

To the Editor
The Guardian,
Kings Place, 90 York Way,
N1 9GU London,
United Kingdom.

Lasne, December 24th 2018

Dear Sir,

Re : **Belgium faces up to postwar 'apartheid' in Congolese colony**
The Guardian 9th December 2018

Quite a few corrections in this article are called for.

Medical care was dispensed free of charge to Whites and Blacks, even to the most remote parts of the colony. In 1962, the WHO considered that, thanks to the "luxury medical care practiced by the colonialists", the former Belgian Congo was in medical terms twenty years ahead of the other regions in Africa. The medical budget of the Belgian Congo was higher than the WHO's budget for the entire planet.

By 1960, when the Congo became independent the Belgian administration had, in a time span of three generations, transformed the totally undeveloped Congo Basin into the fourth most advanced country of the whole of Africa. This is something that could not be achieved by mostly playing tennis in the afternoon and black-tie balls and grenadine cocktails in the evening.

"Boy" was the generic name given to domestic personnel only. Unlike in British colonies, where nearly every household would employ six or seven servants, an average Belgian household would employ one or two and they would generally be addressed by their first name. The author of the article would be well advised to dig into the negative attitudes shown towards domestics in British colonies.

Obviously ridicule does not kill. Cassava root had become the staple food in sub-Saharan Africa since the 16th century and nobody tried to change this in any way. It may be noteworthy however that with the arrival of the Belgians, new crops were introduced and imposed, sometimes referred to as forced labour, to successfully put an end to endemic famine, one of the main causes of depopulation in the Congo Basin. The Congo became even a leading exporter of its surplus agricultural production.

It is true that there was segregation but was it racial like for example in the United States until very recently? The segregation was definitely social and cultural as it was and still is in our societies. May I remark that in the Belgian colony the intermingling of races was never considered conduct unbecoming!

The author does well to refer to the reopening of the Africa Museum. If the producers of the documentary series Children of the Colony can get away with the manipulation of testimonies in order to bring them in line with their ideological bias, this cannot be

accepted from a scientific institution of world repute. The direction of the Museum has been at odds with most of its scientific staff over the renovation and historians with an expertise on Africa who did not want to stick to the barriers of single thought were banned from the reorganization.

Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of Democratic Republic of Congo, though very charismatic, did not have the stature of a statesman. He is the first, if not the main architect of the chaos in which the Congo is still immersed, almost sixty years after its independence. By his speech on Independence Day he unleashed a rebellion which caused the death and severe maltreatment of hundreds of Belgians. During his two months tenure as prime minister he ordered a military operation against Kasaian separatists which claimed the lives of thousands of men, women and children. Well informed Belgians see no reason whatsoever to pay tribute to this man in whichever way. Lest not forget that, though the death of Patrice Lumumba was a heinous crime, for sure with external complicity, it was Congolese who jailed him and deliberately sent him off to his enemies in the Katanga, where he awaited certain death. That it was at the hand of Belgian officers, as alleged in the article, is outrageous.

Adam Hochschild estimated that under King Leopold's rule as many as 10 million people were killed. Hochschild, a pamphleteer rather than a historian, based his "estimate" on Mark Twain's King Leopold's Soliloquy. In the preface to this pamphlet, no less than Edmund Morel of the "Congo Reform Association" warns the reader against the author's exaggerations and the extravagance of the figures quoted (10 million deaths starved and massacred). In his own writings, Morel reports 1.5 million victims, most of who died from diseases.

Allow me a word on the economic exploitation of Congolese mineral wealth. The colonization of the Congo was certainly an undertaking with economic aims which brought considerable benefits to those who engaged in it. Would it have been any different in British colonies or anywhere else in the world?

But since the acquisition of the Congo by Belgium in 1908, the colony had been self-financing. The budgets of the Metropolis and the Colony were completely separate. By entirely reinvesting collected taxes into the colony Belgium saw to it that on its independence in 1960 The Democratic Republic Congo was well equipped to become the wealthiest country in the whole of Africa.

Allow me to end with a quote of Mark Twain himself which applies perfectly to this circumstance: "If you don't read the newspaper, you're uninformed. If you read the newspaper, you're misinformed."

Robert Devriese
Belgium