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Matthew G. Stanard, *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. xiv + 387 pp. Images, chart, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8032-3777-3.

Review by Sarah Van Beurden, Ohio State University.

This book joins the ranks a new, growing generation of scholarly literature on Belgian colonialism. This growth has been exceptionally strong in Belgium. One of the causes was the public controversy ignited by the publication of Adam Hochschild's book, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, but the re-emerging debate over the role of Belgium in the assassination of Congo's first prime minister Patrice Lumumba has also played a role.[1]

All this is to say that Stanard has chosen the right moment to embark upon a re-evaluation of the belief that Belgians were "reluctant imperialists." He argues instead that the existence of pro-empire propaganda in Belgium reveals that this belief "greatly underestimates the extent to which ordinary people came to understand and support the colony. Belgians not only sustained the empire in significant ways, but many became convinced imperialists, evidenced by the widespread, enduring and eagerly embraced propaganda in favor of the Congo" (p. 8).

A second aim of the book is to restore the role of culture, and in this case, imperialistic propaganda and colonial culture, to the scholarship on Belgium colonialism. The study of colonial culture has received a significant amount of attention in scholarship on German, French and British imperialism, but is largely lacking in English-language scholarship on Belgian imperialism. Stanard uses the scholarship on other European empires to his advantage, not only as a model, but also by weaving a comparative thread into *Selling the Congo*. [2] Scholars on French, British and even German empire rarely feel the need to refer to historical literature on other empires in order to make their own work relevant, but the field on Belgian colonialism is small enough for authors to feel this pressure. Stanard, however, transforms this disadvantage into an advantage by adding a comparative component to his work that is quite informative.

From its very origin, King Leopold II's rule of the Congo Free State relied on propaganda in order to sway both international and national public opinion in favor of his regime. His use of imperial expositions to promote his African adventure to the Belgian population as well as his (veiled) use of covert press operations in order to combat the attacks against the abuses of his rule, set the stage for the role of pro-empire propaganda after the Belgian state took over the colony in 1908. Although Stanard admits that, from Leopold II's perspective, "these [propaganda] initiatives were unsuccessful because international and domestic pressure finally compelled him to transfer authority of his African territory to the Belgian state," at the same time, "whereas interest in the Congo in 1876 was nil, it had increased tremendously by 1908" (p. 44).

After international controversy over the excesses associated with Leopold II's rule over the Congo Free State, the Belgian state took over the colony in 1908. The role of pro-empire propaganda, however, continued undiminished. It relied on many of the same themes; the opportunities trade with the colony

would create for Belgians and for the future of the Belgian economy, and the benefits civilization would bring to the lives of Africans most prominent among them.

Stanard's investigation of imperialistic propaganda follows five avenues: imperial expositions, colonial museums, education and school materials, the construction of monuments, and film. Reflecting their significance in other European empires, the occurrence of colonial exhibitions steadily increased during the twentieth century, and private businesses and the church (both crucial pillars of Belgian colonialism) participated in them. Probably the most important tool for the promotion of empire was the famed Museum of the Belgian Congo in Tervuren, Belgium (today's Royal Museum for Central Africa), which displayed the colony's natural history and resources alongside its cultural diversity. As a government institution the museum struggled to balance a scientific mission with propaganda, an equation that only started to tilt in the direction of science by the 1950s, Stanard writes. Detailing not only colonial expositions at world and other fairs, he also adds a grassroots perspective to the discussion by including the history of smaller *quinzaines locales* (colonial fortnights) and locally organized exhibits and museums, which, he argues, "disclose a depth of support that raw attendance numbers at universal expositions cannot reveal" (p. 87).

The most remarkable evolution in the content of pro-empire propaganda was the development of a veritable "Leopoldian myth." Stanard shows how colonial Belgian propaganda initially distanced the government's administration from Leopold II's regime, but by the 1930s attempted to capitalize on the king's legacy instead. He locates the causes for this change in the Belgian state's need to "bolster the legitimacy of its colonial rule" with an imperial heritage (p. 59). There might, however, also be reasons that had less to do with Belgian empire and more with internal politics. Belgium continued to be ruled by the Von Saksen-Coburg dynasty, and aside from being a symbol for Belgian unity, the (unofficial) influence of the royal family was something to be reckoned with, providing another reason for the rehabilitation of one of its most important members. (Stanard brings this up in his conclusion, but the argument is not pursued in any of the chapters.) The author's comparative focus pays off in his discussion of the content of pro-empire propaganda. He points out this focus on Leopold II is where Belgian imperialistic propaganda differed from other European pro-empire propaganda, which did not have any comparable figure.

In his chapter on education, Stanard addresses why the Belgian state wanted—and needed—its young population to be educated about the colony. The answer lies with the state's desire to populate its administration in the Congo with Belgians (as opposed to citizens of other European countries who were prevalent under Leopold II's rule), but also in its need to create national faith in its colonial rule. Compared to other empires, however, the coverage of Belgian colonialism was limited in Belgian schoolbooks. It also took the country until 1923 to establish a colonial school.[3]

In order to remedy these shortcomings, the state-sponsored *Commission Coloniale Scolaire* brought pro-empire propaganda to the classroom. An important aspect is missing from this discussion on colonial education, however. A significant part of Belgium's primary and secondary school network consisted (and consists) of Catholic schools. In these schools, Congo was often quite present because of the many missionaries active in the colony. The main source of information and pro-empire propaganda in these schools came from talks by visiting missionaries, school charitable actions for the missions, and Catholic publications. Although this falls outside the scope of state-sponsored propaganda, its importance cannot be underestimated when it comes to the knowledge many Belgians had of the colony.

The majority of memorials and monuments for Belgian empire and Belgian colonial pioneers, Stanard reports, were built after 1908, with a particular boom in the interwar period. The themes of many of these monuments, however, related to the (often invented) heroism and pioneering role of the Belgians involved in the creation of Leopold II's Congo Free State, underscoring the canonization of the "Leopold II myth." The majority of the monuments were the result of initiatives led by local colonial

organizations and inaugurations regularly drew crowds of people. Stanard cites both cases to support his claim that the Belgian population was involved in propagating their country's empire. He also notes, however, that the monuments also served to unite a country in which national politics were heavily inflected with Walloon-Flemish tensions.

The last chapter deals with filmmaking as a means of pro-empire propaganda. Early attempts at colonial filmmaking in the late nineteenth century were fleeting, but picked up again in the aftermath of World War I and flourished in the last decade of Belgian colonialism. Missionary films were an important part of national film production after World War II, but since these were mostly aimed at a Congolese audience, they remain largely outside Stanard's scope. He does describe the ventures of colonial companies such as the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK) into the world of filmmaking in the 1950s and the apotheosis of colonial filmmaking for the 1958 World Exposition in Brussels (commonly referred to as Expo 58). The author focuses on those commissioning, funding and making the films more so than on a close content analysis. This is understandable considering the scope of the book, but hopefully future researchers will explore the content of the surviving films in more detail.

The Ministry of Colonies's bankrolling of the colonial filmmaking industry, particularly in the 1950s, points to a general trend in colonial propaganda. The state was always the prime sponsor of colonial propaganda, but the renewed commitment of the Belgian state to its colonial identity from the postwar era until the mid- to late 1950s required an intensified effort to convince the Belgian population of the continued use and value of the colony.

The heavy government involvement seems to run counter to one of Stanard's main points in this book, namely the growth of pro-empire sentiment among the Belgian population and their participation in the creation of imperialistic propaganda. The author himself admits that teasing out cause-and-effect is tricky when it comes to propaganda. As a historical argument, however, equating the presence of propaganda with pro-empire sentiment is problematic. It could potentially point to the opposite: a lack of interest of the Belgian population in the colony and the government's need to remedy this. Stanard's descriptions of the vigor of local colonial organizations, especially in the efforts to create local colonial museums and monuments, are a good counterargument, but even those initiatives were often financially supported by the government. Perhaps the argument could be more precise: what was the background of those who became involved with the promotion of the empire? Were they from a particular class?

The decision to focus on expositions, museums, education, monuments and film has advantages and disadvantages. They are, all five, very important avenues for imperialistic propaganda, but they are also the ones about which the most has been written. Much of the work on these topics, however, was published in Belgium, in either French or Flemish (Dutch). One of the great merits of this study is Stanard's incorporation of that scholarship and especially his use of Flemish language sources.^[4] The latter are often lacking in English-language publications on Congo, creating particular blind spots in that literature.

Stanard's choice of subjects also (naturally) shapes his conclusions. One of those concerns the lack of female participation in the creation of pro-empire messages: "imperial propaganda was a male province, both in terms of production and subject matter" (p. 255). Although this is true for the topics he discusses (except for film, where one of the colonial filmmakers was a woman: H el ene Schirren), it might not be true for imperial propaganda overall. A different focus--for example, on colonial women's organizations (such as *the Union des Femmes Coloniales*), local colonial charity organizations, or even on missionary publications (given the large number of female congregations in Congo)--might paint a different picture.

The breadth of topics covered in this book is wide--each of them could fill a separate monograph. It is to Stanard's credit that he is able to pull them together. In terms of primary source work, I believe the strength of the book lies in his discussions of the contributions of local organizations to the promotion

of Belgian imperialism. As a result of the scope of the book, however, the depth of the arguments sometimes suffers. There is, for example, less systemic attention to the changes within Belgian imperialism between 1908 and 1960 and how those affected the way in which the empire was promoted.

The breadth of this book, however, is also its strength. Although it might make it less appealing to specialists in Belgian colonialism and Congolese history (with the exception of the sections on local initiatives), it makes the book suitable for a broader audience interested in learning more about Africa and empire. In addition, scholars of other European empires seeking to gain comparative knowledge will find this book useful.

NOTES

[1] Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2005 [1998]). For overviews of this new material and the debate about the nature of Belgian colonialism, see Geert Castryck, "Whose History is History? Singularities and Dualities of the Public Debate on Belgian Colonialism," and Guy Vantemsche, "The Historiography of Belgian Colonialism in the Congo," in Csaba Lévai, ed., *Europe and the Word In European Historiography* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2006), pp. 71-88 and pp. 89-119; and Idesbald Goddeeris and Sindani E. Kiangu, "Congomania in Academia: Recent Research on the Belgian Colonial Past," *BMGN Low Countries Historical Review* 126/4(2011): 54-74.

[2] Referring to the work of John MacKenzie, Herman Lebovics, Catherine Hall, Robert Aldrich and Lora Wildental, among others.

[3] Those interested in transatlantic history might be intrigued by a piece of information about the Colonial School in Antwerp discovered by Stanard: the post-World War I American Commission for Relief in Belgium helped defray the costs for the creation of that school (pp. 140, 305).

[4] Included is the work of, for example, Maarten Couttenier on the Museum of the Belgian Congo, Luc Vints and Guide Convents on colonial cinema, Zana Aziza Etambala on Congo in the 1950s, and Guy Vantemsche on political colonial history.

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