



# History by Parliamentary Vote: Science, Ethics and Politics in the Lumumba Commission

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## Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War an increasing number of countries have set up government-appointed 'historical commissions', often staffed or assisted by historians, to settle disputes about the past. This article analyzes the phenomenon of 'commissioned history' by focusing on the case of the Belgian parliamentary commission of inquiry which was active between 2000 and 2002 and had to investigate Belgium's responsibility in the murder of the Congolese prime minister Patrice Lumumba in 1961. It especially addresses the questions how the 'Lumumba commission' attempted to create a hegemonic memory around the (post)colonial past and how history, politics, and ethics were combined in this attempt. Despite official assertions about a strict division of labour between experts and politicians and about the 'absolute independence and freedom' granted to the former, the article argues that a problematic 'osmosis' of history and politics took place. However, it is argued that this osmosis did not result from partisanship on the side of the experts, nor from an active interference by the politicians, but from a (probably unconscious) attitude that the experts developed in which they appropriated a part of the meta-political values and the *habitus* of their law-making employers.

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## Introduction

The use of government-appointed commissions of inquiry, often staffed or assisted by historians, to settle disputes about the past is not new. For example, bi-lateral historical commissions were already set up between former enemies after WWI and WWII in order to address nationalistic historiographies.<sup>1</sup> Yet, since the end of the Cold War, the establishment of historical commissions has risen to a whole new level. In an international political context which has been described as an upsurge of 'neo-enlightenment morality',<sup>2</sup> a '*fin de millénaire* fever of atonement',<sup>3</sup> or a 'politics of regret',<sup>4</sup> many countries have turned to historical commissions as a way to attain ethical introspection or absolution. Shortly after the collapse of the USSR, several countries of the former Eastern bloc set up historical commissions in order to deal with their communist legacy. During the last decade more than 20, mostly European, countries organized a commission on the so-called 'holocaust assets'. In the US, historical commissions have been recently used to inquire into race riots that took place as long as a century ago. Many other recent examples can be listed: Czechs and Germans set up a commission on the Sudeten question; the Swedish used the formula to study the history of their Security Services; in the Netherlands, historians were asked to inquire into the failed peace-keeping operation in Srebrenica; in the UK a commission was set up to report on Bloody Sunday; and in October 2009 Armenia and Turkey signed a protocol that promises a historical commission on the events of 1915.

Evaluations of the rise of 'commissioned history' strongly differ, but whether one supports or rejects this tendency it is clear that it is of great relevance to historians and that it

deserves profound scholarly attention.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I will analyze the phenomenon of commissioned history by focusing on the case of the Belgian parliamentary commission which was active between 2000 and 2002 and had to investigate the Belgian responsibility in the murder of the Congolese prime minister Patrice Lumumba in 1961. I will especially address the questions of how the ‘Lumumba commission’ attempted to create a hegemonic memory around the (post)colonial past and how history, politics, and ethics were combined in this attempt.

Although there is a long tradition of parliamentary inquiries in Belgium, the ‘Lumumba commission’ represented a relatively new phenomenon because it focused on an older past and because it subcontracted an important part of its research to a group of scientific ‘experts’. Most Belgian politicians were very enthusiastic about this new mix of science and politics.<sup>6</sup> The collaboration of the scientific and the political worlds was celebrated as an example for the future. Of course both parliamentary commissioners and subcontracted experts knew that not everybody would share their enthusiasm. However, they pre-empted potential criticisms about the ‘politicisation’ of science by stressing that there had been a clear division of labour between experts and politicians and that the experts were able to work in ‘absolute independence and freedom’.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these claims, I argue that this ‘division of labour’ was more problematic than it seems and that the workings of the commission cannot be interpreted as a two-step program in which one first practices science only to draw political conclusions in a second stage. I will defend two theses: First that the commission was directed primarily not at the production of new knowledge but, mainly, at the production of acknowledgement. Rather than as a substantial contribution to the accumulation of historiographical insight, I consider the work of the commission primarily to be a kind of ‘translation-struggle’ in which existing historiography was ‘re-phrased’ or ‘re-styled’ in order to fit the procedure of parliamentary decision-making.

In this ‘translation-struggle’—that is my second thesis—no clear borderline can be drawn between the work of the experts and that of the Members Parliament (MPs). On many levels the experts did more political ‘work’ than MPs. However, this did not result from partisanship on the side of the experts, nor from an active interference by the politicians, but from a (probably unconscious) attitude that the experts developed. Instead of producing a report about which the MPs then had to try reach a political consensus, the experts have actively worked toward this consensus. They have done this, I argue, by appropriating a part of the meta-political values and the *habitus* of their law-making employers. This appropriation had a number of negative effects: First it produced a great tension between the experts on the one hand and, on the other hand, the authors and witnesses previously contributing to the debate—a tension, I will claim, which primarily manifested itself in quarrels that concerned no content but, rather, the level of ‘style’. Second, it resulted in a formalistic and legalistic perspective that provoked a very poor analysis of historical reality and, paradoxically, had a ‘de-politicising’ or even ‘de-moralising’ effect.

### *The Commission and Its Findings*

Before proceeding to my argumentation let me start by talking some ‘facts’. The Lumumba commission was set up in federal parliament in the spring of 2000 and in direct reaction to the publication of a book by the sociologist Ludo De Witte, who accused the Belgian government of being responsible for the murder of Lumumba shortly after Congo gained its independence.<sup>8</sup> The legal mandate of the commission stipulated that it

had to consist of 15 MPs appointed according to the political principle of proportional representation.<sup>9</sup> The commission was invested with an extensive range of investigative powers which closely resemble those of an examining magistrate. The official assignment of the commission was '[...] to determine the extent to which Belgian politicians were implicated in the specific circumstance of the death of Patrice of Lumumba'. In order to do this, it had to produce, among other things, an 'exhaustive inventory' of the facts which led to the death, define the responsibilities, and give the names of those responsible. The commission could decide to broaden its research perspective if necessary, but it *had to* appoint a team of scientific experts to assist in that research. The experts received a temporary authorization to enter archives that remained sealed for ordinary mortals.

By the end of 2001, the four appointed expert historians delivered their report to the parliamentary commission.<sup>10</sup> This report described how the Belgian government assisted in the political elimination of Lumumba and how it ultimately was also implicated in the latter's fatal transfer to Katanga. Moreover, it describes a series of 'private' and 'official' Belgian plans to murder Lumumba, describes his last days and hours before his execution, analyzes how Brussels reacted to the 'news' of this execution, and, in a series of extra chapters, discusses issues such as the use of secret funding and the part played by state security and the king. However, despite the long list of incriminating leads, the experts concluded that, concerning the Belgian role in the *physical* elimination of Lumumba, no proof could be found for a 'great conspiracy'.<sup>11</sup> They consistently did not list the names of any responsible Belgian politicians, nor did they point out any Belgian political (or criminal) responsibilities in their conclusions. Nonetheless, they did confirm that the Belgian government assisted in the *political* elimination of Lumumba, supported his transfer to Katanga and showed no concern for his physical well-being.<sup>12</sup> Therefore they asked the commissioners '[...] to judge whether the Belgian authorities bear a moral responsibility in the death of Lumumba'.<sup>13</sup>

In their final report, the MPs adopt the concept of 'moral responsibility' and conclude that '[...] some members of the Belgian government and other Belgian actors bear a moral responsibility for the circumstances that have led to the death of Lumumba'. But they immediately add that they thereby assume the 'present day standards concerning public morals and without taking into account the then prevailing personal moral considerations'.<sup>14</sup>

### *History vs. Politics: A Clear Division of Labour?*

As mentioned above, the experts stressed their intellectual autonomy and denied having made compromises or having written a 'politicised' history. They claimed that their work consisted in 'clearing up illusions' regardless of the party or ideology to which they belonged.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, they argued that the MPs *could* not even pressure them because they had near to no experience in historical research.<sup>16</sup>

This last argument seems to be confirmed by several MPs who approvingly stated that they relied almost entirely on the work of the experts also for their political conclusions,<sup>17</sup> or, on the contrary, complained that there had been no time for developing interpretations or doing 'political work'.<sup>18</sup> Anyone who compares the experts' report with the final report of the parliamentary commissioners can only agree with these claims. Yet this begs the question of where the 'political work' was actually done—how, indeed, did the politicians come to their political conclusions so rapidly and in quasi-consensus?

Furthermore, the great confidence of the experts in their own professional capacities did not keep them from being fairly impressed by their assignment and by the formal

environment in which they ended up. One of the experts retrospectively recounts his concern that Belgium was ready to sacrifice some of its 'historical figures' or that, alternatively, the experts themselves were in danger of being sacrificed.<sup>19</sup> Working for parliament clearly was not the most comfortable position: 'Historians with the back against the wall, that is what we instantaneously had become when setting foot in Parliament [...]'<sup>20</sup> The experts were allotted a space in the 'peculiar biotope' of the parliament, and this mere fact already betrayed the uncommonness of their temporary job.<sup>21</sup> This temporary working space was equipped with a safe in which the experts could store their most secret archives and documents—also not exactly a habitual situation for historians.

Moreover, the commission started with a bad omen. During the first political discussions after the publication of Ludo De Witte's book on the murder of Lumumba, nobody asked that a commission be established. Rather, some MPs asked the minister of foreign affairs to offer official apologies on the basis of the aforementioned book, arguing that it concerned 'scientific findings' which met 'all criteria of historical source criticism'.<sup>22</sup> However, the minister answered that it merely concerned an 'interpretation' and that 'the current government prefers not to join in this interpretation [...]'<sup>23</sup> Despite the reaction by several MPs that the interpretation of documents and testimonies belongs to the 'essence of historical research'—and that it was thus up to historians to decide on this matter—the minister stood firm. Nonetheless, he added that he would support the idea of a research commission and that he did respect De Witte's 'freedom of speech'.

Given this pre-history, the experts could not take it for granted that their findings would automatically be consensually acknowledged instead of being treated as 'interpretation' or 'freedom of speech', as had been the case with the work of their predecessor. Despite their constant referral to the 'unmasking' of myths and 'exposing' of historical facts, the main problem of the experts therefore was not in the first place, and certainly not only, a problem of achieving (new) knowledge but also one of finding a broad political and extra-disciplinary recognition for this knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

### *Truth vs. Style: A 'Serene' and 'Transparent' History*

How then did the experts make sure their intellectual fate would not resemble that of their predecessor? How did they render their knowledge of the past 'credible'? I argue that they primarily did this by appropriating a number of meta-political values which dominated parliamentary discourse and which revealed themselves especially on a 'stylistic' level. The most significant and most obvious of these dominant values were doubtlessly those of 'transparency' (*transparantie/transparence*) and 'serenity' (*sereniteit/sérénité*). During the political debates about the commission (almost) all political fractions constantly referred to these values. Only a recipe of serenity and transparency or 'clarity' (*klaarheid/clarté*) could make the Belgian soul-searching succeed—on this fact nearly all MPs seemed to agree. 'Passion' and 'polemic', in contrast, functioned as the vilified antonyms of serenity. Several MPs warned, for example, that 'passions should not run too high', hoped that the presence of scientists would benefit the serenity of the debate, or complained that politicians themselves had to practice the virtues of 'modesty' and 'serenity' more often.<sup>25</sup> One of the initiators of the commission stated that this commission came into existence only due to the government's new 'spirit of openness, transparency and clarity'.<sup>26</sup>

That the experts were not insensitive to the values propagated by the MPs and that they appropriated these values for seemingly strategic reasons was revealed early, when they had to hand in an interim report. The experts were reluctant to communicate about

the content of their research before concluding it, and in order to justify this reluctance they argued that this would only add confusion and not benefit transparency. Worse even, they claimed, 'it would feed polemics, which are deemed disadvantageous to the serenity which is necessary for all profound scientific research'.<sup>27</sup>

However, the experts especially stressed their dedication to serenity and transparency when trying to accentuate the contrast between their work and that of the (amateur)historians, and witness-actors who preceded them in discussing the Lumumba 'case'. The tension remarkably manifests itself foremost on a 'stylistic' level rather than in quarrels over fundamental facts. Several commentators have remarked that the experts' report, despite the experts' privileged access to a series of 'new' archives and witnesses, did not yield great quantities of new historical knowledge or insight.<sup>28</sup> Most of the outlines or even details of the issues that are discussed in the report had already been 'revealed' in the writings of previous authors. One of these authors, Jacques Brassinne, criticized the fact that the experts repeatedly spoke about 'remarkable discoveries' but, according to him, barely produced any new knowledge about the death of Lumumba.<sup>29</sup> He also complained about the way the experts treated the mainly autobiographical writings of Colonel Frédéric Vandewalle—one of the principal witnesses/actors of the Congo crisis. The experts rejected these writings as untrustworthy, but, according to Brassinne, did so on the basis of only some futile factual mistakes and because they did not understand the specific *genre* of the writings. Brassinne argued that Vandewalle's writings were never meant as historical work, adding that '[Vandewalle] has wanted to make a document that was probably too lively for the experts' taste!'<sup>30</sup>

Brassinne's remark points to an important issue. While the experts questioned the reliability of nearly all previous contributions to the debate, they indeed seldom did so by referring to factual mistakes. Many passages in the experts' report seem aimed at convincing the reader that the previous publications cannot be considered 'real' historiography for methodological and (most of all) stylistic reasons. The reason often seems to boil down to the implicit claim that, due to their engaged or polemical character, these publications are not serene enough. The experts consider it their duty to 'de-dramatize' the accounts of the death of Lumumba and to 'purge' the 'baroque' histories of their predecessors.<sup>31</sup> The aspect of 'style' is explicitly put forward as a formal principle to discriminate between trustworthy and untrustworthy sources. The experts label certain sources as reliable on the basis of their 'general soberness' or 'simplicity' while others are categorized as unreliable due to their 'baroque' character or their abundant details.

The stylistic differences between the work of the experts and that of, for example, Ludo De Witte, are indeed considerable. While the experts opt for a 'detached' style and reject the reprehensible habit of focusing on the details of the 'dead and inaccessible' past, De Witte stresses his commitment and the fact that his 'drama on paper' is no 'dead history' at all. The experts confess that De Witte's rich and detailed style is 'seducing' and that it enables him to draw a vivid image of the Congo-crisis. However, they warn that it can be 'audacious' to attempt 'a realistic, almost photographic reproduction' of the past. 'The historian', they write, 'should strive for clarity rather than abundance'.<sup>32</sup>

However, the experts did not pledge to serenity and transparency for purely instrumental reasons; they thoroughly interiorised these values. The experts' report reads as a chronicle of resisted temptations with regard to which the experts time and again had to preserve their stoic 'cold-bloodedness' (*sang-froid*).<sup>33</sup> The greatest danger did not come from an external (party)political seduction—the experts had enough professional ethics to resist that—but came from within. The past itself, her witnesses, and the temptation to 'hermeneutically' interpret the past apparently were the greatest threats to serenity. One

of the experts retrospectively describes how he defended himself against the menace of emotionality that above all came with the hearing of witnesses:

[...] One should never let oneself be overwhelmed by a testimony, for every witness who gives her version of the facts [...] produces an effect of seduction or repulsion, thus an emotion, which may leave traces more closely resembling dross than gemstone.<sup>34</sup>

Hermeneutics too, according to this expert, can have a 'paralysing' effect and only an 'ironic' attitude could give solace: '[...] One has to know how to mock oneself in relation to the treated subject. Otherwise hermeneutics provoke a vertigo which is paralyzing [...]'<sup>35</sup> The experts indeed develop a highly anti-hermeneutical attitude. Furthermore, the experts' report also has a strongly anti-narrative character. The experts seem to believe that real historical insight is obtained not due to but despite of the narrative character of historiography, and they complain about the 'synthesis-effect' they discern in the work of De Witte. 'Through the arranging of a series of selected facts', the experts argue, 'an incident gets tied together into a particular image or molded into a scenario; the employed mode of selection raises questions however'.<sup>36</sup> In order to keep off this narrative 'synthesis effect' and to be as transparent as possible, the experts chose to accompany their text with more than 230 transcribed archival documents and to insert long textual intermissions in which the treated historical facts are listed once more in chronological overviews.

#### *Letter vs. Spirit: Legal Country, Effective Country, and Habitus of the Legislator*

One of the most criticized aspects of the experts' report is that of its 'text fetishism'. Distrust of oral sources and strong belief in written documents are certainly not uncommon in academic historiography. However, as several commentators remark, these tendencies are extremely strong in the experts' work.<sup>37</sup> While the experts formally recognized that oral testimonies are of great importance in the research on the murder of Lumumba, they clearly indicated that they attempted to make use of these oral sources as little as possible while writing their report. 'Paper', they posited, 'once again turned out to be the most important carrier of the past'.<sup>38</sup>

In line with my overarching analysis, I interpret this extreme manifestation of 'text fetishism' as part of a broader attitude in which the experts appropriate the *habitus* of legislators and develop a highly formalist and legalist logic. In the experts' report, one does not merely encounter a fixation on written sources; one also can identify a fixation on the written reality of a 'legal country' in which the letter of the law occupies centre stage and which has to protect against the more ambiguous informal reality of the 'effective country'. This attitude could render the work of the experts more 'consensus-fähig', since it perfectly fitted into the logic of legislators whose formal procedures of decision-making often compel them to put letter before spirit. Yet the attitude of the experts also resulted in a problematical and impoverished image of historical reality and, moreover, had a 'de-ideologising', 'de-politicising', and 'de-moralizing' effect.

The experts by and large confined themselves to written documents with an official character—such as archives of government institutions and the letters and telexes these sent to each other. Although the experts themselves remarked that written sources, certainly when concerning clandestine operations, often contain 'soothing formulations or phrasings that are difficult to decode', they refused to go beyond the most literal interpretation of these sources.<sup>39</sup> This fixation on official documents and their literal meaning was particularly inappropriate in the context of the mainly informal power structures of the newly



independent Congo. Given that even in the case of the highly bureaucratic Nazi Germany no written ‘order’ for the *Endlösung* was found, it should not be surprising that this was not the case either for Congo or for the Belgian–Congolesse/Katangese political relations.

The formalist and legalist perspective also profoundly influenced the way in which the experts defined, delineated, and interpreted potential Belgian responsibilities. While Ludo De Witte, for example, related Belgium’s responsibility to the *de facto* influence it exercised on Congolesse and certainly Katangese territory even, according to him, after the loss of its colony, the experts primarily interpreted the concept of responsibility in strictly legal terms. This attitude ultimately enabled the MPs to conclude that Lumumba was murdered by the Katangese authorities and to minimize the responsibility of (even) those actors ‘of Belgian nationality’ who directly assisted in the murder (a police officer and three military officers) by positing that they ‘operated under the authority, command and supervision of the Katangese government’.<sup>40</sup> Both experts and MPs admitted the ambiguous status of those Belgians who remained at their posts in the Congolesse and Kangese administration, security, or army after the independence—and thus agreed implicitly that no strictly legal logic could be applied in this situation. Nonetheless, the entire report pays very little attention to alternative and more informal loyalties—such as royalism, patriotism, ideological commitment to colonialism, etc.—which doubtlessly contributed to the relatively efficient political and physical elimination of Lumumba without the need for explicit written orders. This approach led to an analysis in which ideology played next to no part and in which there was very little space for considerations of an ethical nature.

This last thesis at first sight seems contradicted by the central conclusion of the experts in which they put forward the concept of ‘moral responsibility’. However, this is not the case. In order to demonstrate this, I will focus a little more in detail on the experts’ conclusions. As mentioned before, the concept of moral responsibility was adopted by the parliamentary commission, but it ultimately did not receive the support of all commissioners. One MP refused to ratify the conclusions and, among other things, requested that the concept of moral responsibility be replaced by a concept of political responsibility. During the closing plenary discussions in Parliament, moreover, the concept of moral responsibility became the stake of a series of very divergent interpretations. While some MPs defended the concept as wide-ranging and profound, others called it vague and contrasted it with the concept of a ‘real and effective responsibility’ (*reponsabilité réelle effective*) upon which they concluded that the report thus clearly indicated that the Congolesse and Katangese were ‘really’ responsible while the Belgium could do nothing.<sup>41</sup>

The experts themselves have never explicitly defined their concept of moral responsibility in the report they handed over to the parliamentary commissioners. Yet whoever reads the experts’ report can hardly avoid concluding that the concept functioned as a ‘residual category’ that was introduced relatively *ad hoc*. Its sudden introduction in the conclusion of the report comes as a great surprise. In their analysis of the murder of Lumumba in the corpus of the report, the experts in fact focused nearly exclusively on potential political and legal responsibilities while, as mentioned above, they pledged to a strict regime of ‘moral abstinence’ in order to retain their serenity.<sup>42</sup> When the concept of moral responsibility is finally defined a little more elaborately in the introduction of the commercial edition of the experts’ report (published in 2004), it is done in terms of what according to the experts it is not:

No criminal responsibility for the murder and neither a political responsibility, because the latter, when concerning a crime and if it wants to mean something, in our opinion, implies a form of complicity and thus criminal responsibility.<sup>43</sup>

The question of course remains why the experts have introduced this 'residual' category. One possible explanation could be given by referring to the thesis of Bambi Ceuppens, who argues that the experts confused the role of historian with that of judge and that they were restrained in their historical judgment by using a very wide 'margin of safety' as it is operated in court.<sup>44</sup> In other words, one could interpret the turn to moral responsibility as resulting from a fear to judge without disposing of absolute 'forensic' proof. This analysis is partly correct, but in my opinion it does not offer a sufficient explanation for the absence of more clear-cut conclusions. A more encompassing explanation must be sought in the fact that the experts systematically worked toward the possibility of a broad political consensus. It was observed by few commentators, but the experts *do* judge and condemn in their report. This happens in juridical, political, and ethical terminology but is largely limited to issues around which a political consensus could be presumed to exist (or be found) because they were less contested or because they connected to the meta-political values of the moment.<sup>45</sup>

The passage which displays the most pronounced moral indignation, ironically, does not relate to the assault and murder on Lumumba but concerns the fact that the Belgian government tarried in informing the Belgian public and even its political allies about the murder. The experts described this attitude in far from serene terms such as 'irresponsible', 'mendacious', 'hypocritical', and as a 'comedy' which perfectly matched the 'sanctimonious' pose of the Katangese authorities. Some of the most strongly phrased ethical allegations in the experts' report thus concern the violation of the values of political transparency and (political/historical) truth rather than the act of political murder.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, it seems that the security margin or the burden of proof which the experts imposed on themselves also differed depending on the potential (Belgian) political consensus that could or could not be found for a specific judgment. Lack of weighty proof did not keep the experts from articulating a very explicit judgment about the part played by the Katangese government in the murder on Lumumba, for example. Although unable to point out the precise moment and circumstances in which the decision to commit murder had been taken and unable to furnish substantial proof, the experts largely based their conclusions on a piece of cut fence on the airport of Elisabethville, and then went on to charge the Katangese with 'premeditated murder'—the words with the most explicit jurisdictional meaning in the entire report.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion

By means of a case study I have tried to evaluate the broad issue of the synergy between science and politics as it occurs in the phenomenon of commissioned history. While I do not *a priori* reject such a synergy, my evaluation has been predominantly negative in the case of the Lumumba commission. Contrary to what both experts and politicians assert, there was no clear 'division of labour' separating both spheres but, rather, a problematic 'osmosis' that had especially negative effects on the work of the experts. Yet for this outcome no 'authentic conspiracy'—to put it in the words of the experts—was needed, and the blending of science and politics, it should be stressed, doubtlessly did not result from a lack of courage or from bad faith on the side of the experts.

Part of the explanation can be found in the very nature of historiography itself, which is not a 'hard' science. Its findings can, on a certain level, always be contested or 'interpreted'—which was indeed the case in the Lumumba commission. This mere fact has fundamentally determined the relationship between experts and politicians: from the very start, the experts not only had to deliver expert knowledge but also had to simultaneously



'sell' this expert-knowledge and defend the scientific status of their field of expertise. The experts have done this—most probably unconsciously, but nevertheless systematically—by adopting a series of perspectives, habits, and values of their parliamentary bosses.

The osmosis of history and politics came into being relatively easily and did not attract attention, because both fields 'naturally' display structural similarities. History and politics resemble each other in the fact that both comprise a form of decision-making procedure. Moreover, the meta-political values of serenity and transparency are not entirely foreign to academic historiography, which often preaches a professional detachedness and whose critical apparatus should render transparent the process of information gathering. However, in 'normal' historiography the process of decision making is rarely as formalist, and the allegiance to the values of serenity and transparency is rarely as rigid, as was the case in the work of the experts.

The appropriation of a parliamentary or legislative *habitus* by the experts thus came with a 'cost'. This cost revealed itself most tangibility in a formalistic or legalistic research focus and in a 'taboo' on those dimensions of historiography that, in the eyes of to the experts, threatened its scientific status: i.e., hermeneutics and the narrative. The search for an 'incontestable' historiography comes at the expense of broader historical insight and often makes the experts' report resemble a chronicle more than a historical study.

The neglect of the moral and ideological character of the conflicts which dominated the 'Congo issue' in the 1960s, and still do today, gives the impression that the past can be 'processed' or 'worked through' merely on the basis of a fair procedure and a series of objective arguments—as if the existing conflictive situation simply resulted from a 'procedural delay' similar to the ones for which the Belgian courts are notorious. The experiences of historians who work in public history or whose work focuses on contested societal issues generally teach a different lesson.

While the officially consecrated findings of the commission certainly *did not* result in a 'worked-through-past' they *did*, on a strictly historiographical level, provoke a (temporary) end to the historical debate. This is probably due in part to the fact that, since the closure of the commission, nobody got similar privileged access to the archives, so nobody could easily refute or object to the findings of the experts. However, the excessively serene and anti-polemical attitude of the experts neither did stimulate further debate. This is regrettable because, although it is always easy to judge while standing on the sidelines and although the experts should be respected for their courage to leave these sidelines, I believe that the analysis could be performed differently. The question should be raised whether science and society in the case of the 'Congo question' in the long run would not have been better served by the visibly committed *histoire-à-these* of (amateur)historians such as De Witte and Brassinne than by the allegedly objective but in reality likewise politicised work of professional experts in government service. Especially the politicians disappoint, however. They, in my opinion, have been hiding too much behind science and have put too little effort into exploring the possibility, within the political power-balance of these days, of finally taking a more critical official stance—even if only temporary—on the (neo)colonial politics of their predecessors. This would not have 'processed' the past, but it might have been more just.

### Short Biography

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> M. Cattaruzza and S. Zala, 'Negotiated History? Bilateral Historical Commissions in Twentieth-century Europe', in H. Jones, K. Östberg, and N. Randerad (eds.), *Contemporary History on Trial* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 123–43.

<sup>2</sup> E. Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations. Restituting and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> W. Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> J. K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret. On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> It has been aptly remarked that historical commissions constitute a 'neglected aspect of the organisation of historical knowledge' and that their recent prevalence demands a 'more sophisticated comparative historiography of public history'. Cattaruzza and Zala, 'Negotiated History?', 123; and C. Fink, 'A New Historian?' *Contemporary European History*, 14/1 (2005): 135–47, 147.

<sup>6</sup> Initially the Christian Democratic parties were skeptical about the establishment of a commission because they suspected it to be part of a plan for a political reckoning. They feared that the inquiry would primarily serve the present-day interests of the newly installed government and that the potential findings about the complicity of Christian Democratic leaders in the murder of Lumumba would be used to discredit the entire tradition of Christian Democracy. Although the fear for political reckoning mostly turned out to be groundless, several commentators have remarked that the establishment of the commission among other things was made possible by the formation of a new majority which presented itself as part of a 'moral revival' and in which the Christian Democrats, for the first time in several decennia, did not participate.

On the influence of issues of domestic and foreign policy on the establishment of the Lumumba commission, see E. Bustin, 'Remembrance of Sins Past. Unraveling the Murder of Patrice Lumumba', *Review of African Political Economy*, 29/93–94 (2002): 537–60; G. De Villers, 'Histoire, justice et politique. A propos de la commission d'enquête sur l'assassinat de Patrice Lumumba, instituée par la Chambre belge des représentants', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 44/1–2 (2004): 193–220; E. Tanja, 'Een afwachtende houding verklaard. Belgisch parlementair onderzoek naar de moord op Lumumba', *Groniek*, 37/163 (2004): 291–301; G. Verbeeck, 'De Lumumba-Commissie: geschiedschrijving en collectieve herinnering', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 122/3 (2007): 357–73.

<sup>7</sup> Final Report of the Parliamentary Commission, Part I (DOC 50 0312/006), 11.

<sup>8</sup> L. De Witte, *De moord op Lumumba* (Leuven: Van Halewijck, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Proposition accepted by Plenary Parliament (Doc 50 0312/005).

<sup>10</sup> By means of a call addressed to the rectors of the Belgian universities a group of 12 'eminent scientific researchers' was selected, from which four persons were eventually appointed. These four were Luc De Vos of the Royal Military Academy, Emmanuel Gerard of the Catholic University of Leuven, Jules Gérard-Libois of the Center for Socio-Political Research and Information (CRISP), and Philippe Raxhon of the University of Liège. Despite the request of some politicians, no African expert was included in the main team of experts, but this team was assisted by the 'external' expert Jean Omasombo Tshonda of the University of Kinshasa. Furthermore, the MPs appointed two legal experts and a specialist in decoding techniques.

<sup>11</sup> Expression used in the Expert Report which is included in the Final Report of the Parliamentary Commission, Part II (DOC 50 0312/007), 605.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 828.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 589.

<sup>16</sup> E. Gerard, 'Het Lumumba-onderzoek', *Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis Der Nederlanden*, 122/3 (2007): 401–10, 405.

<sup>17</sup> Daan Schalck in Parliamentary protocols, 5–2–2002, 14h15 (CRIV 50 PLEN 205), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Parliamentary protocols, 5–2–2002, 10h15 (CRIV 50 PLEN 204), 54. Also see Parliamentary protocols, 5–2–2002, 14h15, 8.

- <sup>19</sup> Ph. Raxhon, *Le débat Lumumba. Histoire d'une expertise* (Bruxelles: Espace de Libertés-Labor, 2002), 22–3.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. My translation.
- <sup>21</sup> Expression used in L. De Vos et al., *Lumumba. De Complotten? De Moord* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2004), 17. (commercial edition of experts' report).
- <sup>22</sup> Protocols of the commission of foreign affairs, 08–12–1999 (HA 50 COM 068), 5–10.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>24</sup> The aspect of 'recognition' is, of course, always included in the concept of scientific knowledge. Yet in 'normal' scientific activity this is primarily based on 'internal' disciplinary conventions and rules, while an extra-disciplinary acknowledgement had to be found here.
- <sup>25</sup> Parliamentary protocols, 23–02–2000 (HA50 PLEN 044), 16; and Protocols of the commission of foreign affairs, 15–02–2000 (DOC 50 0312/003), 7.
- <sup>26</sup> Daniel Bacquelaine, in Parliamentary protocols, 23–02–2000, 22.
- <sup>27</sup> Interim report included in Final Report, Part II, 854. My translation.
- <sup>28</sup> G. Verbeeck, 'De Lumumba-commissie', 359; and Ch. Klep, 'Een problematische erfenis: België en de moord op Lumumba', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 122/ 3 (2007): 374–84, 379.
- <sup>29</sup> J. Brassinne, 'Réflexions sur le rapport de la Commission d'enquête parlementaire sur l'assassinat de Lumumba', 25–01–2002 (unpublished note), 16 and 23.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 and 22. My translation.
- <sup>31</sup> Final Report, Part I, 508; and Final Report, Part II, 588.
- <sup>32</sup> Final Report, Part I, 340. My translation.
- <sup>33</sup> Expression Raxhon, *Le débat Lumumba*, 17.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 62. My translation.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. My translation.
- <sup>36</sup> Final Report, Part I, 341. My translation.
- <sup>37</sup> De Villers, 'Histoire, justice et politique', 395; L. De Witte, 'Lumumba in het Belgisch parlement: Brussel kijkt in een besmeurde spiegel', *Uitpers*, 26 (Januari 2002); and Brassinne, 'Réflexions sur le rapport'.
- <sup>38</sup> De Vos et al., *Lumumba*, 16.
- <sup>39</sup> Final Report, Part I, 131.
- <sup>40</sup> Final Report, Part II, 838.
- <sup>41</sup> Parliamentary protocols, 5–2–2002, 10h15, 25.
- <sup>42</sup> Expression used in F. Ankersmit, "'Een schuld zonder schuldigen?" Morele en politieke oordelen in het Screbrenica-rapport', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 116/2 (2003): 78–101.
- <sup>43</sup> De Vos et al., *Lumumba*, 24.
- <sup>44</sup> B. Ceuppens, 'Lumumba. De complotten? De moord. Onderzoeksrapport of historisch studie?' *Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis Der Nederlanden*, 122/3 (2007): 385–400.
- <sup>45</sup> One important exception to this rule is the series of conclusions that the experts drew regarding the part played by the king.
- <sup>46</sup> Final Report, Part II, 600.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 599.

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