



Teaching History as an Interpretation, by using Textbooks in a Diachronic Perspective: The Research Case of the Representation of the Belgian-Congolese Colonial Past

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karel van Nieuwenhuysse

I serve as Associate Professor at the Research Unit of History, at the University of Leuven. I am responsible for the History Teacher Training Programme. After studying history and a baccalaureate in philosophy at KU Leuven, I obtained a PhD in history in 2002. Between 2002 and 2010 I combined teaching history and geography in secondary school (9th-12th grade) with being research fellow in the department of political sciences and teaching assistant within the history teacher trainer programme. Since 2010 I was subsequently postdoctoral researcher and assistant professor at the University of Leuven. My research interests are (1) the history of history education, in Belgium and abroad, (2) historical representations in history education and popular historical culture, (3) teaching and learning processes within history education, (4) the fostering of historical thinking, and (5) the interplay between students' historical narratives, identification, civic attitudes and historical thinking ability. I am currently president of the Flemish Association of History Teachers, and vice-president of the International Research Association for History and Social Sciences Education. I act as an expert in the development committee for new standards for (primary/secondary school) history education in Flanders.



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INTRODUCTION

History textbooks play an important role in social representations of the past (hereafter: historical representations) circulating within a society. As history or related subjects such as social studies are often compulsory for young people, the textbooks used in these subjects have an extensive range and constitute an important medium in disseminating historical representations. Research shows that textbooks often present their account of the past as 'the truth': a representation of what actually happened. Textbook authors often leave no room for different interpretations, while history is precisely a matter of substantiated interpretation and construction based on historical source analysis and on considering multiple perspectives.

If we want young people to deal critically with historical representations, they must learn to use history textbooks critically. These are cultural artefacts, which can be considered as a meeting place between young people's learning, how society wishes to represent itself and its past, and the knowledge that this society finds important to pass on. In that sense, Wineburg (2001) states that textbooks offer biased historical representations rather than objective truths.

THE RESEARCH

From this perspective, I conducted a diachronic-throughout the past seven decades-narrative analysis of 20 secondary school history textbook series in post-WW II Belgium since 1945. A narrative analysis considers the different representations of historical phenomena within the textbook narrative as a whole, as these only get their significance therein. I developed categories allowing to analyze the context in which the colonial past was (not) embedded, the content, and how the colonial past was represented (perspective(s), judgment, tenor, etc.). The analysis specifically focused on the representation of the Belgian-Congolese colonial past. Congo was the private property of the Belgian King Leopold II from 1885 to 1908 and a Belgian colony between 1908 and 1960 (three accessible introductions to Congolese history are Edgerton (2002); Gondola (2002); Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002)). In the analysis, I focused on how and why historical representations of this past evolved since 1945, also in relation to representations in popular historical culture and academic historiography. In what follows, I first present the research results. Afterward, I offer a concrete model to transfer the results into educational activities in the secondary school history classroom for the 11th-12th grades in Belgium).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Textbooks in 1945-60 (when the Congo was a Belgian colony) described, inspired by patriotism, Congolese colonialism in triumphalist terms (appendix: excerpts 9 and 14). They represented Belgian colonizers as heroes who brought civilization to the colony. Textbooks stated that the chief among them was the brilliant, genial, wise, and generous King Leopold II. This representation of colonization as a mission *civilisatrice* was the starting point of



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a Eurocentric narrative of Western superiority. The abuses in the colonial rubber domains were not denied yet minimized. The Congolese were barely mentioned, if at all, in the narrative. These textbook accounts were in line with the then scientific historiography, which was hagiography, especially of Leopold II. The current 21st century dominant historiographical understanding of colonialism as essentially and primarily a combination of violence, racism, profit and the ambition to transform indigenous societies was then not an issue.

The Congolese decolonization in 1960 was soon followed by chaos and dictatorship (Edgerton (2002); Gondola (2002); Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002)). This led to disillusionment and malaise in Belgian society, resulting in a quasi-silencing of the former colonial enterprise. Academic historiography, by contrast, then just began to reject hagiographic approaches to colonialism and took a scientific-critical approach. The representation of the colonial past in history education mirrored the trend (of quasi-collective amnesia) in society at large. The attention to the 'own' Belgian colonial past dwindled in the 1960s-80s and was limited mainly to the Congo Free State period (1885-1908). The triumphalist tone disappeared, and slightly more critical voices appeared. However, textbook accounts remained Eurocentric and quite laudatory of Belgium's role in the Congo (appendix: excerpt 11). Furthermore, the responsibility for Congo's turbulent decolonization and ensuing chaos was assigned exclusively to the Congolese (appendix: excerpt 4).

From the 1990s onwards, attention to the Belgian-Congolese colonial past increased again in history education, particularly focusing on two episodes: the Congo Free State, and the decolonization process, including the assassination of the first Congolese prime minister Patrice Lumumba. This was inspired by two books, causing heated public debate: Hochschild's (2006) *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* and De Witte's (2002) *The Assassination of Lumumba*. Concerning the remote past of Leopold's late 19th-century rule in the Congo, the textbooks all took a critical stance. They rejected the idea of the colonial mission civilisatrice as hypocritical; Leopold II was presented as a villain rather than a hero (appendix: excerpt 3). By contrast, the textbooks featured much less criticism of the Belgian role in the recent (post-1945) Congolese past. They ignored Belgium's involvement in the murder of Lumumba, although academic expert historians had demonstrated this involvement in a Parliamentary Enquiry Commission in 2000 (appendix: excerpt 13 and 1).

Furthermore, textbooks did not connect the colonial and post-colonial eras except for one (appendix: excerpt 5), despite overwhelming evidence for such connections. The chaos and misery in the DR Congo over the past 50 years were, for instance, solely explained by internal-Congolese and intra-African factors. In so doing, the textbooks (once again) failed to connect with academic historiography, which became much more attentive to those issues. And although textbooks, very modestly, started to introduce a Congolese perspective on colonialism by including few Congolese primary sources, they continued to offer a mainly white and Eurocentric colonial narrative.



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IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

How might history teachers make pedagogical use of critical academic analyses of textbooks? And how might learners in secondary school history education (11th – 12th grade; approx. 16 to 18 years old) engage with the results of such studies? The author developed a concrete educational module based on this study.

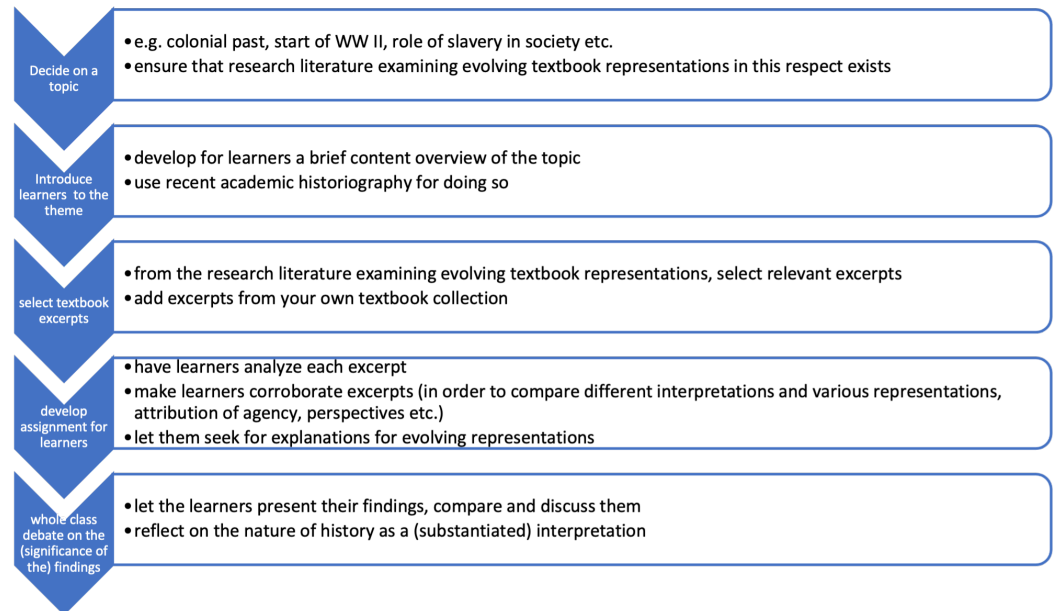


Figure 1 Roadmap for design of educational activities based on diachronic textbook examination

Learners are first briefly introduced to the main features of the Belgian-Congolese colonial past. Then, they focus on the evolving historical representations in history textbooks since 1945, via 14 short excerpts: see appendix. Learners (individually or in small groups) engage in the following steps:

Step 1: Learners analyze each excerpt. For example, they are asked to designate the historical actors: who gets attributed agency and who does not? They also have to indicate each actor's positive, neutral and negative connotations.

Step 2: Learners compare the different excerpts. Which fragments are similar and not, or even contradict each other?

Step 3: Learners sort the excerpts chronologically. The teacher explains them that they stem from three distinct periods: 1945-60, 1960-1989, and 1990-present. Considering the Zeitgeist and the historical context of those periods (e.g., in 1945-60, Congo was a Belgian colony), they assign the excerpts to a specific period.

Step 4: Learners summarize the historical representation per period. What representation do the textbooks excerpts offer? Who do they (not) attribute agency to? How do they evaluate colonialism? How do they explain the failed decolonization: who bears what responsibility? From what perspective is the account written?



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Step 5: Learners analyze similarities and differences in the accounts from the different periods. They search for explanations within the evolving societal context.

This is followed by classroom feedback. The results are collated, compared and discussed. If so desired, one can introduce an additional exercise after this, in which learners compare the textbook accounts with an excerpt from academic historiography. Afterward, starting from the conclusions drawn, learners reflect on the essence of history and the status of textbooks in a whole class debate. Guiding questions here are: What have you learned about how historical representations emerge? Learners can reflect on (1) how the ‘positionality’ of textbook authors influences particular representations; (2) the moral judgments in the textbook accounts (which are hence not ‘neutral’); (3) how different author perspectives lead to other representations; (4) whose voice are present and whose are silenced. Subsequently, the question can be raised: does ‘the objective truth’ exist?

On the other hand, can one claim that every historical representation is equally valid? Or can one be better than another? What criteria would you use to determine this? How do historians construct a historical representation, and how are historical representations in popular historical culture constructed? Do you now consider using the history textbook differently? Can you find other topics in your textbook in which the account offers one perspective or has a certain bias (e.g., the account of the Crusades, the “discovery” of America, etc.)? How do you notice that? Can you substantiate your claim?

In so doing, the textbook is not only a resource for transmitting historical knowledge but also a tool for interpreting history. This is not an easy learning performance. Hence, continuous attention throughout secondary school education is necessary so that learners can gradually build the necessary understanding of history as an interpretation. In so doing, learners gain a deeper understanding of the constructive and interpretive nature of historical knowledge and interpretations, and they are given tools to approach other historical representations critically.

Q & A WITH KAREL VAN NIEUWENHUYSE

Question #1:

Teacher’s Question:

How can teachers use this approach but adjust their instruction to support different (all) groups of learners? For example, how might a teacher using this strategy support a group of learners who identify within a dominant social group compared with a teacher hoping to use this strategy to support learners who identify within non-dominant social groups? Do you recommend teachers take any special care when using this specific textbook analysis to support Congolese Belgian learners?

Karel van Nieuwenhuysse’s Response:

The instruction can indeed be adjusted to support different groups of learners, although I would suggest to always (in principle) design the instruction with young people of dif-

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ferent groups, belongings, and identifications in mind. In so doing, a teacher can raise questions about dominant and silenced perspectives, in terms of ethno-cultural, religious, gender, socio-economic, national etc. backgrounds). The teacher can also elaborate upon the importance of multiple perspectives, both in order to come to a better understanding of past and history, and in the light of building a sense of belonging in history education. These understandings are important for every learner (no matter their belonging). Throughout the design, it is necessary to take special care of certain groups. In this case for instance, it is important to prepare all learners, particularly Congolese Belgian learners, for what is coming. Textbook excerpts from many decades ago often include shocking viewpoints and language when considering those from a present perspective. Learners should be prepared for that. Afterwards, they can debate to what extent those viewpoints and language still affect the present.

Question #2:***Teacher's Question:***

How could this pedagogical tool be used to facilitate relationships between university researchers and practicing secondary teachers? Can you talk a little about what that might look like and how both researchers and teachers could stand to benefit from a relationship structured around the development and use of this tool?

Karel van Nieuwenhuysse's Response:

There is a gap between university researchers and practicing secondary school history teachers. In this respect, educationalist and curriculum theorist Thomas Popkewitz (2004) talks about the process of “alchemy” to describe the fundamental changes when disciplinary knowledge is transferred to schools, notably through curricula, textbooks, and classroom practices. There are many reasons and explanations for this, but one of them is that, too often, no dialogue exists between academia and secondary schools. My suggestion would be to establish professional development programs in which both academics and teachers take part. In so doing, academic knowledge can be shared and disseminated. Yet, at the same time, teachers can push academics to highlight the true essence of historical themes, as teachers need that to address in their history classes.

Question #3:***Teacher's Question:***

In the introduction you write that if we want young people to “deal critically with historical representations, it is necessary that they learn to use history textbooks in a critical manner.” I wonder, why is this so? Is it possible that developing creative uses for history textbooks might subtly perpetuate their problematic ubiquity, and instead educators should turn to new materials and approaches for supporting their learners' engagement with representations of the past alongside the use of textbooks? In other words, why should we develop creative uses for textbooks rather than grounding our social studies instruction in materials



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found elsewhere?

Karel van Nieuwenhuysse's Response:

Indeed, I assume that textbooks are a widespread medium and are often used, and teaching learners to critically deconstruct textbook accounts is appropriate. Of course, it is an equally valid option not to use textbooks. This would immediately resolve a number of issues as, in so doing, the pitfalls of textbooks are avoided. However, teaching history in various countries requires a lot from the teacher, in terms of time, effort, and expertise, to develop their teaching materials and learning texts. This explains (among other things, such as the unavailability of primary and secondary sources otherwise) why textbooks continue to be used so often. Furthermore, other materials (such as websites, documentaries etc.) often also hold a bias, and testify to similar pitfalls as history textbooks.

The main message I want to convey with this educational module is that it is crucial to teach learners a critical attitude towards any information medium. Textbooks can be used for this purpose, but so can historical films and documentaries, statues and street names, comic books, museums, and so on. It is important that learners always ask themselves questions about the goals, the validity, the reliability and the representativeness of (historical and current) sources and information material. In so doing, they should first try to understand why an author/creator comes to a particular representation and then assess its value.

Question #4:

Teacher's Question:

As a teacher who wasn't trained in historiography, I sometimes struggle to articulate these concepts to my learners. How would you explain historiography and historical memory to teenagers who may never have heard of these concepts before?

Karel van Nieuwenhuysse's Response:

The concepts mentioned are indeed not easy to grasp, neither for teachers nor for learners. A scheme that I often use in the context of secondary school history education is this one:

This visual aid clearly distinguishes between the past, history and collective memory. Of course, in explaining and using different themes (which is important: learners only grasp the essence of this scheme when they have to engage with it on several occasions), it is important to nuance it to a certain extent. There is not always such a sharp dichotomy between history and collective memory. Historians, for instance, can also be ideologically, etc. biased.

Question #5:

Teacher's Question:

I was wondering if you might be able to speak to how asking learners to write their own version the section of all three texts to make a more "complete" history might complement

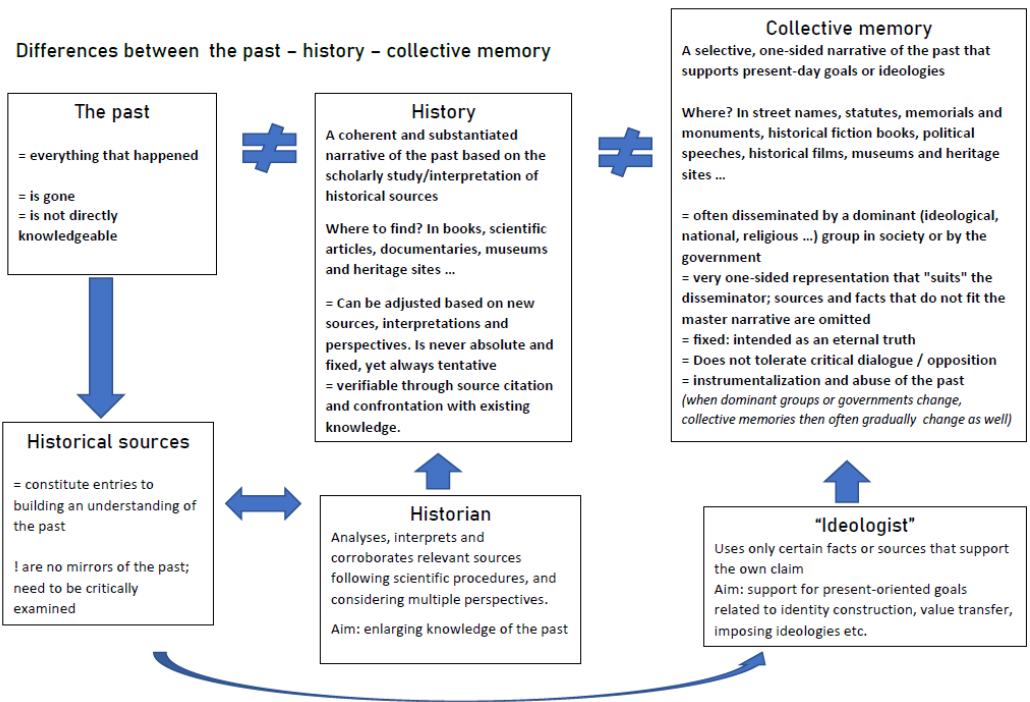


Figure 2 Differences between the past, history, and collective memory

or undermine the work you are proposing?

Karel van Nieuwenhuysse's Response:

This seems to be an excellent suggestion that does not undermine the educational module but indeed complements it. By asking learners to construct their own historical accounts based on sources that sometimes contradict or complement each other, they are forced to weigh the sources critically and develop a reasoned representation. In so doing, they experience the practice of writing history: that writing history is not merely summarizing sources, yet building, through analysis and interpretation of historical sources, a substantiated historical representation.

Question #6:

Teacher's Question:

To what extent do you think that using different textbook resources (e.g., charts, images, study questions, etc.) in these activities/modules could enhance or detract from the historiographical work learners might do with textbooks?



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Karel van Nieuwenhuysse's Response:

It is an excellent suggestion to examine the evolving historical representations in textbooks over time, not merely through excerpts from the learning texts but also through the historical sources included in the textbooks. These, too, are revealing. For example, what do images express: white triumphalism, black suffering, black resistance? Who gets attributed agency via the images: white or black people? Who is the author of the images? Whose perspective do they express? In charts and the like, a teacher can ask similar questions. The same is true for study questions: what is the tenor of the questions? To what extent do they encourage considering multiple perspectives? Involving sources in the analysis is, therefore, certainly not a distraction.

Question #7:

Teacher's Question:

You mention that often times meanings can remain “unexamined” when textbooks are mined for facts. You also mentioned that it’s not always an option to displace the textbook if primary and secondary sources are not widely available. I’m wondering what advice you might have for teachers about how to balance the use of textbooks as information sources versus as artifacts used in the construction of historical memory?

Karel van Nieuwenhuysse's Response:

You rightly point out that there has to be a balance. A textbook is not just and entirely a cultural product that mirrors the mentality of society and the dominant popular historical (and political) historical culture. It is also a pedagogical product, providing a historical frame of reference, offering historical sources, and providing learners with a learning text, which they must study to pass exams. So, you can use textbooks in different ways. Between a textbook as a cultural product and a pedagogical product, you have to find a balance. Feel free to use the textbook for the historical sources it offers, and for some topics, let the learning text be used as a preparation for an examination. For selected topics, primarily sensitive or controversial issues, you might prefer to use the textbook as a cultural product, which you then critically deconstruct with the learners. In such a case, provide a different learning text that brings in more perspectives than the textbook.

Question #8:

Teacher's Question:

You mention mandated testing and how learners have traditionally performed poorly when it comes to comparing interpretations and perspectives as it relates to different sources and authors. Understandably, teachers don’t always have access to multiple textbooks from which to draw comparisons. How might you suggest teachers could make use of your research despite having limited access to varied narrative sources?



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Karel van Nieuwenhuysse's Response:

Indeed, it is not always easy to get hold of multiple textbooks, neither textbooks currently in use nor textbooks from previous decades (diachronic perspective). However, the multiple interpretations of historical phenomena are up for grabs wherever you are based: there are the various histories that circulate in families, communities, society at large, etc. There is the surrounding heritage, the political statements and speeches containing historical representations and historical films, etc. The goal, the approach, and the questions I suggest in this educational module to uncover the interpretive and constructive nature of history can also be applied to these historical representations.

APPENDIX

14 excerpts from history textbooks since 1945

1. "After the Belgians officially left, disorder and chaos soon broke out. The rich copper province of Katanga, under the leadership of Moïse Tjombé, broke away from the Congo. The ensuing civil war was bloody and also led to the death of the popular leftist nationalist Patrice Lumumba, who was murdered in unclear circumstances."

2. "Colonization was above all territorial robbery, economic exploitation, oppression and humiliation."

3. "The colonisation of Central-Africa is one of the darkest chapters in the history of modern imperialism and the history of Belgium. King Leopold II was 'the villain of the piece' in this drama; the Congolese people, the victim of enslavement and inhuman cruelty, play the leading part."

4. "Meanwhile, Congo had become a chaos. Prime Minister Tshombe, however, proclaimed Katanga's independence on July 11, restored peace there, and the economy flourished as before. Prime Minister Lumumba, however, a first-rate demagogue but not a politician, pitted the blacks against the whites, increased the chaos, and obtained planes, vehicles and the like from the Soviet Union. [...] In an attempt to escape from Leopold City, he was captured by Mobutu's troops, later handed over to Tshombe and mysteriously died in early 1961."

5. "In any case, colonization explains in part the current difficulties: the fixing of the borders of the colonies was often done without taking into account local ethnic and religious realities, which led to the establishment of heterogeneous states. By favoring this or that local group, the colonizers sometimes reinforced ethnic tensions. (...) The development of education benefited only a small group. (...) After independence, the economic colonial system continued."

6. "Without covering up the mistakes and shortcomings of any colonial system, there is no doubt that the Belgian colonial rule has been a blessing for the Congolese. (...) It is probably due to the tireless and loving work of the numerous missionaries, of whom the Flemish constituted the majority, that Belgium has accomplished its civilizing work in the Congo better than other Europeans in other African regions."



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7. "Of course there were many abuses for profit by the whites. Too often the blacks were exploited. And it was not always the noblest people who went to Africa to be civilized! Leopold's 'ivory and rubber policy' therefore faced extremely fierce criticism from radical liberals and from socialists, who found in it a wonderful weapon with which to attack the monarchy. There was a systematic campaign of invective. (...) And the criticism was not confined to the interior. Foreign powers, with England in the lead, made their contribution, and certainly not always with purely humanitarian and altruistic intentions. Here, too, greed and envy played a role."

8. "In 1999, a Parliamentary Enquiry Commission was convened to unravel the Lumumba case. It began its work in 2000. This chapter aims to make one reflect on the work of that commission; Why was it appointed so late? What did it want to achieve? What results did it produce? The study also has a broader scope. It seeks to draw attention to the survival of conflicts. Few conflicts stop after official peace."

9. "Against the indifference and small-mindedness of the Belgians, in the midst of greedy great nations and at the cost of daunting difficulties, King Leopold II succeeded in founding, in the heart of unknown Africa, a powerful empire, which, under the leadership of Belgium, would develop culturally, economically and religiously splendidly and command the admiration of the world."

10. "The conditions in which exploitation took place were sometimes horrific. Especially in the gathering of ivory and rubber, blacks provided real slave labor. Many were killed or mutilated."

11. "From all this it is clear that Belgian paternalism in Congo, despite the many drawbacks, yielded a surplus for the Congolese people."

12. "Through the actions of King Leopold II, Belgium also acquired its colonial territory in Africa. From Brussels, a colonial rule was then conceived, supported by three pillars: the administration, the Church, which was present there with approximately 6,000 missionaries, and the companies that did brilliant business and also played a decisive political role. Above all this: the royal house. The civilization of the Congolese was seen as a pyramid. The basis was laid through a broadly spread primary education; it was further developed through secondary education and finally through university education to form an elite. Full attention was also given to the formation of a solid middle class. On the whole, the aim was to see a Belgian-Congolese community emerge on the basis of white-black parity."

13. "Lumumba, too progressive by American and Belgian standards, dies in mysterious circumstances."

14. "To form an idea of the progress of the colony, one has to think back for a moment to the state of Kongo before half a century, with its endemic plagues (diseases, fetishism, cannibalism) and its population with extremely primitive living conditions, thinned by bloody rivalries and by the slave trade. Missionaries, officers, civil servants, engineers, technicians, settlers waged an unrelenting struggle against barbarism. By their action the Negro population has reached a higher level of civilization, but its emancipation is far from complete."



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FURTHER READING?

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