

**Matthew G. Stanard, *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism*, (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2011)**

Matthew G. Stanard, professor at Berry College (Mt. Berry, Georgia USA) writes a fascinating cultural history of pro-empire propaganda in Belgium. While the book emphasizes the period from 1908 when the Belgian state inherited the Congo from King Leopold II to 1960 at the eve of the Congo's independence, the Leopold era myths become key parts of the story. Analyzing the five propaganda media—expositions, museums, monuments, colonial cinema, and education in favor of empire-- Stanard finds the Belgian government promoted imperialism by propagating two myths: 1) portraying Leopold II "and his "notorious" colonial rule as glorious and honourable" (p. 261); 2) describing the "heroic pioneer period" as providing the "the bold and glorious foundation for a noble and justified civilizing mission" (p.261).

Stanard concludes that contrary to a widely-held belief, the Belgian people were not unwilling imperialists. Although the state took the lead, colonial businesses, missionaries, and grassroots activities supported the empire "be it for reasons of nationalistic pride, perceived economic benefits, or other reasons. The impetus may have come from only a few, but the interests generated for the imperial cause was widespread, if not in all ways profound" (p. 269). However, similar to research findings in France, Britain, and elsewhere, the pro-empire propaganda "was unsuccessful in creating gut connections to the Congo, save among the comparatively small number who lived there" (p. 15).

Stanard systematically examines each of the media for its substantive message over the time period. For example, the five world affairs Belgium hosted between 1908 and 1960 made a concerted effort to popularize the colonies by charting "colonial progress," i.e., backward images of African living conditions compared to colonial- built cities and factories, illustrating "Belgium"s civilizing action, philanthropy, and moral accomplishments. . . . " (p.63). in some cases, even as late as 1958, indigenous villages were recreated with few natives transported to the Belgium and dehumanized in open air cages. In short, the "other" was homogenized, lacking authenticity. Similar depictions were found in national and local museums.

Much more difficult to assess is the impact of the expositions, museums, and the monuments on the population. As Stanard himself admits,

attempts to suggest impact on "attitudes, beliefs, prejudices and everyday lives" is "notoriously fraught with indeterminacy" (p. 14). Relying on numerous archival and local resources at museums, ministries, and government offices, Stanard painstakingly makes the connections, in the absence of empirical public opinion polls or attitudinal surveys.

Education also was used as a "tool to inculcate the masses" (p.137). In the earlier years of the century there is comparatively scant coverage of the colony in the history textbooks, just as in Britain and France. Only after World War II did coverage become more systematic, illustrating the "human progress of the "African black" (p.155). But education included other activities; students visited the museums, the expositions, and competitive essay contests were held. The deluge of post World War II propaganda explains why the population was caught by surprise at the swift independence of the colonies. After independence, the textbooks were once more silent about the colonial experience, similar to what other historians have found about the French and British experience.

The book provides a rich assessment of the popular cultural portrayal of the Congo in Belgium. Yet, the reader is left to lament three missing areas, which the author acknowledges. First, were the attitudes toward the colony similar in both the Walloon (French speaking) and the Flemish speaking parts of Belgium? How much of the effort to promote the colony represented an attempt to build the Belgium nation from those two contentious communities? Second, the colonialization was largely a male oriented enterprise. What impact did the propaganda have on women? What role did women play in creating the propaganda? Third, what were the views of Congolese of Belgium and its people, especially as gleaned by those brought to the world fairs? While this was not explicitly within the scope of research, any available evidence would have enriched the analysis.

The book is highly recommended for historians of European colonial history. Generally, that literature focuses on impact on the colony rather than the colonizer, but this book joins an increasing number of works on the probable effects on the mother country. And of course, the work adds to the literature on the Belgian experience. Much has been written on France, Britain, and Portugal, much less on Belgium, and even less on Germany and Spain. Political scientists specializing in Comparative Politics might find intriguing the links made between state and society, how societal groups were used by the state and how national and local (municipal) constituencies fashioned and reinforced the message.

International Relations scholars will find the book a useful addition to a small but stimulating and provocative literature on how museums and culture more generally shapes national and ethnic identities and how museums may be a venue for nation-building. Christine Sylvester's recent book *Art/ Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It (Media and Power)* (Boulder: CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009) is exemplary with more recent examples of the relationship between culture and international politics.

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