxembourgish she knows. We should teach her French, but it is difficult; she only has Bangala in her head.¹⁰⁷

The family adapted to the colonial environment and tried to preserve a Luxembourgish or at least European identity, albeit with the difficulty that they were the only Luxembourgers in their locality. However, Louise Kraus also penned statements such as: 'You should hear us speak Bangala, we speak it almost as well as the blacks.'¹⁰⁸

These letters written by the wife of a colonial officer reveal the significance of national identity for colonialist themselves. Not only officials but also their families positioned their national background within the colonial framework. While, for instance, Flemish colonialists had to assert their 'white' identity through language and participation in the colony, Luxembourgers could draw on their national identity.¹⁰⁹ The latter could not only refer to a different nationality, but also to an arrangement between two states. It seems that, depending on their situation, Luxembourgers had the choice of either identifying with Belgium or even adopting Belgian nationality, or referring to their Luxembourgish nationality while distinguishing themselves from the Belgians or speaking negatively about them.

In the context of the Belgian Congo, Luxembourgish identity functioned as a negotiable and strategically mobilised category that enabled access to colonial advantage. Unlike other European nationals such as the Finns or the Dutch, who remained distinct from the Belgians, Luxembourgers were able to align themselves with Belgian standards – particularly through the shared French language and common cultural references – thus positioning themselves more favourably within the colonial hierarchy of the Belgian empire.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 25 April 1946.

¹⁰⁷ Original: 'Nur spricht sie zuviel Bangala, wir müssen ihr verbieten mit uns Bangala zu sprechen, sonst täte sie das wenig Luxemburgisch noch vergessen. Wir sollten ihr französisch beibringen aber das ist schwer, sie hat nur Bangala im Kopf'. Ibid., 18 March 1934.

¹⁰⁸ Original: 'Du solltest uns mal Bangala sprechen hören, wir sprechen schon fast so gut wie die Schwarzen.' Ibid., 16 October 1930.

¹⁰⁹ Kanobana, 'How the Flemings Became White', 260.

The colonial entanglements of Luxembourg in the Belgian Congo highlight how colonialism was a pan-European and transnational enterprise. Moreover, this case study reveals imperial dynamics within European communities themselves, where power, privilege, and identity were contested. The shared colonial project – clearly dominated by Belgium – also served to strengthen Belgium's influence in Luxembourg. It remains debatable to what extent this can be seen as an indication of long-term Belgian ambitions to 'assimilate' Luxembourg into the Belgian empire.¹¹⁰ Tensions within the empire also reveal how the Congo and colonial governance were instrumentalised to serve Belgian metropolitan interests.


From the 1920s onwards, Luxembourg's unprecedented colonial ambitions were realised within the Belgian empire, although the country remained dependent on Belgium for reciprocal benefits. Differences persisted between metropolitan decisions and the realities in the colony, reflecting the varied interests of Luxembourgish actors such as Cito and the CCL. They were not passive participants; they negotiated roles, asserted personal and national interests, and sought reciprocal benefits from the colonial power. Their involvement illustrates how small states could be involved in colonial systems without direct colonial rule, influencing colonial practices through transnational networks and individual agency.

In colonial Congo, Luxembourgish identity was marked by the possibility or choice of aligning with the Belgian colonial power or maintaining a distinct national identity. Complaints from Luxembourgish colonialists about unmet Belgian promises of equality also underscored the persistence of Luxembourgish national sentiment in the colony. As this special issue of *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* illustrates, the colonial history of the Congo was characterised by a tension between international ambitions and Belgian national sovereignty. This dynamic also shaped the agency of Luxembourgish actors, who, amid the increasing nationalisation of the Belgian colony during the interwar period, were compelled to position themselves and negotiate their affiliations within the evolving structure of the Belgian colonial system.

Furthermore, Luxembourgers in the Congo, often from the upper and middle classes, were socially and economically distinct from other Europeans. Their grievances focused on a lack of privileged treatment from the Belgian government, not mistreatment. They navigated fluid identities shaped by class, race, and national belonging, actively moulding their roles within the colonial system in a way that highlights the dynamics of power, identity, and mobility in colonial settings. By situating Luxembourg and its subjects within the broader imperial and pan-European framework, this article

110 Moes, 'Cette colonie', 105-106.

has demonstrated how small European states were entangled in national, colonial, and imperial dynamics, both contributing to and being shaped by them.¹¹¹ The Luxembourgish case underscores the complex hierarchies and the imperial and transnational ambitions underpinning colonial endeavours, offering a more complete understanding of pan-European colonialism.



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111 Tavares and Vieira, 'Black Luxembourg'; Samuel Weeks, 'Financing White Rule: How Luxembourg Became a Banker for the Belgian Congo and

Apartheid South Africa', *Finance and Society* 10:3 (2024) 1-17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/fas.2024.12>.