

Transimperial Opportunities?

Small State Colonisation of Congo (1876-1940)

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This introduction to the special issue *Transimperial Opportunities? Small State Colonisation of Congo (1876-1940)* reinterprets Congo's colonial history through a transimperial lens, situating it within wider debates on pan-European empire and small state imperialisms. Moving beyond Belgian-centred national frameworks and 'Great Power' biases, it reveals how tensions between nationalisation and internationalisation shaped transimperial practices and relations and vice versa. The issue examines how actors and institutions from states with diminishing or limited imperial leverage – such as the Netherlands, Finland, and Luxembourg – engaged in, shaped, and contested the colonisation of Congo. Demonstrating how transimperial opportunities both motivated and complicated joint colonial projects, it analyses how so-called small state actors navigated, benefited from, and negotiated imperial hierarchies. By foregrounding transimperial collaboration and competition, the issue positions colonial Congo as a key site for understanding tensions in the co-production of (pan-European) colonial policies, identities, and structures across borders.

Deze inleiding op het themanummer *Transimperial Opportunities? Small State Colonisation of Congo (1876-1940)* biedt een herinterpretatie van de koloniale geschiedenis van Congo vanuit een transimperiaal perspectief en plaatst het binnen bredere debatten over pan-Europese imperiale samenwerking en de rol van zogenaamd kleine staten daarin. Door tegelijkertijd Belgisch-nationale kaders en de focus op de traditionele imperiale grootmachten te overstijgen, tonen we hoe de spanningen tussen nationalisering en internationalisering transimperiële praktijken en relaties vormgaven en vice versa. Het themanummer onderzoekt hoe actoren en instellingen uit staten met tanende of beperkte imperiale slagkracht – zoals Nederland, Finland en Luxemburg – de kolonisatie in Congo vormgaven en betwisten. De bijdragen duiden hoe transimperiële mogelijkheden koloniale

projecten zowel stimuleerden als bemoeilijkten, en hoe actoren van zogenaamd kleine staten navigeerden tussen en profiteerden van imperiale hiërarchieën, en deze tegelijkertijd herdefinieerden. Door transimperiale samenwerking en competitie centraal te stellen, presenteert dit themanummer koloniaal Congo als een centrale casus om tot verdere inzichten te komen over de spanningen rond de co-productie van (pan-Europese) koloniale strategieën, identiteiten en structuren over grenzen heen.

Introduction¹

In 1882, the infamous explorer Henry Morton Stanley advised Colonel Maximilien Strauch – the Belgian secretary general of the International African Association and president of the Committee for Studies of the Upper Congo – on the so-called Congo scheme: ‘It is not wise to be too exclusive in your choice of men. It would be wiser to get the best men, irrespective of their nationality though the principals may be Belgians’.² Stanley’s remark reflects the pragmatic cosmopolitanism of early colonial efforts in the Congo Basin. Indeed, approximately half of the ‘white agents’ who ventured or were sent to the region during the formative years of the Congo Free State were non-Belgian Europeans, including explorers, missionaries, and officers.³ However, both historical scholarship and public debate overwhelmingly portray Congo’s colonial history as a singular and an exclusively Belgian affair, tightly tethered to the Belgian state and monarchy.⁴ While the strong linkages

1 This special issue emerged from the conference ‘Pathways to Empire? Belgian Global Expansion 1830-1930’, supported by the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS), KU Leuven, CegeSoma, KAOWarsom, and the University of Antwerp. The collaboration with our fellow co-organisers and the lively discussions with conference participants created the intellectual spark from which many of the ideas developed here have emerged, and to which we are indebted. Our thanks go to the contributors for their dedication to this theme and for their thoughtful revisions, as well as to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and insightful comments, which significantly strengthened each article, including our own. We also wish to express our sincere appreciation to the BMGN editorial team, in particular Tessa Lobbes, Houssine Alloul, and Wouter Egelmeers, for

their unfailing guidance and careful management throughout.

2 Henry Morton Stanley to Colonel Strauch, April 1882, KBF/RMCA Stanley Archives, inv. nr. 34, journal ‘Vol. 1. Congo. 1878-82’, 473, quoted from Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi, ‘To Be International Or Not to Be: Stanley Within the “Congo Scheme” (1878-1884)’, in: Patricia Van Schuylenberg and Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi, *The Congo Free State: What Could Archives Tell Us?* (Peter Lang 2022) 129.

3 Ibid., 129.

4 Guy Vanthemsche, ‘The Historiography of Belgian Colonialism in the Congo’, in: Csaba Lévai (ed.), *Europe and the World in European Historiography* (Pisa University Press 2006); Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro, and Guy Vanthemsche, *Colonial Congo: A History in Questions* (Brepols 2024). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.STMCH-EB.5.127497>.

between Belgium as coloniser/metropole and Congo as colonised/periphery are rightfully scrutinised, such a narrow lens risks obscuring the more multifarious, transimperial nature of the colonisation of Congo.⁵

This special issue is based on a selection of lectures presented during the international conference *Pathways to Empire? Belgian Global Expansion*, which took place in September 2024. Our call for papers sought to attract contributions exploring Belgian expansion beyond Congo and its reception by local agents.⁶ Surprisingly, we received several submissions that addressed quite the contrary: the colonial presence of non-Belgians in Congo. These presentations were not about British, French, or Portuguese imperial agents, typically associated with the Scramble for Africa, or Italian, German, and North American imperial newcomers, but rather focused on individuals, institutions, and networks from smaller European polities, such as Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Finland. Although limited in numbers, they represent an often-overlooked perspective of actors from small European states in Congo (see Graphs 1 and 2). These submissions, on the one hand, reveal the untapped potential for expanding a transimperial research agenda in the context of Congolese history. On the other, they raise questions about how actors from so-called marginal European states navigated the transimperial opportunities that emerged – or were foreclosed – in the colonisation of Congo.

Following the invitation in Amandine Lauro's conference keynote, this special issue tackles 'transimperial opportunities' in a dual sense, both the historiographical and historical. Transimperial refers not simply to cross-border circulation, but to a methodological lens that builds on earlier frameworks of entangled and global history, exposing how actors operated across, between, and sometimes against formal imperial boundaries. On the historiographical level, the title of this issue raises the question of what the

5 Debora L. Silverman, 'Diasporas of Art: History, the Tervuren Royal Museum for Central Africa, and the Politics of Memory in Belgium, 1885-2014', *Journal of Modern History* 87:3 (2015) 615-667. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/682912>; Benoît Henriët, *Colonial Impotence: Virtue and Violence in a Congolese Concession (1911-1940)* (De Gruyter 2021). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110652734>. The same narrow focus is noticeable in the colonial history of Central Africa in general, also where Belgium is concerned, as the colonial history of Ruanda-Urundi has often been understudied by scholars. Notable exceptions exist, most importantly: Joseph Gahama, *Le Burundi sous administration belge – la période du mandat 1919-1939* (Karthala

1983); Jean Rumiya, *Le Rwanda sous le régime du mandat belge (1916-1931)* (L'Harmattan 1992); Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860-1960* (Columbia University Press 1993); Alison Des Forges and David S. Newbury, *Defeat Is the Only Bad News, Rwanda Under Musinga, 1896-1931* (University of Wisconsin Press 2011).

6 This topic will be the focus of another special issue. For more information regarding this conference, see KU Leuven, 'Pathways to Empire? Belgian Global Expansion 1830-1930', <https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/conferences/conference-pathways-to-empire>. Accessed 7 November 2025.

burgeoning field of transimperial history – including its focus on small(er) empires and states – might have to offer to the study of Congolese colonial history, and conversely, what the case of colonial Congo can contribute to transimperial historiography. On the historical level, it inquires what transimperial opportunities motivated small state actors such as the Dutch, Finnish, or Luxembourgish, to engage in imperial activities in the ‘extra-European world’, and more specifically in Congo.⁷ As such, it expands Bernhard Schär’s plea to analyse how transimperial actors actively pursued opportunities in multiple imperial spaces.⁸ Congo’s colonial past is a case in point to study the friction, contestation, and overlap between national and imperial identities, interests, and networks during the epoch of high imperialism, demonstrating how the transimperial turn can benefit from a more explicit engagement with questions on (trans)nationalism in the two previous centuries.

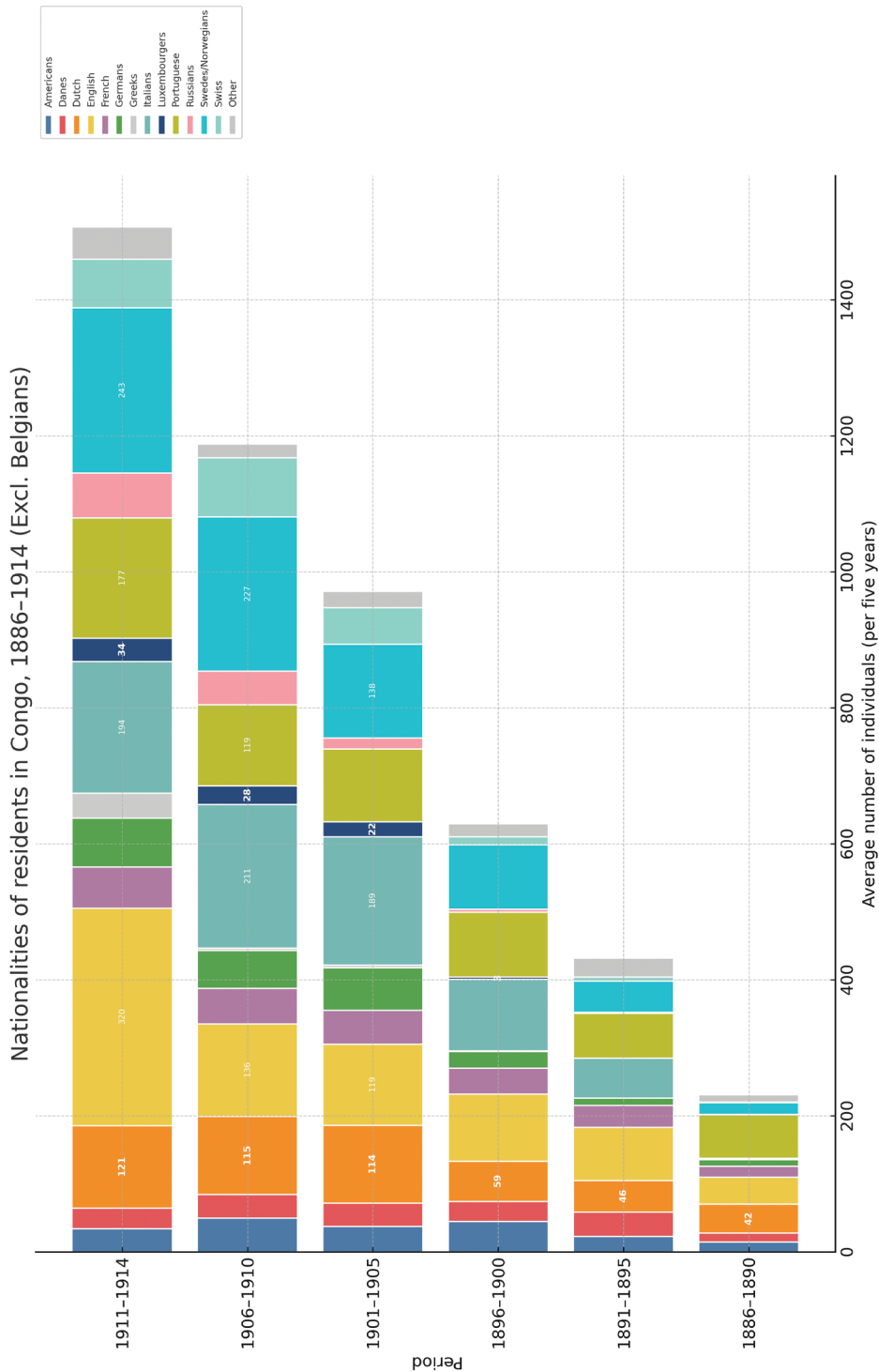
This issue connects two often eclipsed dimensions in the field of imperial history: the role of so-called small states and that of colonial latecomers. By foregrounding these features, the contributions aim to enrich, and sometimes challenge, prevailing understandings of their place within the pan-European imperial project. First, the category of ‘small states’ refers not solely, or even primarily, to geographical size, but rather to a state’s perceived geopolitical position within a given historical moment, indicative of their place within the imperial order understood by contemporaries and in historiography. While these demarcations come with their own set of limitations and inevitable fluidity, they are necessarily and productively imprecise: necessarily, as size is difficult to define objectively, making it a ‘perceptual and malleable’ notion;⁹ productively, because this conceptual flexibility allows to comparatively analyse the similarities, differences, and connections of a broad range of small state actors who lacked substantial imperial leverage, yet operated from vastly different historical positions: the Netherlands, with, among others, its large colony in Southeast Asia and longstanding colonial past; Finland, engaged in internal and arctic colonisation; and Luxembourg, scarcely an independent state with no formal colonies yet deeply involved in the imperial projects of its close neighbours. The concept ‘small state’ is thus adopted as an analytical category to examine how limited geopolitical leverage shaped different modes of imperial participation, intertwining, and dependency. With regards to the

7 Concept taken from Moritz von Brescius, *German Science in the Age of Empire: Enterprise, Opportunity, and the Schlagintweit Brothers* (Cambridge University Press 2019) 344. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108579568>.

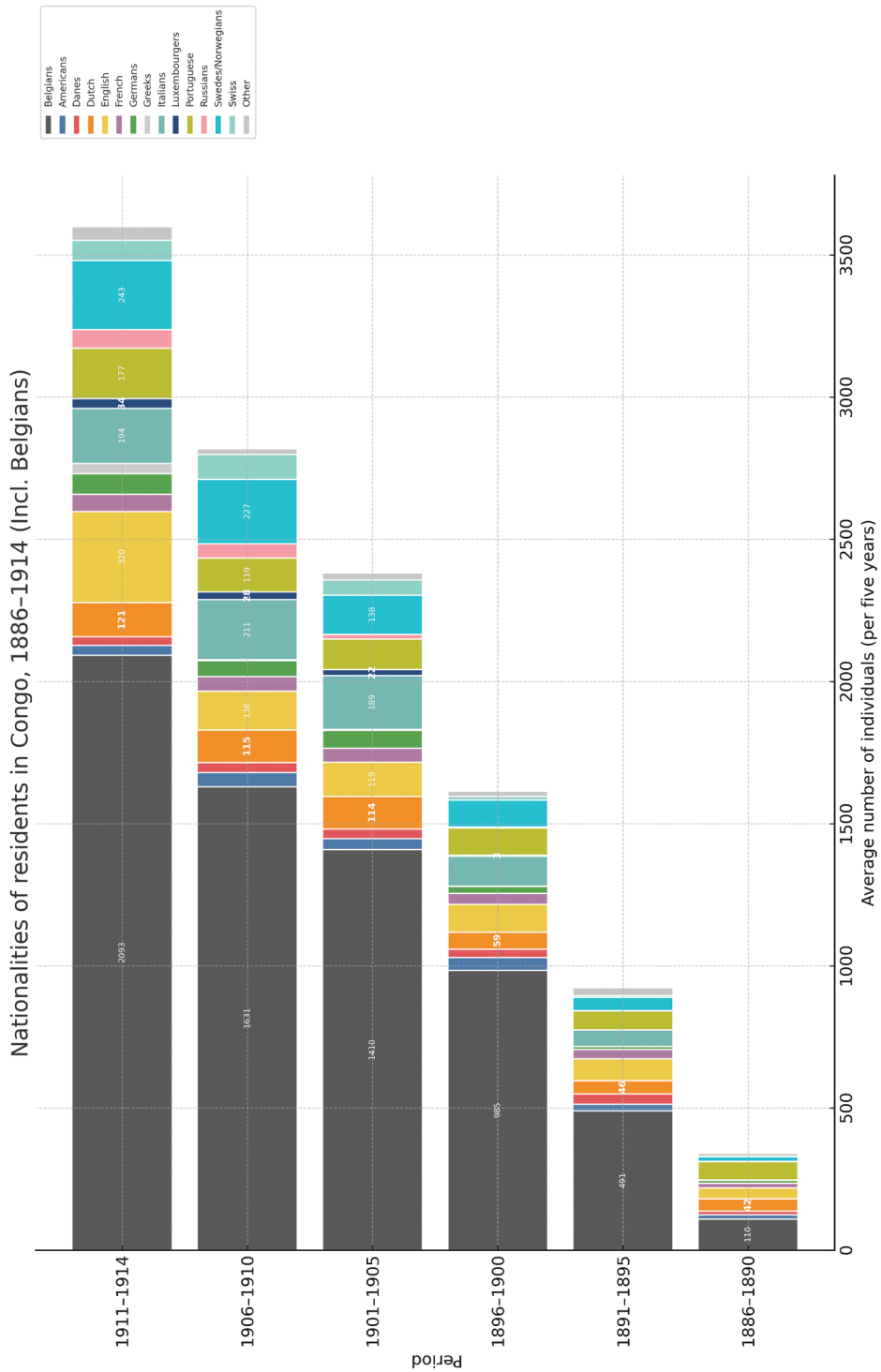
8 Bernhard C. Schär, ‘Introduction: The Dutch East Indies and Europe, ca. 1800-1930: An Empire

of Demands and Opportunities’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* (hereafter *BMGN – LCHR*) 134:3 (2019) 4-20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10738>.

9 Samuël Kruizinga, *The Politics of Smallness in Modern Europe: Size, Identity and International Relations since 1800* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2022) 205.



Graph 1. The number of Euro-American residents, excluding Belgian nationals, in Congo between 1886-1914, taken by average every five years, based on the *Bulletin Officiel de l'État Indépendant du Congo*. © Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, <https://www.kaowarsom.be/fr/bibliotheque-digitale/fichiers-numerises/bulletin-officiel-du-congo-belge>.



Graph 2. The number of Euro-American residents, including Belgian nationals, in Congo between 1886-1914, taken by average every five years, based on the *Bulletin Officiel de l'État Indépendant du Congo*. © Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, <https://www.kaowarsom.be/fr/bibliotheque-digitale/fichiers-numerises/bulletin-officiel-du-congo-belge>.

second dimension, the Belgian imperial enterprise has often been dismissed by historians as a ‘tiny empire’, or even ‘never much more than a joke’.¹⁰ Yet, within the historiography on Congo, Belgium is routinely described as an empire, spearheaded by the paradigmatic imperialist King Leopold II. This seeming paradox can be resolved employing the concept of ‘colonial latecomer’ which, according to Elizabeth Buettner, refers to those powers which ‘looked overseas as a means of consolidating their standing as newly unified nation-states by adopting behaviours characteristic of Great Powers [...], gaining footholds in Asia and particularly Africa meant winning their rightful “place in the sun”’.¹¹ Their efforts were frequently mediated, supported, or contested by transimperial networks of foreign agents, which reinforces the argument of including the Belgian ‘empire’ as one of these colonial latecomers.

As such, colonial Congo represents a unique case to investigate how the transimperial opportunities of small state actors could foster or complicate joint colonisation projects – or in the words of Mikko Toivanen and Schär, to deepen our understanding of ‘the underexplored question of the coloniality of Europe as a concept’.¹² Although Congo studies have recently underscored the importance of local, interdisciplinary, and cross-border perspectives (in particular during the Congo Research Network’s 2025 conference at the Africa Institute of Sharjah), a tendency remains to focus exclusively on (structural) violence within the Congo Free State. The striking violence, moreover, is still too often interpreted as the solo endeavour of Leopold II and his closest allies or examined mainly through its reverberations in Belgian Congo.¹³

10 In the words of Michael Mann and George Schöpflin, in: Jan-Frederik Abbeeloos, ‘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, 108.

11 Elizabeth Buettner, ‘Europe and Its Entangled Colonial Pasts: Europeanizing the “Imperial Turn”’, in: Britta Timm Knudsen et al. (eds.), *Decolonizing Colonial Heritage: New Agendas, Actors and Practices in and beyond Europe*, (Routledge 2023) 25-43, 27; Elisabeth Bruyère, ‘Constructing Latecomer Colonial Models: Transformation of the Traditional Theory of Nationality in the Face of Belgian Expansionism’ (University of Toronto 2025). Presentation at the conference *Legal Histories of Empires 2025: Empires in Touch*.

12 Mikko Toivanen and Bernhard C. Schär, ‘Expansion Alongside Integration: A New History of Imperial Europe’, in: idem (eds.), *Integration and Collaborative Imperialism in Modern Europe: At the Margins of Empire, 1800-1950* (Bloomsbury Academic 2025) 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350377370>.

13 Recent exceptions are worth mentioning, including (but not limited to): Pierre-Philippe Fraiture (ed.), *Unfinished Histories: Empire and Postcolonial Resonance in Central Africa and Belgium* (Leuven University Press 2022). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1116/9789461664914>; Florence Bernault, Benoît Henriët, and Emery Kalema (eds.), *Textures of Power: Central Africa in the Long Twentieth Century* (Leuven University Press 2025). DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.1116/9789461666383>; Gillian Mathys, *Fractured Pasts in Lake Kivu’s Borderlands: Conflicts, Connections and Mobility in*

Building on the discussions initiated at the *Pathways to Empire?* conference, this special issue moves beyond these limitations by examining colonial Congo within a broader transimperial research agenda. In doing so, it develops two branches of this agenda: small state involvement in the ‘pan-European’ colonisation of Congo and the resulting tensions between (trans) imperial and (trans)national forces. The temporal scope extends from 1876 – with the founding of the Association Internationale Africaine (AIA) and the institutionalisation of colonial endeavours in the Congo Basin – to 1940, marking the end of the interwar period as well as structural transformations in the Congolese colony due to its role in the Second World War. While this issue lacks a more engaged dialogue with non-European, and in particular Congolese, scholars, sources, archives, methods, and epistemologies, we hope this is only the beginning of a blossoming research line with a transimperial perspective on Congolese history, one that more explicitly situates itself within Africanist and decolonial scholarship, as outlined by the contribution of Lauro in this issue.¹⁴

Connecting transnational and transimperial histories

The critique on overly national frameworks within history writing has been voiced widely and loudly, but its relationship with imperial history harbours an incongruity. Transnational historians have rightly pointed out that nineteenth-century nationalism co-shaped the institutionalisation of modern history writing and hindered (or still does) our comprehension of border-crossing phenomena in history. They have proposed the notion of transnationalism as a ‘conceptual acid’ to corrode the concept of the nation and understand it as ‘a thing contested, interrupted, and always shot through with contradiction’.¹⁵ Subsequent historiographical trends such as *histoire croisée*, entangled history, and global history injected refreshing questions about connections, circulations, and asymmetries to transcend these national boundaries. These trends were picked up (although quite slowly) by imperial historians, leading to the rebranding of the field as ‘New Imperial History’.¹⁶

Central Africa (Cambridge University Press 2025).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009463041>. As well as Amandine Lauro’s contribution to this special issue, ‘Writing Transimperial Histories from/of the Belgian Congo: Reflections on a Historiography in the Making’, *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.22337>. For more information about the Congo Research Network and their conferences, see Congo Research Network,

<https://congoreseachnetwork.com/>. Accessed 7 November 2025.

14 Lauro, ‘Writing Transimperial Histories’.

15 Laura Briggs et al., ‘Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis’, *American Quarterly* 60:3 (2008) 625–648. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.0.0038>.

16 Gita Deneckere, Daniel Laqua, and Christophe Verbruggen, ‘Belgium on the Move: Transnational History and the Belle Époque’, *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 90:4

Consequently, this renewed attention shed unprecedented light on the width, depth, and complexity of colonial histories, their (shared) legacies, and the cooperative nature of Euro-American imperialism, but it has fallen short in some crucial respects.¹⁷

While imperial and colonial histories have increasingly emphasised the mutual economic, cultural and political constitution of colonies and metropolises, thus correcting the one-sidedness of traditional national narratives, these works have largely stayed within the confines of nationalised imperial borders, for example, exploring the reciprocal dynamics between French Algeria and metropolitan France, or between the Brazilian colony and the Portuguese Crown.¹⁸ Antoinette Burton pointed to an ‘intriguing and unsettling paradox of the “new” imperial history’ where even the most critical scholars often ‘leave the nation in pride of place’.¹⁹ Moreover, Euro- and Anglocentric biases are continuously reproduced.²⁰ When scholars do transcend national-imperial frameworks, this often results in inter-imperial comparisons that ‘add-on’ to our understanding of the well-known – most often British – imperial histories.²¹

The booming field of transimperial history seeks to counter these shortcomings. In their seminal article, Daniel Hedinger and Nadine Heé explain how transnational historians have analysed the colonies in order to scrutinise border-crossing connections, movement, and influences, but paradoxically often ‘nationalized empires’ – a point which Lauro develops

- (2012) 1213-1226. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/rbph.2012.8283>; Simon Potter and Jonathan Saha, ‘Global History, Imperial History and Connected Histories of Empire’, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 16:1 (2015) 1-31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2015.0009>; Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, *Empires and the Reach of the Global, 1870-1945* (Belknap Press 2012); Stephen Howe (ed.), *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (Routledge 2009).
- 17 Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski (eds.), *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930: Empires and Encounters* (Bloomsbury Academic 2015).
- 18 Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, ‘Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition’, *Journal of Modern European History* 16:4 (2018) 429-452. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2018-4-429>; Nadin Heé, ‘Transimperial Opportunities? Transcending the Nation in Imperial Formations’, *Comparativ* 31:5/6 (2021) 631-639, 632. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26014/j.comp.2021.05-06.07>.
- 19 Antoinette Burton (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation* (Duke University Press 2003) 7.
- 20 A bias also pointed out by: Howe (ed.), *The New Imperial Histories Reader*; Karwan Fatah-Black, ‘A Swiss Village in the Dutch Tropics: The Limitations of Empire-Centred Approaches to the Early Modern Atlantic World’, *BMGN – LCHR* 128:1 (2013) 31-52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8354>; Florian Wagner, *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire, 1893-1982* (Cambridge University Press 2022). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009072229>.
- 21 As indicated by Susan Legêne, ‘The European Character of the Intellectual History of Dutch Empire’, *BMGN – LCHR* 132:2 (2017) 113, 118. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10344>; Wagner, *Colonial Internationalism*.

further with regards to colonial Congo in her contribution to this issue.²² In other words, the plea for a transimperial turn emerged from the need to apply a transnational perspective at the scale of empires. A transimperial lens complicates traditional metropole-colony axes, integrating a variety of actors whose movements, affiliations, and ambitions cut across national and imperial borders. Simultaneously, the transimperial turn aims to overcome the ‘Eurocentrism that still haunts imperial history’ by broadening the scope of inquiry to include geographically and historiographically marginalised and lesser-studied empires, epistemologically non-Western perspectives, and more fluid, overlapping forms of imperial presence.²³ It challenges the dominance of ‘Great Power’ narratives within the field, not only complementing but also decentralising the usual – British and French – suspects that have come to dictate how scholars perceive and study imperialism.

Their plea has driven many scholars to examine how and why individuals became personally and institutionally involved in the cultural, scientific, economic, political or military imperial ventures of other states.²⁴ These scholars have convincingly drawn attention to the permeability of imperial boundaries, illustrating how actors, capital, labour, and information circulated across and between empires. Studies concerning early modern Portuguese merchants operating under Dutch colonial frameworks in Brazil, or eighteenth-century Flemish slave traders navigating the Spanish inquisition and British jurisdiction in Cuba or on their way there, demonstrate how imperial subjects continuously adapted their strategies in response to shifting legal regimes, opportunities, and rivalries.²⁵ Although much of this scholarship focuses on the early modern period, similar dynamics characterised the long nineteenth century.²⁶ British, French,

22 Hedinger and Heé, ‘Transimperial History’, 429; Lauro, ‘Writing Transimperial Histories’.

23 Hedinger and Heé, ‘Transimperial History’, 430.

24 Cátia Antunes and Amélia Polónia (eds.), *Beyond Empires: Global, Self-Organizing, Cross-Imperial Networks, 1500-1800, European Expansion and Indigenous Response* 21 (Brill 2016) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004304154>; 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* 131:3 (2018) 501-521. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2018.3.006>. ANTU.

25 Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, ‘Dutch and Portuguese Encounters in the South Atlantic: A Business

Perspective, 1590s-1670s’, in: Cátia Antunes (ed.), *Pursuing Empire: Brazilians, the Dutch and the Portuguese in Brazil and the South Atlantic, c.1620-1660* (Brill 2022) 34-56. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004528482_004; Stan Pannier, ‘Habsburg in Havana. Outsider Participation in the Spanish Empire: The Slaving Licence of Romberg & Consors of Ghent, 1780-90’, *Itinerario* 49:1 (2025) 79-98. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115325000026>.

26 Ulbe Bosma, ‘European Colonial Soldiers in the Nineteenth Century: Their Role in White Global Migration and Patterns of Colonial Settlement’, *Journal of Global History* 4:2 (2009) 317-336. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022809003179>; Stephen Conway, *Britannia’s Auxiliaries: Continental Europeans and the British Empire*,

Spanish, and Portuguese firms played prominent roles in colonial economies far beyond the borders of their empires, while various actors from minor European powers participated in, or profited from, imperial enterprises not administered by their own nation-states. These cross-imperial movements were not merely the byproduct of technological advances and increased mobility; rather, they were shaped by – and responsive to – broader ideological and structural transformations, including evolving views on liberalism, protectionism, and nationalism.²⁷

Indeed, the historical influence of nationalism is especially salient with regards to the late nineteenth century, when the age of empire putatively converged with the age of the nation-state.²⁸ Throughout much of the nineteenth century, Europeans moved freely through imperial spaces, often with their white skin serving as a kind of passport. Yet by the turn of the twentieth century, national origin emerged more prominently as a marker of distinction and legitimacy.²⁹ Almost a decade ago, Susan Legêne called for further investigation to ‘understand the deep entanglement of the processes of nation-state formation in Europe with imperialism as a fundamentally European endeavour’.³⁰ A couple of years later, in 2019, Schär took up the questions formulated by Legêne in a special issue of this journal exploring the presence of European ‘foreigners’ in the Dutch East Indies.³¹ Focusing on case studies emanating from the Dutch empire in the long nineteenth century, the issue’s contributions collectively demonstrate how ‘the webs of the Dutch empire neither started nor ended at the formal political borders of the Netherlands and its colonies’. Rather, they ‘reached deep into the European hinterland to accumulate capital, mercenaries, settlers, planters, know-how, and other resources’.³² Building on Schär’s framework of demands and opportunities, the articles demonstrate how transimperial actors actively pursued opportunities in multiple imperial spaces, responding to entangled demands within the colonial world.

1740-1800 (Oxford University Press 2017); John R. Davis, Stefan Manz, and Margrit Schulte Beerbühl (eds.), *Transnational Networks: German Migrants in the British Empire, 1670-1914* (Brill 2012). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004229570>; Patrick Harries, *Butterflies & Barbarians: Swiss Missionaries in South-East Africa* (James Curry 2007); Florian Krobb, ‘“The Starting Point for the Civilisation of the Dark Continent”: Austrians in the Sudan: Ernst Marno and Rudolf Slatin as Agents of African Conquest’, *Austrian Studies* 20 (2012) 142-160. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aus.2012.0010>; Bernhard C. Schär, ‘From Batticaloa via Basel

to Berlin: Transimperial Science in Ceylon and Beyond around 1900’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48:2 (2020) 230-262. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2019.1638620>.

27 Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke University Press 2015).

28 Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press 2014).

29 Legêne, ‘The European Character’, 112.

30 Ibid., 116.

31 Schär, ‘Introduction’, 10-11.

32 Ibid., 9.

Scholars investigating (alleged and often self-proclaimed) smaller European powers have pointed out the ‘webbedness’ of the European colonial world, thereby challenging common notions of empires with stark and impenetrable boundaries driven by inter-imperial rivalry.³³ However, empires did not always or continuously embrace foreign involvement. While they often benefitted from extra-imperial demands for colonial objects, expertise, and commodities, foreign elements could at times also present a threat to the dominant colonial power. In her contribution to this issue, Lauro reminds us how ‘colonial authorities were remarkably successful in imposing controls on the movement of people and ideas from/to the Congo’. Echoing Matthew Stanard’s call for caution, she emphasises the need to balance the wish to connect imperial histories with attentiveness to the peculiarities of the Belgian colonial experience.³⁴ To truly and fully address the heterogeneity and contingency of European imperialism(s), scholars need to examine transimperial cooperation *and* competition, overlap *and* contestation, and how all this influenced imperial demand and opportunity.

The (inter)nationalisation of Congo

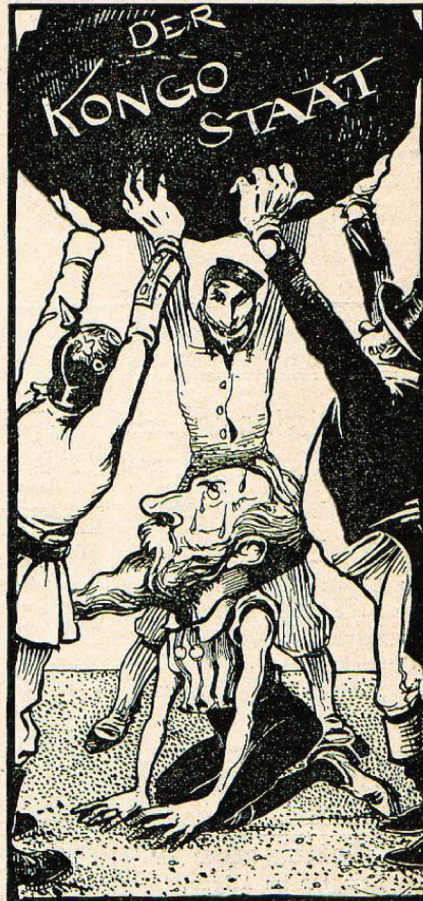
The following section translates these historiographical considerations into the specific case of Congo, tracing how processes of (inter)nationalisation shaped both the structure and imagination of empire. Public and scholarly perceptions of Belgian colonialism have been conditioned by the image of Congo as a monopolistic venture of Leopold II and his so-called colonial party.³⁵ To a certain extent, this image has been corrected by authors disclosing broader networks of imperial careerists, such as businessmen, explorers, and (amateur) scientists.³⁶ While literature focused on the Belgium-Congo axis draws necessary scholarly and public attention, important compilations such as *Koloniaal Congo. Een geschiedenis in vragen / Le Congo colonial. Une histoire en questions* (2020) already tentatively hint at the transnational and transimperial pathways of capital, people, and knowledge through Congo. On the one hand, the Belgian ‘drive to exert exclusive and absolute control

- 33 Remco Raben, ‘A New Dutch Imperial History? Perambulations in a Prospective Field’, *BMGN – LCHR* 128:1 (2013) 11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8353>.
- 34 See: Matthew G. Stanard, ‘Belgium, the Congo, and Imperial Immobility: A Singular Empire and the Historiography of the Single Analytic Field’, *French Colonial History* 15 (2014) 87–110. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14321/frencolohist.15.2014.0087>; Lauro, ‘Writing Transimperial Histories’.

- 35 Vanthemsche, ‘The Historiography’; Vincent Viaene, ‘King Leopold’s Imperialism and the Origins of the Belgian Colonial Party, 1860–1905’, *Journal of Modern History* 80:4 (2008) 741–790. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/591110>.
- 36 Frans Buelens, *Congo 1885–1960: een financieel-economische geschiedenis* (EPO 2007); Jan Vandersmissen, *Koningen van de wereld: Leopold II en de aardrijkskundige beweging* (ACCO 2009).



*Wie sich König Leopold von Belgien mit seinem
Congostaat abmüht —*



*und wie ihm leicht geholfen werden könnte,
wenn er sich beklagte.*

▲
Figure 1. Cartoon portraying Leopold II carrying a massive rock titled ‘the Congo State’, published in the German periodical *Jugend*, Munich, 19 December 1896. The colony ‘discovered’ by explorer Stanley (on the left-hand panel, on top of the boulder) is represented as an enormous burden to the Belgian king, while the right-hand panel depicts the ‘Great Powers’ – in this case from left to right: Germany, France, and Great Britain – lifting the rock to either support or take over from the sweating Leopold. In this section *Humor des Auslandes*, the cartoonist ridicules the melodramatic effort by Leopold, pretending to carry an unbearable weight, metaphor for the supposed unmanageable, laborious, and unprofitable Congo Free State, insinuating that Leopold’s supposed martyrdom is unnecessary, as other European powers could easily share or lighten said burden. © *Jugend. Münchner illustrierte Wochenschrift für Kunst und Leben*, Volume 1:2 (1896) nr. 51, 829–848, 845. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.3224#0409>.

over Congo runs like a thread through [its] colonial history'.³⁷ On the other, empires continually depended 'on extra-imperial resources, labour, and expertise' beyond the often too clear-cut metropole-periphery, coloniser-colonised divides'.³⁸ What remains unexplored are the tensions between this nationalising reflex and the transimperial dynamics in Congo. The complex history of (inter)nationalisation of the Congo Free State and later Belgian Congo sets the stage to scrutinise these tensions.

The Congo Free State was born from an ostensible ideal aimed at the internationalisation of colonial expansion in Africa. In practice, the colony was increasingly nationalised over time, leading to continuous tensions between internationalisation and nationalisation (Figure 1). From its inception in 1876, the AIA was conceived along the lines of philanthropic organisations akin to the Red Cross, with national committees in several countries and a central executive committee based in Brussels. The AIA recruited explorers – most famously Henry Morton Stanley – to sign treaties with African leaders and establish trading posts. Over the years, the Congo Basin became a focal point of European and North American imaginings about the internationalisation of colonialism, all this under the cover of the so-called moral burden to 'civilise' and 'modernise' the African continent. In 1883, the *Institut de Droit International* addressed the Congo Question, advocating principles of free trade and freedom of movement in the region. Around the same time, Belgian jurist Émile de Laveleye explored the legal feasibility of establishing a neutral colony administered by an international commission.³⁹ This culminated in the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference, where the American delegation formally proposed the creation of an 'international colony' in the Congo Basin – an idea that garnered support from the British, German, Italian, and Belgian representatives.⁴⁰

The International Association (replaced by the Association International du Congo, AIC) was transformed into the Congo Free State by means of bilateral recognition of other states. A supposedly neutral and sovereign colonial polity was founded with Leopold II – while also being King of the Belgians – as its head of state. The conference was the first attempt at organising European expansion collectively among the European and North American powers, and – at least on paper – internationalisation was a core pillar in rethinking colonial expansion.⁴¹ Yet, in the shadow of the conference,

37 Vanthemsche, 'The Historiography', 105.

38 Schär, 'Introduction', 4.

39 Jan Vandersmissen, 'The King's Most Eloquent Campaigner – Emile de Laveleye, Leopold II and the Creation of the Congo Free State', *BTNG – RBHC* 41:1-2 (2011) 7-57.

40 Geoffrey de Courcel, 'The Berlin Act of 26 February 1885', in: Stig Förster, Wolfgang

Mommsen, and Ronald Robinson (eds.), *Bismarck, Europe, and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition* (Oxford University Press 1988) 247, 256; Vandersmissen, 'The King's Most Eloquent Campaigner'.

41 Förster et al., *Bismarck*; Joanne Yao, 'The Power of Geographical Imaginaries in the European

the partition of Africa continued to divide the African continent in national zones of influence, thus hampering the international intentions from the onset.⁴² Proper enforcement of free trade and free navigation ‘required political boundaries, and these in turn implied [national] colonial control’.⁴³

Soon after the international recognition of the Congo Free State, Leopold II began to privatise large portions of its territory, delegating control to massive concessionary companies such as the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company (ABIR) and the Société Anversoise. In doing so, the king relied on a broad range of Belgian and non-Belgian agents to exploit these lands and advance both his and their imperial agendas.⁴⁴ Despite increasing restrictions on free trade from 1892 onward, cross-border economic networks remained vital to the Free State’s political economy.⁴⁵ Many contemporaries such as the British journalist Edmund Dene Morel noticed the high degree of transnational movement in Congo.⁴⁶

Indeed, a wide array of European actors – including Dutch, French, German, Greek, Luxembourgish, Finnish, Portuguese, Swedish – as well as non-Europeans such as Americans, Brazilians, Chinese, and Russians were active in Congo before, during, and after the Leopoldian period.⁴⁷ Henry

International Order: Colonialism, the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, and Model International Organizations’, *International Organization* 76:4 (2022) 901-928. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818322000182>.

- 42 Ronald Robinson, ‘The Conference in Berlin and the Future in Africa, 1884-1885’, in: Förster et al., *Bismarck*, 1-32.
- 43 Imanuel Geiss, ‘Free Trade, Internationalization of the Congo Basin, and the Principle of Effective Occupation’, in: Förster et al., *Bismarck*, 263-280.
- 44 Jan Vandersmissen, ‘Science, Economy and Power: Origins of Colonial Engineering in the Congo Free State’, *Archives Internationales d’Histoire des Sciences* 62:168 (2012) 225-251. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.ARIHS.1.102983>; Mathieu Zana Etambala, *Onderworpen, onderdrukt, geplunderd: Congo 1876-1914* (Sterck & de Vreese 2023).
- 45 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. African Networks, Exchange and Spatial Dynamics. Dynamiques spatiales, réseaux et échanges africains, *Studien zur afrikanischen Geschichte* 28 (Lit 2001) 131-146.

- 46 Edmund Dene Morel, *The Black Man’s Burden* (Manchester National Labour Press 1903). <http://archive.org/details/blackmansburdenoomoreoft>.
- 47 Vladimir Ronin, ‘Russen in Belgisch Congo’, in: Emmanuel Waegemans (ed.), *De Russische beer en de Belgische leeuw. Drie eeuwen Russische aanwezigheid in België* (Davidsfonds) 93-106; Kizobo O’bweng-Okwess, ‘La communauté hellénique et son apport au développement de la ville de Lubumbashi (RDC) de 1880 à nos jours: research article’, *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 95:1 (2013) 249-257. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC146446>; Frederico Antonio Ferreira, ‘Diplomacia do Império Brasileiro na África entre 1850-1860: Abolicionismo, Liberalismo e Civilização’, *Faces de Clío* 3:5 (2017) 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34019/2359-4489.2017.v3.26597>; Frederico Antonio Ferreira, ‘No Festim Dos Lobos: O Império Do Brasil e o Colonialismo Na

Shelton Sanford, the American Foreign Minister to Brussels and close friend to Leopold II, exemplifies the important, yet often overlooked role played by the United States of America in the colonisation of Congo, as well as the transimperial connections forged by such actors.⁴⁸ He played a pivotal role in the North American recognition of the Congo Free State as a friendly government in 1884 and, in return for his lobbying, received one of the first trade concessions in the colony from Leopold II, resulting in the investment company Sanford Exploring Expedition. The Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad was employed by Sanford's company, an experience which provided the inspiration for his renowned novel *Heart of Darkness*. In the very first pages of the book, the protagonist meets Swedish, Danish, French, and other nationalities and witnesses how a white man is escorted by a group of armed and malnourished Zanzibaris. As Lauro illustrates in her contribution, cross-border mobility in Congo was not limited to a white or European community, but extra-European actors were as vital to colonial histories of Congo, including Chinese and Caribbean workers, Indian traders, South African, Rhodesian or Senegalese craftsmen, and Arabo-Swahili brokers.⁴⁹

Events around the turn of the twentieth century pushed the nationalisation of the Congo Free State further. An international campaign under the lead of the previously mentioned journalist Morel against abuses in the rubber and ivory extraction methods as well as a growing number of reports on the atrocities committed in Leopoldian Congo – most famously the one published in 1904 by Roger Casement, the British consul in Congo – pressured the Belgian state to annex the Congo Free State in 1908 (Figure 2).⁵⁰ The nationalisation of the colony into 'Belgian Congo' did not eliminate international involvement, but an aversion to foreign interference grew steadily. In 1906, right before the annexation, Leopold II had created three major companies – Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, Société internationale

África Centro Occidental (1880-1885)' (PhD Thesis, Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro 2018); Diana Miryong 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* 51:3 (2023) 464-486. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2023.2205746>; Arwen Mohun, *American Imperialist: Cruelty and Consequence in the Scramble for Africa* (University of Chicago Press 2023); Dario Miccoli, 'Tierra Prometida: Jews from Rhodes in the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia, 1910s-1960s', *Jewish Historical Studies: A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry* 55:1 (2024) 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2024v55.08>.

48 Silverman, 'Diasporas of Art', 663; Mohun, *American Imperialist*.

49 Lauro, 'Writing Transimperial Histories'; Li Anshan, *A History of Overseas Chinese in Africa to 1911* (Diasporic Africa Press 2012); Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (University of California Press 2019).

50 Berber Bevernage, 'The Making of the Congo Question: Truth-Telling, Denial and "Colonial Science" in King Leopold's Commission of Inquiry on the Rubber Atrocities in the Congo Free State (1904-1905)', *Rethinking History* 22:2 (2018) 203-238. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2018.1451078>.

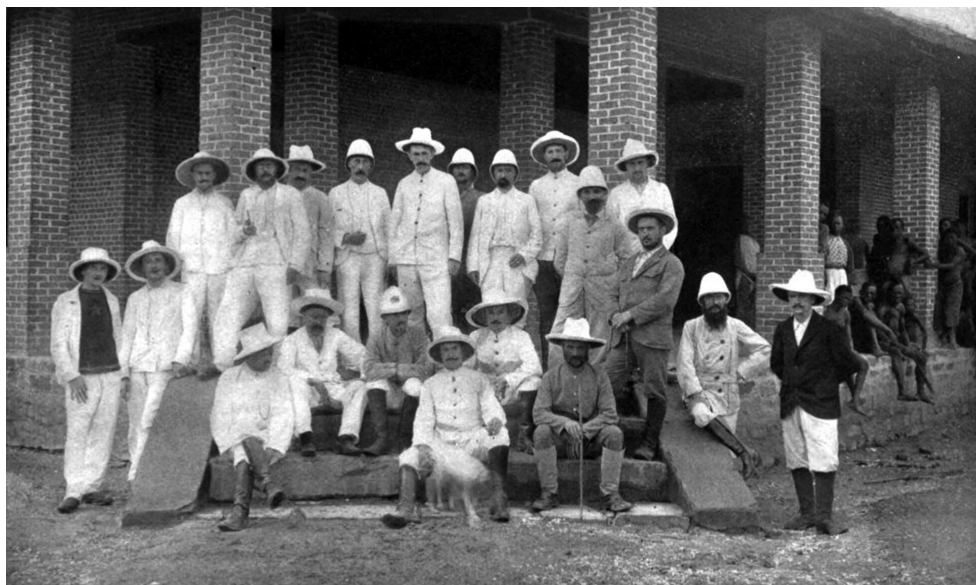


Figure 2. Photograph with the generic caption ‘Europeans at Stanleyville, 1902’ depicting a group of white men standing in front of a European-style structure with brick pillars, while behind them Congolese adults and children observe the scene. The image, published in Henry Wellington Wack’s 1905 volume *The Story of the Congo Free State: Social, Political, and Economic Aspects of the Belgian System of Government in Central Africa*, was produced in defence of Leopold II’s regime against mounting international criticism. A striking contrast lies in the self-conscious pose of the Europeans, clad in clean, white colonial attire and arranged in a carefully staged composition, versus the Congolese people at the right margin – scantily dressed, informally grouped, and seemingly unaware of being photographed. The composition and caption not only visualise the proximity within the European community and the segregation from the Congolese population but also capture the latter’s gaze on the former. This invites a reflection on how Congolese observers witnessed the performed colonial identity of the men in front, as well as the pervasive and unequal power relations. © Public domain, by unknown author. Included in Wellington Wack’s *The story of the Congo Free State* (G. P. Putnam’s Sons 1905) 79. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10005843>.

forestière et minière du Congo and Compagnie du Chemin de fer du Bas-Congo au Katanga – with significant foreign capital. These companies soon came to dominate the colonial economy, which inevitably also translated into political influence.⁵¹ Especially in Katanga, the Anglo-Saxon presence among company leaders and guest workers from surrounding British colonies caused growing unrest among the Belgian administrators. As from the Belgian takeover of Congo, international doubts were cast about the Belgian competence and ability to govern this large colony. Prior to the First World War, German, French, and British politicians and diplomats recurrently suggested that Belgian Congo should be internationally managed, chopped up, divided or sold.⁵² This caused unrest and anxiety in Belgian administrative circles, raising the question of whether Belgium would ‘forever be doomed to drag behind it those heavy servitudes resulting from an international statute drawn up in a moment of crisis by way of an experiment?’⁵³

In the interwar period, Belgian migration policies strategically aimed at hampering the presence of foreigners in Congo; the proportion of Belgians among the white population of the colony grew between 1920 and 1930 from 57 to 67 per cent.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, foreign residents and their transimperial networks of knowledge and expertise continued to shape, as Lauro has shown, colonial sciences as well as imperial anxieties well into the twentieth century.⁵⁵ Complex migration flows led to confusing expressions such as ‘the former people of Rhodes [annexed from Italy by Greece in 1947] who are now settled in Congo are former Italians or of Belgian nationality’.⁵⁶ The question how small state actors in colonial Congo experienced and shaped these dynamics of (inter)nationalisation lies at the heart of this special issue.

Small state imperialisms in the pan-European colonisation of Congo

Building on the work of postcolonial scholars, many historians have emphasised the pan-European character of colonisation.⁵⁷ Comparing the

51 Bruce Fetter, *The Creation of Elisabethville: 1910-1940* (Hoover Inst. Press 1976).

52 Vanthemsche, ‘The Historiography’, 105-106.

53 Ibid., 93-95.

54 Vita Foutry, ‘Belgisch-Kongo tijdens het interbellum: een immigratiebeleid gericht op sociale controle’, *BTNG-RBHC* 14:3 (1983) 464.

55 Amandine Lauro, “‘To Our Colonial Troops, Greetings from the Far-Away Homeland’: Race, Security and (Inter-)Imperial Anxieties in the Discussion on Colonial Troops in World War One Belgium’, *Revue Belge d’Histoire Contemporaine. Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste*

Geschiedenis 48:1-2 (2018) 34-55; Amandine Lauro, “‘The British, the French and Even the Russians Use These Methods’: Psychology, Mental Testing and (Trans)Imperial Dynamics of Expertise Production in Late-Colonial Congo’, in: Benoît Henriët et al. (eds.), *Across the Copperbelt: Urban & Social Change In Central Africa’s Borderland Communities* (Boydell & Brewer 2021) 267-295. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781800101487-015>.

56 Miccoli, ‘Tierra Prometida’, 152.

57 Wagner, *Colonial Internationalism*; Legêne, ‘The European Character’, 113, 118.

colonial rule and racial policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, Ulrike Lindner has noted how colonialism was ‘never nationally confined [...] but a pan-European endeavour that affected not only the colonies but also the very creation of “Europe”’.⁵⁸ European cooperation in the exploitation of resources, labour, and expertise of colonised regions fostered a collective European identity which was used to alienate and dominate colonised people and justify imperial domination.⁵⁹ The European self-image was grounded in eugenics, social Darwinism, white and Christian supremacy, and its supposed civilising mission – ideologies that reverberated throughout the colonial era and beyond.⁶⁰ This colonial expansion depended on transimperial agents – individuals whose expertise and ambitions transcended national empires and operated across the ‘extra-European world’.⁶¹

The presence of small state actors prompts a reflection on the modes and motivations of actors engaged in imperial expansion, without (necessarily) being subjects of larger imperial states themselves. Recent scholarship on ‘colonialism without colonies’ or ‘colonialism from the margins’ has highlighted how smaller states – whether lacking formal colonies or possessing only scattered or intra-European ventures – were integral to the broader pan-European colonial project.⁶² In a 2013 interview, Jürgen Osterhammel argued that small states such as Switzerland or Ireland have historically been more outward-oriented than their larger neighbours, suggesting that ‘small states have an advantage, they can afford to be more cosmopolitan, they may even have to be’.⁶³ Smaller states often had to rely on others for stability and opportunities, often resulting in an outward-looking reflex and cross-border connectedness. Investigating the perspective of these small state actors, their colonial experiences, rhetoric, practices, and motivations, allows a more comprehensive understanding of the similarities and differences in colonial strategies that drove the pan-European colonisation of Congo.

58 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. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26014/j.comp.2009.01.06>.

59 Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Éditions Réclame 1950); Lindner, ‘Colonialism’; Barth and Cvetkovski, *Imperial Co-operation*.

60 Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Éditions Maspéro 1961); Lindner, ‘Colonialism’, 99.

61 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>.

62 Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins* (Palgrave Macmillan 2015). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137442741>.

63 Sternstunde Philosophie, ‘Das bahnbrechende 19. Jahrhundert. Der Historiker Jürgen Osterhammel im Gespräch mit Roger de Weck’, 3 January 2010, 4:20–4:33, <https://www.srf.ch/play/tv/sternstunde-philosophie/video/sternstunde-philosophie-das-bahnbrechende-19-jahrhundert--der-historiker-juergen->

This special issue spans the period from 1876, with the foundation of the AIA, covers the takeover of Congo by the Belgian State in 1908, and ends in 1940, at the start of the Second World War. By cutting through temporal, geographical, and historiographical boundaries, the contributions to this issue detect vital diachronic changes and similarities. Why and how did non-Belgian colonial actors' experiences in Congo transform over time? How did dynamics of (inter) nationalisation shape the scope of opportunities available to them? In what ways did these actors negotiate, challenge, align with, or benefit from the colonial structures of the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo? How did the presence and practices of Dutch, Luxembourgish, Finnish, and other actors contribute to the construction of colonial authority? And conversely, how did their engagements with Congo shape their own national identities, colonial imaginaries, and participation in the racialised hierarchies of European imperialism?

These questions are addressed in the five articles of this issue. The contributions sequentially zoom in, starting from broader, topical discussions to more actor-oriented vignettes. The opening article, by Amandine Lauro, offers a reflexive and agenda-setting exploration of (how to write) transimperial histories *from* and *of* Belgian Congo. Engaging critically with the recent historiographic turn towards transimperial history, Lauro examines why the Belgian colonial empire – and Belgian Congo in particular – has largely remained absent from this dynamic field, while also outlining the scant transimperial research on Congo *avant la lettre*. Through a series of case studies drawn from existing literature and her own empirical research on gender, race, science, and the military, she highlights both the possibilities and limits of a transimperial lens while taking Congo's complex relationship with internationalism, imperial comparison, and circulation into account. Lauro not only calls for the integration of colonial Congo into broader transimperial debates but also uses it as a vantage point to rethink key methodological questions about (im)mobility and (dis)connection. Lauro's historiographical contribution is followed by four more empirically grounded contributions that trace the experiences of small state actors in the Congo Basin.

The history of colonial knowledge circulation has perhaps received the most attention from transimperial, entangled perspectives, especially the 'imperial careers' of so-called outsiders – actors from the margins of Europe or from states without any colonies themselves.⁶⁴ Through the history of patents, the contribution of Véronique Pouillard draws a diverse map of imperial careers who were involved in the economic, pan-European development of colonial Congo from the 1880s to the 1930s.⁶⁵ This map

osterhammel-im-gespraech-mit-roger-de-weck?urn=urn:srf:video:a1672291-9e80-49e0-b512-0ad75d232113. Accessed 7 November 2025.

64 David Lambert and Alan Lester (eds.), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careerings in the*

Long Nineteenth Century (Cambridge University Press 2006); Heé, 'Transimperial Opportunities', 632.

65 Véronique Pouillard, 'The Congo Patent System and Transimperial Entrepreneurs: The Colonial

connects the participation of small state actors (Austrian, Dutch, and Scandinavian) to the dominant industrial powers (Belgium, France, Great-Britain, and the United States of America). Complicating the transplantation and adaptation of colonial legal schemes, Pouillard examines the role of patent agencies as transimperial intermediaries. She demonstrates how adaptations to the Belgian patent system fostered the involvement of international entrepreneurs, who, in turn, contributed to transimperial constructions of patent law. As such, Pouillard questions the centrality or marginality of these agents' colonial policies, strategies, and actions, while also examining if and how these processes were facilitated by the Belgian Ministry of the Colonies, and in which ways the governmental patent office (and colonial patents themselves) served respectively as sites and instruments of colonial knowledge and power.

In his contribution, Gijs Dreijer analyses the role of Dutch private entrepreneurs in the build-up and expansion of the Congo Free State under Leopold II, as well as during the first years of Belgian Congo until 1920.⁶⁶ Scrutinising the role of foreign financial elites and foreign capital in Congo, Dreijer demonstrates how the move from free trade to a tightening monopoly system was a process of constant negotiation in which the Belgian king was dependent on deals with various international and local actors and vice versa. By decentralising Leopold's role in the Congo scheme, the overarching transimperial connections and the continuous reciprocity between imperial demands and opportunities become apparent, while this approach also problematises the symbiotic relationship between monarchy, diplomacy, and (global) capitalism. This way, Dreijer deepens our understanding of the involvement of the 'global bourgeoisie' in the 'empire of others'.⁶⁷

The fourth article by Kevin Goergen deals with the often-overlooked yet substantial community of Luxembourgers in Congo from the early interwar period onwards.⁶⁸ Goergen explores the complex construction of a national Luxembourg identity in the context of the so-called Belgian empire, unearthing how (supra-)national and racial hierarchies were fostered,

Expansion of Belgian Intellectual Property (1880s to 1930s)', *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.20007>.

66 Gijs Dreijer, 'Dutch Entrepreneurs in Congo: Navigating "Belgian" Imperialism in the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo (1870s-1920s)', *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.19951>.

67 See also the overarching project: Leiden University, 'Exploiting the Empire of Others: Dutch Investment in Foreign Colonial Resources,

1570-1800', NWO Vici SWGVI.C.191.027, <https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/vic191027>. Accessed 7 November 2025; Christof Dejung, David Motadel, and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Classes in the Age of Empire* (Princeton University Press 2019).

68 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/bmgn-lchr.20005>.

maintained, and perceived by the Belgian colonial administration, and how these categories were perceived by Luxembourgers in colonial Congo within complex constructions of whiteness and Europeanness. His contribution questions, on one hand, how and why the Belgian government granted Luxembourgers a privileged position, compared to other Europeans, in a context of an increased ‘nationalisation’ or ‘belgicisation’ of the colony, and on another, how the Luxembourg colonists in Congo experienced and managed these Belgian policies. Scrutinising how Belgian nationality became a legal category for Luxembourgers to be negotiated in the pursuit of colonial benefits, Goergen’s contribution reveals the opportunistic adaptability of (national) identities within the construction of pan-European visions of empire in colonial Congo.

Finally, Janne Lahti concludes the special issue examining two Finnish individuals that travel the Congo River as mobile transmitters of knowledge. As such, he contributes to the burgeoning literature of ‘Nordics in motion’ from the vantage point of small state actors in the Belgian empire.⁶⁹ The article tackles the experiences of alleged outsiders to the colonial venture, demonstrating how they sought opportunities far away from home in a foreign colony. Focusing on the day-to-day experiences of these two ‘rather ordinary’ Finnish travellers, Lahti shows how their colonial trajectories influenced their racial rhetoric and sense of national belonging. His two case studies underline how Finns were not mere marginal bystanders, but active participants in and co-producers of prevailing pan-European notions of a ‘dark and perilous Africa’, which was carefully maintained to support projects in colonial Congo.

In sum, this special issue concentrates on the involvement of actors and institutions from the so-called marginal or lesser Europe within the colonisation of Congo to gain better understanding of how transimperial exchanges – in people, goods, ideas, and institutions – created joint, hierarchical, and contested pan-European visions of empire in Congo. This transimperial ‘prism’ allows scholars to examine ‘the defining characteristics of a far wider European history, not simply that of a series of individual nations’.⁷⁰ As colonisation was both a global and European phenomenon, recognising the variety of colonial experiences remains vital to understand, grapple with, and dismantle the shared and enduring legacies of European imperialism(s).⁷¹ This can only be achieved by disclosing the colonisers’ minds, practices, and networks in all their diversity. By transcending methodological

69 Janne Lahti, ‘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>; John Hennessey and Janne Lahti, ‘Nordics in Motion: Transimperial Mobilities and Global Experiences

of Nordic Colonialism’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 51:3 (2023) 409–420. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2023.2205699>.

70 Buettner, ‘Europe’, 25, 35.

71 Heé, ‘Transimperial Opportunities’, 632.

I.
Sur le grand fleuve où l'hippo nage
Nous payons.
Et lançons vers chaque rivage
Le doux refrain de nos chansons.

II.
Puisqu'il nous faut servir un maître
Nous préférons
Ramener sans fin, libres, que d'être
Un serviteur en sa maison.

III.
Il donnera, chacun l'espère
Le but atteint
De l'argent, des étoffes claires
Ou bien du sel plein nos deux mains.

IV.
Et dans nos villages les femmes
Aux corps si doux
Nous verserons le vin de Palme
Les plus belles seront à nous.

V.
Quand la nuit tend ses voiles sombres
Le voyageur
Rêveur, écoute au fond des ombres,
Chanter l'âme des Payageurs

Figure 3. While drawing attention to pan-European exploitation, hypocrisy, and violence, the poem of Belgian-Congolese poet Nele Marian [Mathilde Idalie Huysmans], 'Chanson de payageurs', gives voice to human resilience – and the persistence of song – within structures of domination, as the river emerges as a liminal site where oppression and freedom, despair and hope, flow together in the currents of shared colonial pasts. © Nele Marian, 'Chanson de payageurs', *Poèmes et Chansons* (Éditions de l'expansion coloniale 1935).

nationalism, the perspective of small state actors grasping transimperial opportunities in the 'empire of others' makes the national visible and allows to situate it as a performative and negotiated historical category. Together, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate not only how colonialism in Congo was more heterogeneous, contingent, and contested than often assumed, but also how European imperialism harboured a variety of national-colonial tensions, inviting further debate on the spatial, temporal, and moral definitions of empire as well as the hypocrisy and cynicism of European colonialism (Figure 3).⁷²

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