



# LEOPOLD II STATUE

Brussels, Belgium

50.8404659, 4.3622016



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## Executive Summary

The June 2020 global Black Lives Matter protests and the 60th anniversary of Congo's independence on June 30th brought increased scrutiny of Belgium's colonial past under the leadership of King Leopold II to the forefront of public consciousness. During this period, the Brussels monument of King Leopold was defaced as part of a wider national conversation surrounding the calls to remove all representations of King Leopold from the public sphere. This case study explores the dynamics of Belgians reckoning with its colonial past as a result of the influence of both global and domestic activists.

## Introduction

In the wake of George Floyd's murder in May 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests, increased attention to Belgium's colonial past produced a wave of vandalism and protests over monuments associated with that history.<sup>1</sup> The issue of colonial legacy crystallised in the figure of Leopold II, the King of Belgium (r. 1865-1909) and, through his own declaration, the King-Sovereign of the Congo Free State (r. 1885-1908), which he regarded as his personal property. Under his colonial rule, the Congo Free State suffered widespread atrocities and bloodshed. It is estimated that ten million Congolese perished because of his policies. Of the Leopold statues, the most famous equestrian one on the Place du Trône in Brussels was the main target during the protests in 2020. Notably, the statue is near Matonge, the neighbourhood where many Congolese live in Brussels. A myriad of other statues and busts spread across Belgium have subsequently been defaced. The protests coincided with the celebration of Congo's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence on June 30, 2020.

## Background

### *The Life and Legacy of King Leopold II*

King Leopold II of Belgium (1835-1909) is known as the *Roi Bâtitseur* (Builder King).<sup>2</sup> He reshaped the skyline of Brussels through urban development and modernised the Belgium state. He envisioned the city of Brussels as a 'Little Paris.' Amongst other things, he commissioned famous monuments such as the Arcade du Cinquanteaire, one of the landmarks of the city of Brussels, a grandiose arch finalised in 1880. The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, a suburb of Brussels, was commissioned by Leopold for the Universal Exhibition of 1897 and originally displayed a traditional Congolese village. The Avenue Louise – named after one of Leopold's daughters – is one of the widest and most beautiful in the city. Lastly, the Royal Greenhouses of Laeken, completed in 1895, host a range of exotic flowers and plants. Leopold also laid the first stone of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in 1905 and encouraged fortifications in the eastern part of Belgium.

King Leopold II left behind a notorious legacy on the African continent and has often been referred to as the 'colonial tyrant.'<sup>3</sup> Leopold II successfully appropriated a large African area in the European scramble to divide African territory. As a private project undertaken on his own behalf and through the assistance of explorer Henry Morton Stanley who helped him lay claim to the area, Leopold was the founder and sole owner of the Congo Free State, much of which is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>4</sup> Although Belgium lacked a powerful navy or a robust merchant fleet, Leopold counted on exploiting Congo's resources, such as ivory and, later on, rubber, to fuel Belgium's industrialisation, and enrich his own coffers. Professing a

<sup>1</sup> Raf Casert, "Belgium's Black Lives Matter protests target the bloodstained legacy of King Leopold II," *Independent*, 11 June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Lorenzo Arke, "A Lasting Legacy of the Builder King in Brussels," *Culture Trip*, November 8, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Hochschild, "Leopold II," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 5, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Sir Martin Ewans, Sir Martin, *European Atrocity, African Catastrophe: Leopold II, the Congo Free State and its Aftermath* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2017),131.

humanitarian and civilising mission, Leopold II convinced the European countries with similar colonial ambitions to allow him to establish his personal rule on the Congo at the Brussels international conference (1876) and the Berlin conference (1884).<sup>5</sup> In essence, the colony became his personal domain. While King Leopold II never personally set foot in Africa, he relied on the Welsh-American explorer Henry Morton Stanley to explore and develop the area of the Congo River basin.<sup>6</sup> It was H. M. Stanley who established trading posts and roads and convinced local chiefs to sign treaties that they would not understand.<sup>7</sup>

The rule of Leopold II over Congo was filled with atrocities committed against the local population, who were forced to submit to Belgian authorities. Rubber can be found in the rainforest of Central Africa. Consequently, Leopold sent detachments of the Force Publique to supervise enslaved Congolese people sowing rubber trees to meet the boom in rubber demand. The soldiers would force Congolese villagers to scatter into the forests and gather the rubber quota as their wives and daughters were held hostage. The quotas increased as demand rocketed in the 1890s, intensifying forced labour. Forced labour was also widespread to develop other areas of the Congo economy, such as road building or woodcutting.<sup>8</sup>

These actions had dramatic consequences as much of the population died of starvation, and the men were worked to exhaustion. Although it is difficult to establish accurate figures, demographers believe that in 1880 the Congo had roughly 20 million inhabitants and only 10 million by 1920.<sup>9</sup> Tens of thousands of Congolese fled to the forests to avoid forced labour, but the flights often led to death. Others were shot for refusing to work. To make sure the Congolese enrolled in the Force Publique would not waste any bullets on hunting or save them from preparing for a future rebellion, it became an infamous practice to cut hands off rebels and present them to the officers, piling them into baskets of severed hands.<sup>10</sup>

English journalists would soon report what was being perpetrated in the Congo Free State and raise awareness in international public opinion. As a result of increasing international pressure, Leopold II gave his personal colony to the state in 1908, hence becoming the Belgian Congo.<sup>11</sup> Before his death in 1909, Leopold II ordered the eradication of official documents containing information on the Congo Free State. While telling his aide to burn the entire archive, he claimed: 'They have no right to know what I did there.'<sup>12</sup> At his funeral, the crowd booed in disapproval of his rule of the Congo.<sup>13</sup> Yet, despite public sentiments at the time, attention to the Congo atrocities subsided over the years after Leopold's death. In the 1930s, at the initiative of King

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> BBC. "Henry Stanley (1841-1904)," *BBC*, September 10, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Hochschild, "In the Heart of Darkness," *New York Review of Books*, October 6 2005.

<sup>8</sup> See Adam Hochschild, "Where There Aren't No Ten Commandments," in *King Leopold's Ghost: Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Asafa Jalata, "Colonial Terrorism, Global Capitalism, and African Underdevelopment: 500 Years of Crimes Against African Peoples," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 5, no. 3 (2013): 25.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 147-159.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 252-262.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 294.

<sup>13</sup> Manohla Dargis, "The Horrors of Belgium's Congo," *New York Times*, October 21, 2005.

Albert I, streets, tram stations, and statues bearing his name were scattered across the country, presenting him as a benevolent king and forgetting his ruthless rule.<sup>14</sup>

## History of the Contestation

In June 2020, the group *Réparons l'Histoire*, Repair History, launched an online Change.org petition collecting more than 82.800 signatures, demanding that the city of Brussels remove all statues of King Leopold II, starting with the one on the Place du Trône.<sup>15</sup> The deadline to achieve this was symbolically set to June 30, on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Congo's Independence Day, as a sign of reparation to the Democratic Republic of Congo. In an interview published in *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and the Monuments in Belgium*, a Belgian citizen of Congolese origins, Tracy Bibo-Tansia, claims: 'It's disturbing to see the statue of a mounted Leopold II... I want to feel at home here, and that's not easy when you see statues of the oppressor of your ancestors.'<sup>16</sup>

However, some criticised the efforts to remove the statue of King Leopold II. A counter-petition had been launched, although it obtained far fewer signatures (21.250).<sup>17</sup> Additionally, proponents of maintaining the monument issued an open letter to Brussels mayor, arguing against the monument's removal.<sup>18</sup> Amongst other things, they accused the anti-Leopold II movement of 'globalist' ideology, which 'shows no interest or respect for historical reality.'<sup>19</sup> The open letter's signatories accused the abolitionist movement of 'dragging the Belgian monarchy through the mud' and refusing the 'right to defence' to the monarchy's legacy.<sup>20</sup> In the open letter, historian Jean-Luc Vellut claims that the ignorance surrounding the anti-Leopold movement can have the 'effect of maintaining a hopelessly controversial and moralising level of the debate.'<sup>21</sup> Another historian, Guy Vanthemasche, argues that it is absurd to compare the 'hypothetical numbers' regarding the death toll in Congo to the atrocities committed by the 20th century totalitarian regimes.<sup>22</sup> Amongst the signatories of the open letter was Renier Nijskens, a long-time Belgian diplomat associated with the efforts against the vilification of the Belgian colonial legacy in Congo.<sup>23</sup>

On Sunday, June 7, 2020, Brussels joined the BLM movement with 10.000 people (police estimates ranged from 15.000 to 20.000) joining the protest, which culminated outside the city's Palace of Justice.<sup>24</sup> During the demonstration, protestors climbed the statue of Leopold II on the

<sup>14</sup> Dave Keating, "How Belgium is being forced to confront the bloody legacy of Leopold II," *New Statesman*, June 9, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Change.org, "Enlever tous les statues Leopold II - Alle Leopold standbeelden verwijderen," *Change.org*, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), 231.

<sup>17</sup> Change.org, "Pétition pour le maintien des statues de Léopold II," *Change.org*, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> "Libre opinion: Léopold II et Le Congo: Lettre ouverte au bourgmestre de Bruxelles," *La Libre Afrique*, June 8, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Joanna Kakissis, "Where Human Zoos Once Stood, A Belgian Museum Now Faces its Colonial Past," *NPR*, September 26 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Brussels Times, "10.000 people join Black Lives Matter demonstration in Brussels against police brutality and racism," *Brussels Times*, June 7, 2020.

Place du Trône and waved the flag of the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>25</sup> While many protesters often referred to the events surrounding the death of George Floyd and police brutality in the USA, the manifestation was also a response to the death of the 19-year-old Moroccan, who had been killed during a police chase in Brussels in April 2020.<sup>26</sup> The protest was largely peaceful. However, several acts of looting and vandalism were committed, which resulted in over 150 police arrests, and the use of water cannons and tear gas.<sup>27</sup> Mayor Philippe Close spoke against the violence on Twitter, claiming that 'delinquent... deliberately provoked police forces' during the protests.<sup>28</sup> The statue of Leopold II was defaced on Wednesday, June 10, with several other monuments connected to the Belgian colonial past being burned down or covered in paint.<sup>29</sup>

The Brussels monument of King Leopold II was amongst many others that were defaced, vandalised, or removed following the BLM protests in Belgium's capital and other major Belgian cities.<sup>30</sup> In Halle, Ostend, Ghent, and the Ekeren district of Antwerp, busts and statues connected to the Belgian colonial legacy were also defaced. However, none of the other manifestations succeeded in obtaining the popularity of the Brussels protest.<sup>31</sup><sup>32</sup> In Tervuren, Leopold II's statue in the Africa museum's garden was also vandalised.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in Ekeren, the statue of King Leopold II was set on fire by the protesters. The monument was subsequently removed on the orders of the mayor of Antwerp, Bart de Wever and was to be restored and put in a museum.<sup>34</sup> The citizens of Ekeren petitioned to replace the monument of Leopold II with the statue of Ekeren-born football player Toby Alderweireld, who refused to sign the petition on non-political grounds.<sup>35</sup> In Ghent, a bust has been defaced, wrapped in a cloth quoting George Floyd's last words 'I can't breathe.'<sup>36</sup> In the night between June 11 and 12, another bust was hit with a hammer and toppled in Auderghem.<sup>37</sup> In Ostend, the equestrian statue of Leopold is surrounded by statues of Congolese people kneeling below their 'protector' Leopold II, portrayed as 'Grateful Congolese people' because Leopold II had 'liberated them from the slavery by the Arabs.'<sup>38</sup> In 2004, a bronze hand of one of the kneeling Congolese was cut off to protest against the 'most egregious' monument, in reference to the appalling treatment enslaved persons would endure whenever they would not meet their rubber quota.<sup>39</sup> The anonymous activists behind this act

<sup>25</sup> DeMorgen, "Zeker 150 arrestaties nadat 'Black Lives Matter' - protest uit de hand loopt in Brussel," *DeMorgen*, June 7, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Moens, "Thousands protest racism in Brussels as U.S. movement sweeps Europe," *Politico*, June 7, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> GardaWorld, "Belgium: Thousands gather in Brussels for solidarity protests near Place Poelaert June 7," *GardaWorld*, June 7, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Moens, "Thousands protest racism in Brussels as U.S. movement sweeps Europe," *Politico*, June 7, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Philippe Carlot, "La Statue Équestre de Léopold II badigeonnée de peinture à Bruxelles," *RTBF*, January 29, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Marc Gerardy, "Manifestation Black Lives Matter à Liège ce Samedi: près de 1.000 personnes se réunissent aux Guillemins, le rassemblement toléré bien qu'interdit," *SudInfo*, June 6, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Cedric Matthys and Erik de Troyer, "Rustige protestactie tegen racisme lokt 750 betogers naar Zuidpark in Gent," *HLN*, June 7, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Leen Belpaeme, "300 mensen verzamelen voor 'black lives matter'-protest in Oostende," *HLN*, June 7, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Gabriela Galindo, "Leopold II statue defaced at Africa Museum," *Brussels Times*, August 3, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Maïthé Chini, "Burned Leopold II statue removed from Antwerp Square," *Brussels Times*, June 9, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Nick Ames, "Toby Alderweireld: 'I will not sign the petition for my own statue'," *The Guardian*, June 13, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Brussels Time, "I can't breathe: Leopold II statue defaced in Ghent," *Brussels Times*, June 3, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Georgina Rannard and Eve Webster, "Leopold II: Belgium 'wakes up' to its bloody colonial past," *BBC*, June 13, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Kees Van Tilburg, "Leopold II," *Equestrian Statues*, June 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Dave Keating "How Belgium is being forced to confront the bloody legacy of King Leopold II," *New Statesman*, June 9, 2020.

said they would return the hand under the condition that a more historically accurate sign explaining the statue was erected.<sup>40</sup>

## Decision-Making Processes

In reaction to this wave of indignation, the Belgian Government is undertaking some active steps. The debate surrounding these colonial representations has taken place at high levels of the Government. Pierre Kompany, a Congolese refugee elected mayor (*bourgmestre*) of Ganshoren in the north-west of Brussels in 2018 and first Black *bourgmestre* in Belgium, says that the statue on the place du Trône should have been removed a long time ago.<sup>41</sup> Princess Esmeralda of Belgium also expressed her views in favour of apologies from the Crown and the Government.<sup>42</sup>

### *The Reaction of the King*

On June 30, 2020, the 60th anniversary of Congo's independence, King Philippe of Belgium addressed a letter to the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, in which he expressed his 'profound regrets' for '*ces blessures du passé*' (wounds of the past).<sup>43</sup> Philippe regretted that he could not go to the Congo himself due to the COVID-19 pandemic but encouraged the parliamentary effort to deal with this unpleasant past. For Patrick Weber, TV historian and specialist on the royal family, this was an unprecedented gesture with a threefold dimension: national, international, and Royal familial, since he was the first member of the royal family to have officially voiced these regrets. Though Philippe stopped short of issuing a full apology, Weber highlights that in a constitutional monarchy, it is not the King's role to apologise, but that is incumbent on the government. Apologies from the political class would be the second step.<sup>44</sup> The Congolese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marie Ntumba Nzeza, welcomed King Philippe's gesture as it has '*posé les bases d'un changement profond*' (set the foundations for a profound change) in the relationship between both countries.<sup>45</sup> However, some Congolese deem it not enough, such as Hervé Diakiese, the spokesman for *Les Congolais Debout*, who asked for more concrete actions and reparations.<sup>46</sup>

### *The Reaction of the Federal Government*

The parliamentary commission called '*vérité et réconciliation*' (truth and reconciliation) was pushed forward by the president of the Chamber Open VLD, Patrick Dewael, to dig into Belgium's colonial past. This has been an ongoing debate since the release of Adam

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Leo Cendrowicz, "King Leopold II ruled Congo as a private slave trade: his brutal legacy is finally being acknowledged and abhorred," *i News*, July 13, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Godfrey Olukya, "Belgian Royal asks nation to apologise to DRC for past," *Anadolu Agency*, June 15, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> RTBF, "Le roi Philippe exprime au Congo ses "profonds regrets pour les blessures du passé," *RTBF*, June 30, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Le Monde, "Pour la première fois, le roi des Belges exprime ses « profonds regrets » pour le passé colonial au Congo," *Le Monde*, June 30, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> La Libre, "Pierre Kompany réagit au geste du roi Philippe: 'Sur 60 ans, si quelqu'un a parlé, c'est lui,'" *La Libre*, June 30, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Hochschild's book *King Leopold's Ghost* in 1999, which dealt with the Congo's unexamined atrocities. This decision comes after local authorities were pressured to pull down statues of the Builder King. After a vote on June 17, the commission got to work on determining its objectives. The Musée royal d'Afrique centrale (MRAC) as well as the service of the Archives de l'Etat (AE) were asked to produce:

A detailed view of the feasibility of such a project, on the different aspects – historical, sociological, etc – that such a project should comprise, as well as on the multidisciplinary expertise – Belgian and African – needed in order to carry it out successfully.<sup>47</sup>

Historians on both sides of the debate were commissioned to clarify the state of national and international research on colonialism, determine the degree of scientific unanimity concerning Belgium's colonial past and examine to what extent it is connected to today's systemic racism. This first note should also contain a vulgarised version of the research for educational purposes and a survey of what other countries have done so far to meet BLM demands. The commission's program was therefore very ambitious: It was tasked to examine institutional violence, economic exploitation and the possible restitution of patrimony.

However, this commission has been criticised by an anonymous source:

It will clearly be limited to the traditional issues of the debate, and will not go beyond. There are almost only historians [in the commission]. Where are the sociologists, the anthropologists who are able to analyse the current situation and the impact of colonisation today?<sup>48</sup>

Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès aligned the government's position to the King's declaration and said it was time to 'start a process of research, of truth, of memory. Any work of truth and memory begins with the recognition of [...] the other's suffering.'<sup>49</sup>

On June 30, Wilmès inaugurated a memorial plaque to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Congo's independence.

The controversy over Leopold II has had international consequences as the King Leopold Ranges, one of the key landmarks in Australia, was recently renamed the Wunaamin-Miliwundi Ranges. The new name combines the traditional names given to those rangers by the Ngarinyin and Bunuba, explains Ben Wyatt, WA's Aboriginal Affairs Minister.<sup>50</sup>

### *The Reaction of the Regional Governments*

In a report by CNN, 14-year-old Noah reflected that he felt 'belittled' by the statues of Leopold in Brussels. As the person who created the *Change.org* petition on behalf of *Réparons l'Histoire*

<sup>47</sup> Himad Messoudi, "À quoi pourrait ressembler la commission « vérité et réconciliation » sur la colonisation du Congo?," *RTBF*, July 1, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*: *On va clairement s'en tenir aux enjeux traditionnels du débat, et ne pas aller plus loin. Il n'y a quasiment que des historiens. Où sont les sociologues, les anthropologues à même d'analyser la situation actuelle et l'impact de la colonisation aujourd'hui?*

<sup>49</sup> *Le Soir*, "Sophie Wilmès sur le passé colonial belge: il faut «entamer un parcours de vérité»," *Le Soir*, June 30, 2020. The text reads: *'entamer un parcours de recherche, un parcours de vérité, un parcours de mémoire. Tout travail de vérité et de mémoire passe d'abord par la reconnaissance de... la souffrance de l'autre'*

<sup>50</sup> "Western Australia's King Leopold rangers renamed Wunaamin-Miliwundi Ranges," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2020.

to remove the memorials of Leopold, Noah not only received pushback from opponents of the movement but also from the mayor of Brussels himself. A spokesperson for Brussels Mayor Philippe Close replied that Noah 'does not have the authority to remove statues of Leopold II, which are national monuments.'<sup>51</sup> Immediately after, the petition picked up momentum, and demonstrations filled the streets of Brussels. The city's Secretary of State, Pascal Smet, said he made the 'quick decision to take the statues down if an expert working group decides it is the best course of action.'<sup>52</sup>

At the end of 2020, the Working Group on Colonial Symbols in Public Spaces in Brussels was formed. The working group – consisting of academics and activists, half of whom are either Congolese or other African individuals from across the diaspora – met to examine the future of colonial statues and symbols in Brussels.<sup>53</sup> After 15 months of research, on February 17, 2022, the group members published their report, which totalled 150 pages, making general recommendations on approaching colonial heritage and suggesting the implementation of annual days of decolonial guided tours, remembrance, debates, campaigns, and conferences.<sup>54</sup> The working group concluded:

Since the end of the 19th century, public spaces in Brussels have been punctuated with elements creating a one-sided propagandistic perspective [...]. This public space is currently no longer suited to the vision of the current inhabitants of Brussels, as evidenced by the mobilizations of activists for many years. What was normal yesterday is no longer normal today.<sup>55</sup>

In their report, the working group extensively detailed their recommendations on the fate of the statue of Leopold II in Trône Square. Firstly, the working group suggested that the statue could be left on the pedestal. However, there would be something visually different, such as dressing up the statue in certain ways or including a plaque to contextualise the statue better. Secondly, the working group outlined that the statue could be discarded completely and placed into what they called a 'central landfill' for all discarded monuments in the region.<sup>56</sup> There, visitors and residents could walk around and see the statues that would no longer be on their pedestals or displayed in the front and centre of the city. This way, the statue would not be completely erased from the public space but reframed to acknowledge Leopold's legacy better.<sup>57</sup> Instead, the site of the Leopold II statue could be used as a space for art exhibitions or to set up a memorial for the victims of Belgian colonisation. The memorial, the group noted, would be made with the melted material from the original Leopold statue. This method reuses the Congo's copper and tin that were imported through exploitative labour originally employed to create the statue.<sup>58</sup> At the end

<sup>51</sup> Scott McLean, "Belgium's King Leopold II Has A 21st Century Nemesis. He's 14 Years Old," *CNN*, June 25, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Maïthé Chini, "Leopold II Statues In Brussels Could Be Removed, Says Minister," *Brussels Times*, June 9, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Bruzz, "Sixteen Experts Take A Closer Look At Decolonisation In Brussels," *Bruzz*, November 04, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Sara De Sloover, "Werkgroep Dekoloniseren Stelt Aanbevelingen Voor: Leopold II Moet Weg," *Bruzz*, February 17, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Urban.brussels, "Un Pas Important Vers La Décolonisation De L'espace Public Dans La Région De Bruxelles Capitale A Été Franchi," *Urban.brussels*, February 17, 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Sara De Sloover, "Werkgroep Dekoloniseren Stelt Aanbevelingen Voor: Leopold II Moet Weg," *Bruzz*, February 17, 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Marie-Sophie de Clippele (Working Group on Colonial Symbols in Public Spaces in Brussels member), interview by Ngoc Tram Nguyen, June 24, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



of the report, the working group members strongly advised more research into colonial history by historians, local history circles, sociologists, urban planners, teachers, and other scientists.<sup>59</sup>

While these conclusions and recommendations of the working group are a starting point, it is a long journey ahead until concrete steps are taken concerning the statue. Upon completing the report in February of 2022, the group officially handed it over to the President of the Brussels Regional Parliament, Richard Madrane, and to the Secretary of State, Pascal Smet, where they await further decisions.<sup>60</sup> Although it is unsure when and whether the federal government will take official action, some experts hope that Belgium's annual celebration of Heritage Day, which will take place on September 18 and 19, 2022, will call for a statement of action from the authorities.<sup>61</sup> This year, on the 33rd annual Heritage Day, the theme is 'Meeting Points', which celebrates gathering places that commemorate 'the collective experience', from libraries, ballrooms, and parks to theatres, restaurants, and markets.<sup>62</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

While Belgium is on track toward some appeasement and reconciliation concerning the contested statue of Leopold II in Belgium, many more remnants of colonisation remain intact on the grounds of the city. The government, however, has been proactive – such as when in June 2018, Brussels named a square after the hero of the Congolese independence, Patrice Lumumba.<sup>63</sup> For some in Congo, these gestures are not enough. On June 9, 2022, in response to a statement by Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo that the Belgian government is 'looking to the future with the desire to cooperate and enrich human ties between Belgium and the DRC,'<sup>64</sup> Congolese senator Francine Muyumba Nkanga wrote: 'We will never return toward the future without apology and reparations from Belgium.'<sup>65</sup>

This case demonstrates the variety of ways stakeholders view the project of confronting one's own history. While some consider taking down the statue as a part of Belgium's path towards a healed society, the opposition considers it an act of erasure. Still, many urge the continual remembrance and education of the Belgian colonial past in public spaces, schools, and within the law. Further, this case highlights how each country's global racial awakenings are realised differently. While demanding equity and justice for all, Belgians, Congolese, and Congolese-Belgians are confronted with the specific history of colonisation perpetrated by Belgium, transforming their advocacies to contextualise their own regional experiences.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Urban.brussels, "Un Pas Important Vers La Décolonisation De L'espace Public Dans La Région De Bruxelles Capitale A Été Franchi," *Urban.brussels*, February 17, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Marie-Sophie de Clippele (Working Group on Colonial Symbols in Public Spaces in Brussels member), interview by Ngoc Tram Nguyen, June 24, 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Heritage Days Urban.brussels, "Heritage Days, 18 & 19 Sept. 2021, Meeting Points," *Urban.brussels*, n.d.

<sup>63</sup> Africanews, "Belgium Names Square After Congo Independence Hero Lumumba," *Africanews*, January 1, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Alexander De Croo, Twitter post, June 8 2022, 4:24 p.m.

<sup>65</sup> Francine Muyumba, Twitter post, June 9, 2022, 10:10 a.m.

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## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter- ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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