

Intergenerational transmission of stigma in the aftermath of mass atrocities

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Abstract:

The article examines the intergenerational transmission of stigma related to mass atrocities, with a focus on stigma imposed on the “villains” and, by extension, on their family. While a rich literature is devoted to the intergenerational transmission of trauma after a war, less attention has been paid to the transmission of stigma. This issue is generally overlooked in international relations. However, it has tremendous consequences on the transformation of relationships between former enemies. The article is divided into three sections. The first questions one of the main purposes of practitioners and scholars involved in post-conflict settings, namely neutralizing stigma. The second section depicts the design of one concrete research project related to stigma transmission. This research brings together political scientists, social and cognitive psychologists, and historians. It proposes a multilevel analysis of stigma related to the figures of collaborators and colonists in Belgium. The third section presents the outcomes of the research. The lessons learned so far cannot be generalized. However, they raise significant questions that matter for both theory and practice. Particular attention is paid to the enduring, yet paradoxically fluid, nature of (de)stigmatization processes. Despite the dreadful human toll of international and intercommunity conflicts across several continents, the analysis of upstream transmission processes, from younger generations to older ones, demonstrates that nothing is irreversible.

Resumen:

El artículo estudia la transmisión intergeneracional del estigma relacionado con las atrocidades masivas, centrándose en el estigma impuesto a los «villanos» y, por extensión, a sus familias. Si bien existe una cantidad importante de literatura dedicada a la transmisión intergeneracional del trauma después de una guerra, se ha prestado menos atención a la transmisión del estigma. Generalmente, este tema tiende a pasarse por alto en el campo de las relaciones internacionales. Sin embargo, tiene tremendas consecuencias con respecto a la transformación de las relaciones entre antiguos enemigos. El artículo se divide en tres secciones. La primera cuestiona uno de los principales propósitos de los profesionales y académicos involucrados en contextos posteriores a conflictos. Nos referimos a la neutralización del estigma. En la segunda sección se presenta el diseño de un proyecto de investigación concreto relacionado con la transmisión del estigma. Esta investigación reúne a politólogos, psicólogos sociales y cognitivos e historiadores y propone un análisis multinivel del estigma relacionado con las figuras de colaboradores y colonos en Bélgica. En la tercera sección se presentan los resultados de la investigación. Las lecciones aprendidas hasta ahora no se pueden generalizar. Sin embargo, plantean preguntas relevantes que resultan importantes tanto para la teoría como para la práctica. Prestamos especial atención a la naturaleza duradera, aunque paradójicamente fluida, de los procesos de (des)estigmatización. A pesar del terrible coste a nivel humano que representan los conflictos internacionales e intercomunitarios en varios continentes, el análisis

de los procesos de transmisión de abajo hacia arriba, es decir, de las generaciones más jóvenes a las mayores, demuestra que nada es irreversible.

Résumé :

L'article s'intéresse à la transmission intergénérationnelle du stigmate lié aux atrocités de masse, en se concentrant plus particulièrement sur la stigmatisation des « méchants » et, par extension, de leur famille. Bien qu'une riche littérature soit dédiée à la transmission intergénérationnelle du traumatisme après une guerre, l'on s'est moins intéressé à la transmission du stigmate. L'on néglige généralement la question en relations internationales. Cependant, elle s'accompagne de conséquences très importantes sur la transformation des relations entre anciens ennemis. L'article se divise en trois parties. La première interroge l'un des objectifs principaux des praticiens et des chercheurs impliqués dans des environnements d'après-guerre, c'est-à-dire le stigmate neutralisant. La deuxième décrit la conception d'un projet de recherche concret en lien avec la transmission du stigmate. Ce travail de recherche rassemble des politologues, des psychologues sociaux et cognitifs, ainsi que des historiens. Il propose une analyse à plusieurs niveaux du stigmate de la personnalité du collaborateur et du colon en Belgique. La troisième partie présente les résultats de la recherche. Les enseignements tirés jusqu'ici ne peuvent être généralisés. Néanmoins, ils soulèvent d'importantes questions qui intéressent autant la théorie que la pratique. Une attention particulière est portée à la nature persistante, quoique paradoxalement fluide, des processus de (dé)stigmatisation. Malgré le bilan humain désastreux des conflits internationaux et intercommunautaires sur plusieurs continents, l'analyse des processus de transmission à contre-courant, des jeunes générations aux plus âgées, démontre qu'il n'y a rien d'irréversible.

Introduction

In the general introduction to this special issue, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Simon Koschut and Adrian Rogstad remind us that the question of how stigma connects to ongoing work on memory remains underexplored. The objective of this article is precisely to focus on the interactions between these two processes. To do so, it examines the intergenerational transmission of stigma related to mass atrocities, with a focus on stigma imposed on the “villains” and, by extension, on their family. While a rich literature is devoted to the intergenerational transmission of trauma after a war (Argenti and Schramm, 2010; Vollhardt and Rezarta, 2015), less attention has been paid to the transmission of stigma. This article seeks to understand how such interactions between memory and stigma concretely evolve in the *longue durée* by examining two case studies related to the Belgium's recent past: the Second World War (WWII) and the colonization of Congo.

The issue of intergenerational transmission of memory is generally overlooked in the stigma literature and International Relations in general. However, it has tremendous consequences on conflict resolution. Mass atrocities and stigma are intimately linked. Extreme violence inflicted on a large-scale both results from and provokes powerful stigmatization processes (see figure 1). These processes foster emotions like anger, resentment, shame and guilt (Friedrich, 2022), with lasting effects on individual, social and political levels. Mass atrocities in Europe, Africa, Asia, or Latin America started with a stigmatization phase. This initial stage of verbal and symbolic violence against the *other* led to the extermination phase presented as the “solution” (Feierstein, 2014). In Rwanda, for instance, the Radio Television libre des milles collines played a decisive role in the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994

(Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014). The efficacy of radio broadcasts to disseminate the ideology of hatred before and during the genocide was fundamentally based on the constant stigmatization of Tutsi depicted as cockroaches (*inyenzi*) (Nyseth Nzitatira *et al.*, 2024).

In terms of representations, stigmatization processes create and maintain various types of otherness. At least four scenarios can be distinguished. In a traditional international war, the other is essentially depicted as an enemy to fight. In a civil war, the other appears more as a traitor to punish. In the colonial context, the other is associated with the child to be educated or the barbarian to civilize. In the case of genocide, the other is branded like an animal to be exterminated. These representations are not incompatible. They do, however, illustrate how contrasting the contexts are. Nonetheless, they share one commonality: in all these scenarios, otherness creates stigma, first placed on those who have been ‘othered,’ and afterwards placed on those who stood by, contributed to, or benefited from the legacy of these violent acts. In this way, the dynamics of stigma transform over time and can endure for generations.

The violence that has been devastating the Middle East for the last decades illustrates such dynamics. Aside from the technical dimension of most aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (borders and security, water and electricity, economic relations, property issues and movement of labor, etc.), memory issues related to the refugees’ right of return, the Israeli settlements, or Jerusalem triggered powerful processes of stigmatization. They systematically “gridlocked” negotiation and mediation attempts. The crimes committed by Hamas in October 2023 and the subsequent escalation of violence in Gaza crystallized the depth of historical traumas anchored in lived and transmitted memories related to the Shoah or the Nakba in 1948. At this stage, most stories that are told and retold on each side justify the “us” “them” dichotomy and the next round of violence. This example shows that interactions between mass atrocities and stigma directly nourish intractability.

Research devoted to post-conflict settings shows that the end of military hostilities does not fundamentally change the dynamics. After the guns fall silent, parties who wish to go beyond the spiral of “stigmas at war” not only need to demobilize armed security forces. They also need to demobilize minds (Mueller-Hirth and Rios, 2018). The significance of stigma during and after political violence cannot be exaggerated. International and intercommunity conflicts are primarily driven by the current interests, needs and positions of the parties involved. Yet, these interests, needs and positions can hardly be understood without considering a millefeuille of past grievances that are systematically related to stigma^{III}. The main hypothesis underlying the article is that understanding the intergenerational transmission of stigma is essential to encourage the transformation of relationships between former enemies and, therefore, a progressive process of desecuritization (Waever, 1995).

The empirical analysis presented in this article can be positioned according to the two major analytical wagers emphasized in the introduction. It scrutinizes stigma at the individual (micro) level in light of the societal (macro) level. Furthermore, it considers stigma transmission as a phenomenon to be explained rather than one that explains something else. Regarding the definition of stigma, this reflection is not founded on one exclusive conceptualization (Link and Phelan, 2001: 364-365), but on the lived experience of those who describe themselves as stigmatized. Rather than being constrained by a precise conceptual framework, the starting point of this reflection is a “phenomenology of stigma”. Contrary to many studies devoted to the stigma imposed on victims, this study questions the enduring impact of stigma imposed on the “villains”. In other words, it is anchored in the narratives,

emotions, and silences shared by people who have found themselves on the “wrong side of history” (to use an expression from one of our interviewees).

The article is divided into three sections. The first relates to our positionality and research posture. It questions one of the main purposes of practitioners and scholars involved in post-conflict settings, namely neutralizing stigma. The second section depicts the design of one concrete research project related to stigma transmission. This research brings together political scientists, social and cognitive psychologists and historians. It proposes a multilevel analysis of stigma related to the figures of WWII collaborators and Congo colonists in Belgium. The third section presents the preliminary outcomes of the research. The lessons learned so far are context specific and can certainly not be generalized. However, the analyses raise significant questions to help understand the interactions between memory and stigma in the *longue durée*. Such understanding matters for both theory and practice.

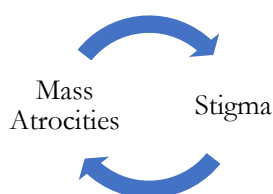


Figure 1: Spiral of “stigmas at war”

1. Research posture: observing or neutralizing stigma?

Scholars eager to understand the evolution of post-war memory take seriously the necessity and complexity of the processes put in place to cope with the past. In our personal cases, the research carried out together has been driven by the willingness to understand the pitfalls, tensions and contradictions of post-conflict settings. Trained respectively in political sciences/philosophy and cognitive psychology, we were never fascinated by the notion of “disciplinary purity”. Therefore, we did not stop multiplying the bridges between different perspectives without any sense of treason towards our initial backgrounds. This interest in interdisciplinary approaches did not only result from our own curiosity. It was also, and above all, dictated by the field. After a couple of fieldworks (in Africa and in Europe), we realized that we could never explore the transmission of stigma related to mass atrocities without a robust interdisciplinary team^[2].

Two major methodological options are generally chosen in memory studies. The first focuses on the political uses of the past (Langenbacher and Shain, 2010). The interest of this option is easily understandable if we consider, with the French novelist Georges Bernanos, that “the future does not belong to the dead, but to those who speak for them, who explain why they are dead” (1949, 29). The second option concentrates not on the political instrumentalizations of history, but on individual memories and grassroots initiatives (Otele *et al.*, 2021). Rather than

choosing one of these options, this article attempts to articulate top-down and bottom-up approaches together. It dissects processes related to both stigma imposition and stigma management (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Rogstad, 2022).

The understanding of these processes goes far beyond the statist military assumptions of traditional security studies (see Butler, 2019). It is, to some degree, reflective of the Copenhagen School's emphasis on "broadening" security, which forces us to consider International Relations by taking into account a wide range of actors besides the State (Huysmans, 1998; Buzan *et al.*, 1998). In this regard, associations of victims and associations of veterans are key actors in post-conflict settings. The broadening of the approach also encompasses a variety of processes that occur at different levels, thereby simultaneously constituting a move toward "deepening" security: the national level — which remains decisive for understanding strategic narratives; the local level — where specific individuals, often described as "memory entrepreneurs" can impact the security agenda (Sylvester, 2023); the individual level — in order to hear the "subaltern" voices that were marginalized, silenced, or even excluded from the dominant discourse (Dalsheim, 2014); and the transnational level — where individual experts and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) increasingly call for global reparations to address historical injustices (Boehme, 2022).

Most scholars and practitioners (from diplomats to donors, NGO workers and mediators) involved in post-conflict settings adopt a normative attitude based on the question: "How can we draw a line between the past and the present"? They consider that the long-term objective is to deconstruct and neutralize the stereotypes and stigmas associated with past violence in order to reconcile the parties (Joshi & Wallenstein, 2018). Such an objective is certainly legitimate. Yet, the research posture adopted in this article is not prescriptive but rather pragmatic. It considers stigma as an ambivalent phenomenon that is neither positive nor negative. This is particularly important as our research deals with *moral* stigma — a form of societal condemnation derived from perceived moral transgression (Goffman, 1963) — assigned to alleged perpetrators and further reflects on the *courtesy stigma* — a stigma by association (Ali *et al.*, 2012; Birenbaum, 1992; Kotova *et al.*, 2020) — imposed on their family.

After the end of World War II, to take only one example, most Belgian citizens supported the stigmatization processes of those who decided to collaborate with the Germans (Conway, 2012). Qualified as opportunistic, they were "punished" for "good" reasons. At the same time, the local practices aimed at humiliating the collaborators *and* their relatives were perceived as deeply unjust by the traitors' children. Eight decades later, the understanding of these children's narratives and emotions requires a non-judgmental attitude. Such attitude does not mean, though, that we adopt a relativist approach towards the violence provoked by numerous collaborators, especially among those who actively supported the extermination politics launched by the Nazi occupiers. In this regard, our stance is not totally detached from any normative frame. But the knowledge of the collaborators' historical responsibility is not incompatible with the eagerness to actively listen to their descendants.

The understanding of intergenerational transmission processes related to the experience of stigma necessarily implies the broadening of the usual timescale. Rather than limiting the study to the analysis of one generation of actors, the article attempts to identify tensions, gaps, and even contradictions between generations, as well as investigate the role that different generations take in the stigma acceptance, stigma rejection or counter-stigmatization (Adler-Nissen, 2014). The concept of "family generations" has been the subject of a large body of

literature focusing on the transmission of memories related to the Holocaust. Yet, most analyses focus on values and trauma (Hirsch, 2012). A few recent studies have examined the intergenerational transmission of historical memories (e.g., Barnwell, 2019; Cordonnier et al., 2021; Hirsch, 2008) but none of them paid a systematic attention to stigma, which leaves many questions open. What are the major variables that determine the duration of stigma? What is the respective influence of socialization, norm promotion and personalities (see the general introduction)? What are the conditions for closure? This last question is paramount if we consider the current failure of most conflict transformation efforts.

2. A multilevel analysis of stigma transmission

Our research examines two controversial figures in Belgium's national past: collaborators of the Second World War and colonists of Congo. We selected these two historical groups based on several methodological considerations. First, WWII and the colonization of the Congo represent pivotal periods within Belgium's recent history. Their influence on the public sphere remains strong, and their recency allows us to analyze how families who actively participated in these events transmit their personal narratives across generations (Assman, 1995). Second, our actors of interest experienced a significant reversal in power dynamics – a fall from positions of dominance (collaborators supported by the occupying forces, colonists hierarchically superior within the colonial system) to positions of “subordinates” or “pariahs” within Belgian society, which they had to reintegrate into after the war or Congo's independence. In both cases, many individuals emphasized the contempt they endured. Collaborators and, to a lesser extent, colonists defined themselves as “second-class citizens” who had been “humiliated” and “exiled” from a society that fundamentally regarded them as “profiteers” (Gillet, 2008; Beyen, 2002). In other terms, these cases represent instances where stigma was imposed as a moral evaluation of collective action.

Examining stigmatized populations within the same national context enables us to control for broader societal and political factors while investigating divergent stigmatization trajectories. Additionally, the partial temporal overlap between post-war collaborator integration and post-colonial returnee experiences (particularly in the 1950s-1960s) provides a unique opportunity to observe how different types of stigma operate simultaneously within the same society. This overlap also enables us to study how descendants of similar age cohorts navigate their complicated family histories. We acknowledge, however, that this shared national context may limit the generalizability of our findings to stigmatization processes in societies with different historical trajectories.

Beyond these similarities, our choice of these particular actors allows us to observe the evolution of stigma linked to two clearly contrasting experiences. While collaboration and colonization are broader phenomena that are not at all comparable in their facts or their outcomes, the (de)stigmatization processes related to the concrete experiences of repressed collaborators and returning colonists are highly emblematic. Although these figures experienced contrasting degrees of stigma initially, the trajectories of that stigma in public memory have since followed divergent paths.

As a final consideration, Belgium provides a compelling case study because of the complex and sometimes antagonistic ways its two main linguistic communities (French-speaking and

Dutch-speaking) have perceived their relationship with the nation, each community developing distinct collective memories and identities (Hirst & Fineberg, 2012). For instance, the memory of World War II collaboration diverged significantly between Belgium's communities (Aerts, 2017; De Wever 2002, Bouchat et al., 2020). In Flanders, collaboration was often reframed within a narrative of Flemish nationalism and cultural rights, with collaborators increasingly portrayed as victims of harsh repression, leading to earlier rehabilitation efforts. In contrast, Wallonia maintained a stronger resistance tradition, viewing collaboration as ideological fascism and betrayal, resulting in more persistent stigmatization of collaborators and less political support for amnesty. With regards to the colonization of Congo, the memory also differs between Belgium's communities. In Flanders, colonial history has been remembered more distantly and with less direct identification, often viewing it as primarily a project of the French-speaking elite and monarchy. In contrast, Wallonia maintained stronger cultural and economic connections to colonial enterprises, with many colonial administrators and settlers coming from French-speaking backgrounds, resulting in both more nostalgic colonial memories but also earlier engagement with debates about colonial responsibility and legacy (Gillet 2008, Goddeeris et al. 2020). These diverging narratives have played a crucial role in stigma management over time. Now that the generation of direct actors is rapidly disappearing, the question remains of how their descendants grapple with this family past within an evolving societal landscape.

We approach this question of the evolution of stigma over time and across generations from a multilevel perspective that can be represented as an hourglass, with the collective and the individual at opposite ends and the sand of memories passing from one to the other, filtered through family values and representations (Cordonnier et al., 2022, see figure 2). The hourglass metaphor allows us to observe the perpetuation of stigma over time and the bi-directional interactions between the macro (societal), meso (family), and micro (individual) levels.

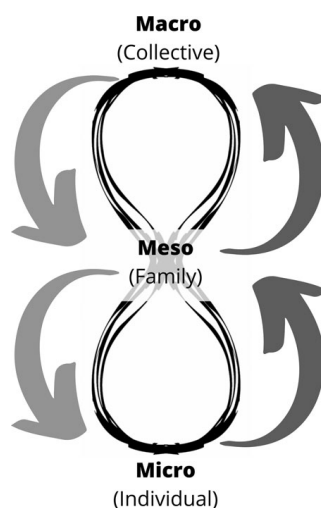


Figure 2: The hourglass metaphor

From a methodological perspective, our analysis examines semi-structured interviews with some rare witnesses (Generation 0, collaborators or colonists) and/or their direct descendants (Generations 1, 2 and 3) in two Belgium communities (French- and Dutch-speaking). Over

the past 8 years, we met with 139 participants from 61 different families. These interviews, averaging two hours each, aimed to investigate the memories, emotions, and personal experiences of the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of our two figures of interest. Interviews were conducted at the residence of the participants, in French or Dutch, recorded and transcribed verbatim. For the purposes of this paper, all quotes have been translated into English. Before conducting these interviews, our project was approved by the ethical commission of the Institute of Political Science Louvain-Europe of UCLouvain (Belgium).

Recruiting participants and reaching out to multiple generations was a challenging task. Beyond the practical difficulties of locating relevant families, we encountered an uneven willingness to discuss a collaborative past between Belgium's two main linguistic regions. Dutch-speaking families in Flanders were more inclined to discuss their family's history, while French-speaking families in Wallonia and Brussels tended to be more reluctant and often knew very little about their ancestors' wartime actions. This difference results from contrasted political and social contexts on both sides of the linguistic border (Aerts, 2021; De Wever, 2002). In Flanders, the phenomenon of collaboration has been highly debated in the media. Testimonies, documentaries and autobiographies have succeeded one another on what is often presented as a "wrong choice" made by some, often driven by Flemish nationalism. In Wallonia, the topic is more rarely discussed and is still perceived through the prism of the French resistancialist myth. Therefore, the attitude of collaborators during World War II is more systematically stigmatized in Wallonia than in Flanders (on the marking of certain attributes of states, societies and individuals as deviant or abnormal, see the general introduction to this special issue) (Ballière, 2025). This divergence highlights the interaction between collective representations at the macro levels and personal experiences at the micro level.

In the following section, we examine the feeling of stigmatization reported by the two figures presented above: the collaborator and the colonist, and, by extension, reported by their descendants. Since we consider stigma as a phenomenological phenomenon, our approach is situated at the micro level, relying on collected testimonies. However, to contrast experiences with more officialized stigma imposed from above, this paper also describes a more macro level, drawing on our colleague Louise Ballière's research, who conducted a systematic discourse analysis of 1,723 articles from Belgian newspapers (both French- and Dutch-speaking and from different ideological stances: socialist, catholic, liberal, or independent) dated between 1944 and 2020 (Ballière, 2025). The objective is to explore how perceptions of these historical roles have evolved over time and to investigate the circumstances that can either reinforce or alleviate the stigma associated with being on the "wrong side of history." In terms of positionality, none of the authors belong to families directly involved during WWII or in the colonization of the African Great Lakes.

Starting points: high versus low stigma

The two case studies provide contrasting evolutions regarding the stigma attached to them. Let us start at the beginning, or should we say at the end: the end of the war for the figure of the collaborator and the end of the colonial period for the figure of the colonist. These two moments can be seen as clear turning points (Druckman, 2001), where there is a reversal of fortune for our two figures, mostly taking the form of a loss of status within Belgian society.

In the case of collaboration, the stigma experienced by those who had collaborated with the German occupier was immediate and formalized by the government (Aerts, 2008; Conway, 2012). Indeed, in 1944, as Belgian citizens woke up in a newly liberated country after four years of German occupation, the population turned, often violently, against those who stood on the German side. Collaborators were arrested and beaten, their houses vandalized, plundered or burnt, and women who had been too promiscuous with the occupier were shaved in public squares (Ballière, 2025). A participant recounts: “After the war, people took revenge, well, revenge, they came to burn, they came to steal. My grandmother used to say, ‘They didn’t shave my head, so I gave some of my curls to my girlfriends [who were shaved] to put in their hats’” (G3). To address this “popular” repression, the Belgian state quickly set up military courts to judge and condemn the *inciviques*. Sentences ranged from a loss of civil rights to incarceration, with between 50 000 and 70 000 imprisoned during the first few months following the Liberation. The most serious cases of collaboration (almost 3000 of them) were even sentenced to the death penalty, although only 242 people were ultimately executed by a firing squad (Aerts, 2008). This means that the repression of collaboration led not only to scenes of humiliation but also to the highest level of stigma imposition: the death penalty, which went far beyond labeling, stereotyping, separating, status loss or discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001; Shoemaker, 2013).

Conversely, in the case of colonization, the stigma faced by former colonists upon their return to Belgium in 1960 after the Congo gained its independence was fairly low, sometimes even nonexistent. There was no official stigmatization from Belgian state authorities, and societal stigmatization remained minimal. Newspapers across the political spectrum globally described colonization as a “work of charity, with Belgian citizens defying Congo’s challenging conditions to help the indigenous people, who were previously living in poverty and savagery” (Ballière, 2024, p. 184). When colonists and their families fled the Congo after the Independence, many people were ready to help them upon their arrival at the airport. Archives show that the Red Cross, Scouts and Guides, volunteer drivers, and even Princess Paola were there to welcome them home (Vos, Danblon & Konen, 1960). Nevertheless, according to our participants this wave of solidarity lasted only for a month or so before suspicions arose and stigmatization increased. Most of them recounted having some difficulty finding their place back in Belgium.

In their testimonies, we find three types of discourses. First, some regret a lack of recognition from the state for their previous hard work and describe a clear loss of status. The daughter of a former police commissioner in Congo explains: “Once my father came back, he never found police work again. After all he’d done, he ended up putting stamps at the bottom of invoices. (...) There were no benefits, no help, nothing. Everyone was left on their own”. Second, some describe feeling stigmatized by the population, often through stereotyping: “There were two views that were impossible for me to hear. The first was: ‘You are colonial bastards, you are profiteers, you’ve plundered, etc.’ Which is true and not true for all white people. There are white people who went out of idealism, including my father. The other was ‘Black people are all bastards, they killed your father, etc.’ So, they incite me to hatred”. In these cases, colonists are either perpetrators of atrocities or pitied victims of the fantasized violent Congolese. Finally, in a strange way, a few participants reported being victims of racism themselves. As if they had been “tainted” by growing up in the Congo, children were called “savages” or “macaque” (G1). Nevertheless, this level of stigmatization was fairly low and not driven by any official stance. Most colonists and their families were able to start their new lives in Belgium without significant backlash.

Evolution over time: contradictory (de)stigmatization processes

Levels of stigma, however, are not set once and for all. The analysis clearly shows that it is an enduring process that evolves with changes in social representations of the contested past. Furthermore, as if it were a contagious disease, people closely associated with those who are stigmatized, particularly their family members, may also feel marked or judged by others in society, a phenomenon ironically called *courtesy stigma* (Ali *et al.*, 2012; Birenbaum, 1992; Kotova *et al.*, 2020). Once again, our two case studies show different trajectories over time.

Collaboration

While the initial repression of former collaborators — both official and social — was at an all-time high at the end of the war, it softened relatively quickly. After many years of turmoil, the government wanted to put the past behind and start rebuilding the country (Conway, 2012). Most sentences were reduced: death penalties were commuted to jail time, and those who received prison sentences were soon freed. By 1965, almost all collaborators had regained their freedom (Aerts *et al.* 2017). However, this change in official sentences did not mean the population forgot the crimes of the past or their resentment towards those who committed them. To avoid this public animosity, there were different courses of action. Some former collaborators turned to others who had suffered a similar fate to find a place to stay, a job, or simply some comfort. One of our participating families, who had all shared a common ideal during the war, closed in on themselves: “We were all on the same property. So, my grandfather, in the 60s, bought a property where there was a big house in the center of this property with a big piece of land around it. My aunt built her house on part of the land. My parents came to live, when I was 2, in a house just next door. (...) And of course, neighbors or friends would come and join us, but we didn’t go out. It was a very protective place” (G1). The whole family also worked together in the family business, with the grandfather providing work to former fellow prisoners.

For others, the solution to avoid stigma was to move to another village or even to another country. Some chose to go to France, while others preferred to follow their ideals by going to Germany or Spain. Interestingly, some chose to move to the Belgian Congo: “Then, they decided [to leave], because for my mother, perhaps it was also a way of redeeming her innocence, I don’t know, to volunteer to go and work in Congo. But in any case, they left to rebuild something there together” (G1). This brief crossover between our two case studies provides an interesting insight into representations of these two events around the 1950s. Whereas collaboration was still seen as a permanent black mark on one’s name, going to Congo was considered by many an act of altruism.

However, it is important to note that negative perceptions of collaboration were not uniform throughout the country. While in the southern part of Belgium, there was a broad acceptance of the stigma associated with collaboration, in the north, efforts emerged to construct a counter-stigmatization narrative, casting collaborators as victims of an overly repressive state (Rogstad, 2022). A collective sense of unjust repression towards Flemish people grew strong, backed by political parties defending the Flemish movement (Ballière, 2025). They believed that collaborators “saw in Germany the savior of Flanders” (as one G1 interviewee put it). In 1955, they presented the first bill advocating amnesty — a complete erasure of past wrongdoings for the “victims of postwar repression” (to borrow language from a 2011 motion) — which was rejected. Subsequently, numerous similar proposals were brought forward by Catholic and Flemish nationalist MPs, though none succeeded. The latest attempt

dates back to May 2011. While politicians debated these bills in the Senate, Flemish activists rallied in the streets, voicing their demands and simultaneously creating a collective memory that reframed collaboration as a positive stance of the Flemish people during the war. One of our participants recalls: “My dad has always been very Flemish-nationalistic and he pulled me into that as a child. I had to go to the *Zangfeest*^[2], to the Pilgrimage of the Yser^[4], until I was twelve or fourteen, and then I didn’t want to go anymore. I had to go to demonstrations. I remember a demonstration — he says that’s not true but it is true — a demonstration for amnesty, where when I was a little kid of seven years old I was shouting “Amnesty!”. I didn’t even know what that meant” (G1).

This narrative has persisted for many years and only seems to be fading slightly among younger generations. A 2018 survey of over 900 Belgians showed that Dutch-speaking participants viewed collaboration as more morally acceptable and were more supportive of amnesty for former collaborators than their Francophone counterparts. Younger generations showed more similarities across both groups than older generations did (Bouchat et al., 2020). Nonetheless, this survey corroborates our own findings and demonstrates that 80 years after its end, the issue of collaboration during WWII continues to divide Belgian society.

In the last ten years, two documentaries — one in Dutch, one in French — have dealt with representations of the collaborative past within families (“Enfants de la collaboration,” 2022; “Kinderen van de collaboratie,” 2017). Although they followed a similar format, the Flemish documentary ran over seven episodes of 50 minutes each and was available for a longer period of time, while its French-speaking counterpart ran as a single episode of 150 minutes (plus a bonus discussion with historians available online only) and was only broadcast once. Historian Koen Aerts, who was the instigator of these documentaries and worked closely with both production teams, analyzed the impact of their broadcasts on the broader public and concluded that “the stigma, and therefore the omerta, are simply greater [in Wallonia] than in Flanders. This is not a new phenomenon; quite the contrary. It was the same in the 1980s” (Aerts, 2021, p. 6).

Even 80 years after the end of the war, certain circles in Flanders have maintained, though less prominently than before, a counter-narrative of this conflicted past, while most French-speaking families still perceive collaboration as particularly stigmatizing. To take one concrete example, several French-speaking interviewees requested that their testimonies remain anonymous because they were “afraid” their grandchildren “could lose their jobs”. Others expressed intense emotions, explaining that there had no one with whom they could talk about this history. To date, we have not observed similar reactions among Flemish families. Likewise, the number of explicit references to “secrets”, “unspeakable realities”, and “unspoken words” reveals that this past is still perceived as a burden in Wallonia. In this respect, interviews indicate that family members who decide to talk about their wartime experiences are often condemned by their siblings for doing so. Once again, the reaction of the granddaughter of a French-speaking collaborator is emblematic. Speaking to her sister, who wanted to further explore their ancestor’s responsibility for the roundups of Jews during the war, she said, “We already organized a mass for the family 15 years ago. Stop that now.”

Colonization

With regard to the evolution of stigma associated with the colonization of Congo, we observe a completely different trajectory. As mentioned previously, there are few traces of blame directed at the colonists, either at the official level or from the Belgian population. Although

some criticisms of the Belgian colony had started to emerge, negative feelings towards ex-colonialists seemed to focus more on their wealth and social status or the poor education of their children than on the exactions committed in the Congo. Until the 1960s, the strategic narrative expressed in schoolbooks, official speeches, and museums exclusively emphasized the positive aspects of a ‘model colony’. No reference was made to the widespread violations of humanitarian standards despite the publication of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which depicted King Leopold II as one of the symbols of colonial brutality.

The uncritical attitude of the Belgian authorities was progressively perceived as inappropriate. In 2019, former Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel apologized for the kidnapping, segregation, and forced adoption of thousands of mixed-race children throughout Belgian colonial Africa (*cf. infra*). One year later, after the murder of George Floyd, the statues of King Leopold II were systematically targeted by protests against racism organized throughout the entire country. On 7 June 2020, a demonstration brought together more than 10 000 protestors in Brussels despite the restrictions imposed due to Covid-19. Three weeks later, King Philippe marked the 60th anniversary of the independence of the DRC by expressing his “deepest regrets” for the acts of violence and brutality inflicted during his country’s rule over the Congo (30 June 2020). At approximately the same time, the Belgian Parliament established a special Commission to confront its colonial past (Rosoux, 2023). This process led to the explicit stigmatization of four major “defendants”: the Belgian State, the royal family, the Church and businesses involved in the colonization. In December 2024, the Belgian State has been formally indicted for crimes against humanity with regards to five cases of métis women.

This contextual change directly affected former colonialists and most of their descendants. Representatives of former colonists’ organizations felt disrespected and stigmatized on the basis of current moral standards. They insisted that the abuses emphasized throughout the work of the Commission were not considered illegal at their time and that legal rules should not be applied retroactively. To the spokespersons of Afro-descendant organizations, this attitude demonstrated that nothing had changed since colonial times. The *disputatio* between these two positions did not take the form of a rational debate but rather a deadlock characterized by anger, rage, resentment, shame, and guilt. Money was the ultimate bone of contention that all parties kept in mind, even though it was rarely made explicit. Most anti-racist militants called for an equitable redistribution of resources, while a vast majority of actors implicated in the colonial episode (first and second generations) categorically refused the idea of retrospective responsibility. These respective perceptions remained incompatible until the end of the process in December 2022. After two and a half years of readings, hearings, and negotiations at all levels, the members of the Parliamentary Commission failed to reach a political agreement, even a minimalist one, which had never happened in the framework of a Parliamentary commission since the creation of the Belgian Parliament.

The impact of this recent evolution was clearly palpable during interviews with families of former colonists. Older generations still tended to perceive this past with paternalism. When asked about how he perceived current debates about the Belgian Congo, a former territorial administrator (G0) described it as “Congo bashing”, but added that he understands: “I say it’s normal, they can’t understand... You can only understand if you’ve lived it. You have to look at it through the eyes of the time. I tell myself that those who only know Congolese people, only well-dressed black people with ties and elegant young women, and so on, can’t imagine that we were brutal with these people. They can’t imagine that, at the time, the people who

lived there were primitive. I'm not saying they were vulgar or common, they had their dignity, but they led a primitive life. And there was also a certain routine that was cruel".

Other participants expressed more frustration and even anger towards accusations they felt were unfair. The daughter of a rubber tree plantation manager (G1) was asked about her opinions on accusations related to atrocities committed in the Congo, including the severed hands. She answered by saying: "So listen up. I'm telling you, when I hear that, I scream! You know where the photo in this book comes from, don't you? Well, you know, it wasn't... Why were they cut off? They were lepers, OK. I read it in very reputable press. (...) But what really pisses me off is that now we're in the process of creating a general history of Congo. There was some, but that's not what we should remember about the colony."

However, younger generations rarely displayed such strong reactions to their family's past. While most tended to highlight that their own ancestors did nothing worthy of blame, they acknowledged the wrongdoings committed during colonial time. When asked about her emotions related to her family's past, a 22-year-old (G3) responded as such: "I'm ashamed of Belgium's situation in relation to these countries, particularly Congo. But I'm not necessarily ashamed of my family, I mean, in the sense that I think they've done a lot of shit, like... I mean, they've made a mess of things, but I'm not ashamed because it's all part of a historical and societal context." Another participant (G2) shared a similar sentiment: "I have mixed feelings about it because, as I was saying, I think my grandfather was very humane when he was there, very conciliatory... In fact, I think that colonization as such was a regime that was fundamentally bad. The basic idea is based on patriarchy and all that... And, in fact, it's not just a story that's gone wrong, it is in the foundations that there is a real problem. I think my grandfather, while over there, was convinced of his mission, of wanting to bring comfort to the local populations, of wanting to... in the vision of the time, to bring 'civilization'". Overall, few of our participants described feeling personal shame for their family history. Many insisted on the need to evaluate their ancestors' actions within the context of the time, arguing that their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents were only there with good intentions.

3. Preliminary results on stigma dynamics

Four striking elements merit to be mentioned even though our analysis is only exploratory. (1) First, all the interviews show facets of real-world stigma management. Admittedly, participants rarely talked spontaneously about stigma and we never asked directly whether they felt stigmatized or not. Instead, the interviewers followed the natural flow of the conversation and only occasionally intervened with some specific guiding questions such as: What are your stances towards (a) the actions of your ancestor; (b) the way your ancestor was treated; (c) the way society evokes this past now and then? What do you expect from society and/or the state (e.g., amnesty, recognition of their ancestor's values, acknowledgment of the stigma detected by the descendant)? Besides the openness of the questions, granting complete anonymity to participants was an additional strategy aimed at mitigating the reluctance of participants to speak freely about what numerous families still consider a taboo.

Numerous interviews are characterized by long periods of silence. Does silence mean that the stigma is internalized? In some families, silence signals the existence of a secret related to

past violence. Silence can also express emotions as diverse as shame, guilt, fear, mistrust, suspicion, respect, grief, or anxiety. The most tragic situations we observed regard the transmission of emotions “without the text”, i.e. without any narratives related to past violences. In several families, parents want to protect their children who themselves want to protect their parents. What is particularly interesting concerns cases of transmission from the grandchildren to the grandparents rather than the opposite. Younger generations play a significant role in several families. Regarding collaboration, some grandchildren consider that their ancestors were stigmatized for good reasons — which reinforces the premise that stigma can be apprehended as an ambivalent phenomenon rather than a necessary negative one. As for colonization, some grandchildren and great-grandchildren of famous colonists stood up to assume some kind of responsibility and accept the social stigma experienced by their family for two main reasons: “Someone has to take responsibility because nobody did so far”; “they all benefited from the colonial exploitation and we still economically benefit from it today”. This bidirectional mode of transmission is critical (see figure 3).

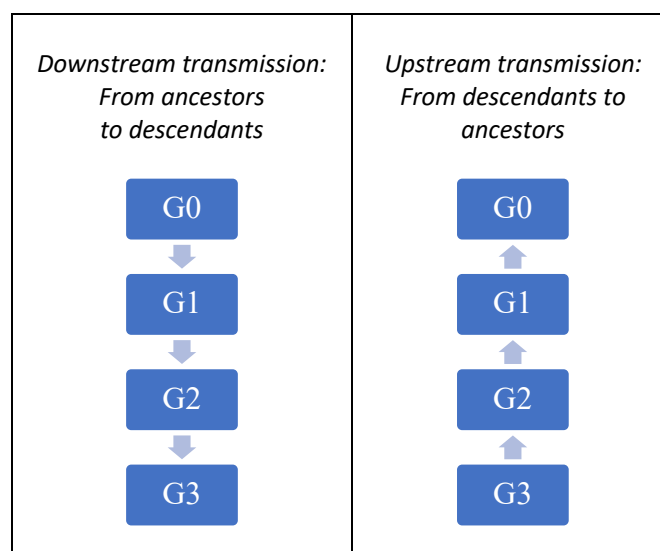


Figure 3: Bidirectional mode of transmission

(2) The multilevel analysis confirms that stigmatization is intricately intertwined with socialization and norm promotion. The level of stigma towards collaborators and colonists has clearly followed different trajectories depending on the linguistic community scrutinized. Both stigmatization processes have evolved significantly since 1945 and 1960. In Flanders, the stigmatization of collaborators has considerably decreased (which is not the case in Wallonia), while the stigmatization of colonists has increased on both sides of the linguistic borders. The interviews conducted so far confirm that the feeling of stigmatization is highly influenced by these different contexts and associated collective representations (Flanders/Wallonia). They also indicate that stigma is not systematically transmitted from one generation to the next in a similar way, nor is courtesy stigma always present — it depends both on how much the family member identifies with their family past and on their perception of a potential stigma imposed by society. Some elements are common to all families. For instance, most details about the knowledge of historical facts related to stigma imposition are lost after two generations. But this absence of memory transmission does not seem to impact the likelihood of younger generations feeling stigmatized, on the contrary. Strong feelings of

shame and stigmatization as led younger participants to actively avoid learning anything about their ancestor's acts.

Beyond these general trends, every single family is a unique microcosm that can illustrate stigma acceptance, stigma rejection, stigma evasion or counter-stigmatization (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Smetana, 2020; Rogstad, 2022). If we focus on whether interviewees accept the public understanding of stigma and stigma's application to themselves, we identify almost the same number of scenarios as the number of interviewed families. The research carried out so far clearly shows that every generational change is an opportunity to either perpetuate the stigma, start a destigmatization process, or launch a re-stigmatization process (the last scenario can be noticed when G2 rejects stigma while G3 accepts it).

If we consider the Belgian public debate, the figures of the collaborator and the colonist are not only considered discreditable; they are often discredited. In such circumstances, the attitude of former collaborators and colonists who are still alive is often based on stigma evasion and counter-stigmatization. Thus, some colonists accept the general narrative but argue that it is not applicable to themselves: "We did contribute to the wellbeing of the local population", "Belgians freed the Congo from slavery"; "it was like this at that time", the "worst massacres" took place during the early phase of the Congo Free State (privately owned by King Leopold II between 1885 and 1908)^[5]. One former colonist accepted the public understanding of stigma related to the colonization *and* its application to self, explaining that what seemed to be "normal" at that time and in their circle was after all problematic. This level of reflexivity is not generalized. Most G0 and G1 emphasized arguments to relativize the crimes committed between 1885 and 1960 in Congo, and between 1919 and 1962 in Rwanda and Burundi. Some colonists also discredit and counter-stigmatize the representatives of diasporic organizations, depicted as "more aggressive than the descendants of colonized people in Congo", "opportunistic", or "woke militants" (Meisenbach 2010, 284; Fleming, 2012).

The next generations adopt various strategies to manage this courtesy stigma. We did not interrogate enough families to claim any kind of representativeness, however, we detect a large range of reactions at every generational level. Besides the diversity of strategy combinations, we were stuck by the frequency of intergenerational repetitions in the strictest sense of the term. Some children and grandchildren highlight the unfairness of the stigmatization imposed on their parents or grandparents by using exactly the same words as those used by the previous generation. Similarly, some descendants denounce what they present as "a complete injustice" referring to strictly identical anecdotes — shared with the same tone, vocabulary and even at times facial expressions — as their parents.

Stigma evasion is also frequently chosen by G1, G2 or G3. When it is the case, the stigma resulting from judiciary sentences (1945) or the accusations made in the framework of the Parliamentary Commission on the Belgian colonial past (2020-2022) is not totally rejected but rather placed at a certain distance. Descendants do not present stigma as fundamentally unfair. Yet, they do not feel inherently guilty. This complex posture is based on both an understanding of stigma and a sense of loyalty. Some descendants describe a "deep admiration" towards their ancestors despite admitting that their role was "highly problematic" (G2). Two types of arguments are underlined to reconcile these two aspects. Primo, they emphasize both the "deeply human nature of their ancestors" and "the responsibility of the regime". In other words, their ancestors did their best, but the system itself was abusive.

Second, they insist on the necessity of not focusing solely on “a whole series of things that weren’t right”, but also on “things that were going well — that we don’t talk about” (G2).

This sense of injustice is palpable in the vast majority of interviews with former colonists and their descendants. Claiming that they “also have victims on [their] side”, one of the interviewees (G0) mentioned a “loss of honor” and a “demolition of [his] identity”. Regarding collaboration, numerous descendants insist on the extreme harshness of the repression. These arguments constitute “deep” narratives that usually resonate with pre-existing stories about victimhood. The frequency of these references indicates that they are particularly “sticky”. This element calls into question the idea that status loss and discrimination are consequences of stigma rather than part of its definition (Andersen *et al.*, 2022). The interviews and the numerous testimonies collected so far show that status loss is at the core of the stigma imposition. In the eyes of our interviewees, the impact of stigma was not the status loss itself, it was the status loss that created the stigma and explains to a large extent its enduring nature.

(3) Non-verbal communication is often symptomatic. When people refer to a mother brutally shaved and humiliated in the streets of the village, or to neighbors pointing at them at school or in a shop, their faces become often theatrical. The corporeal expression of the daughter of a French-speaking collaborator was particularly telling. After speaking at length without any interruption about the fact that her father was doing business with the Germans, she concluded her testimony in an unexpected way: “My father became very rich — millions [sic]. We had seven servants at home. But he did not know anything. He did not know that the Germans made lampshades from the skin of the Jews. He did not know that”. After sharing this, the woman started shaking nervously and then crying. After a while, she explained that she never wanted to have children but that she had been a pediatrician all her life “to help as many children as possible”. Other examples confirm the embodied dimension of the process of stigmatization. Several interviews provoked tears of descendants suddenly moved by an anecdote or the evocation of a memory. Examples could be multiplied. They all remind us that memory breathes in the sense that it evolves without much docility. Memory of stigma remains often stubborn and can barely be tamed.

In this regard, the relationship between stigma and shame is particularly telling. Shame is a complexe emotion that has been widely debated in the literature (e.g., Blum, 2008; Lewis, 1998). Zahavi (2020: 351) defines it as a “distressing emotion, where we feel faulty and unworthy, defective, exposed, and vulnerable.” Importantly, he adds: “Although one can be ashamed of moral infractions, one can certainly also be ashamed of things that have nothing to do with the moral domain. Indeed, shame does not have to be brought about by something one wilfully does. One can feel ashamed of a physical disability, of one’s parentage, or of skin colour, etc.” Shame is thus an internal response, whereas stigma is generally perceived as externally imposed. Stigma can thus produce shame in individuals, while the presence or absence of shame can modify stigma management.

Because shame can be associated with a broad range of contexts, it is hard to measure (Andrews *et al.*, 2002). However, it can be detected through various explicit or implicit signals (ranging from answers to survey questions about emotions, to long phases of silence during interviews or to non-verbal communication). In the surveys, participants are invited to assess their degree of shame (from 1 to 7). This kind of assessment is far from being sufficient to measure emotions but provide a more public or explicit stance on the matter. On the other hand, in-depth interviews allow for a more implicit and nuanced investigation of feelings and emotions. Together, they provide an idea of the extent of the phenomenon (high vs low) and

its evolution from one generation to the next (decreasing vs increasing). If we consider all the interviews conducted so far, we can identify four main scenarios regarding the nexus of stigma and shame (see figure 4).

The first scenario relates to individuals who describe themselves as being stigmatized and ashamed. It can be illustrated by the attitude of collaborators who were sentenced and repressed and who explicitly regretted the decisions made throughout the war. This is, for instance, the case of the pediatrician's father who explained after the defeat of the Nazis that he was not aware of the extent of their responsibility regarding the Shoah. The second scenario concerns individuals who describe themselves as stigmatized but shameless. This is the case for collaborators who were severely sentenced after the war (jail sentence or even death sentence) but who justified their choices until the end (fight against communism, autonomy of Flanders, etc.) and never regretted them. The third situation concerns individuals who are not stigmatized but still feel ashamed. This complex situation characterizes many grandchildren or great-grandchildren of collaborators in Wallonia. For some of them, shame is palpable despite the absence of active stigmatization in the current context. The fourth and last scenario gathers individuals who feel neither stigmatized nor ashamed. This is the profile of collaborators' descendants who express a form of "understanding" towards collaborators (G3), some of them belonging to neo-Nazi organizations. Finally, in some families, the children or great children became the stronger stigmatizers of their ancestors. A few participants told us that they got angry upon learning about their father's pasts (often when they were young adults) and as a result, some even left their home and spent years without talking again to their father, explaining to that they "could not forgive".

The same exercise can be done regarding colonization. Among colonists' descendants, one particular group systematically experienced stigma and shame, namely the mixed-race children. Their existence blurred the distinction between "Whites" and "Blacks", which underpinned the whole colonial order. Perceived as a threat to the "natural supremacy of the white race", they had to become invisible. From the Church's perspective, these Métis — as they are called in French — were also described as "children of sin", since neither the colonial administration nor the ecclesiastical institutions had any record of their parents' relationships. To solve this "problem", the former Metropole institutionalized the abduction of thousands of children from their maternal families. This practice was not only the choice of the administrators and religious bodies. It was also the approach favored by the fathers, who rarely chose to recognize their children, and, unsurprisingly, of the fathers' families, who did not want to hear anything about a shameful episode. Métis children were called "half-bloods" — meaning only half of their blood was European — or "mulattos", from the Latin word "mulus", the bastard offspring of a horse and a donkey. These scornful stigmas never vanished. As one Métis (who was 75 years-old) told us: "I still hear the voices of those who repeated over and over again that I was like a piece of waste left on the sidewalk".

Regarding the three other scenarios, some colonists explain that they were stigmatized by the Parliamentary Commission but that they are not shameful: "Shame? Never!". In the same line, some grandchildren of colonists said they were never stigmatized themselves (while their parents, as colonists' children, were) and never felt any shame about the past. In contrast, some great grandchildren of colonists consider that, despite the fact they are not stigmatized themselves, they still feel ashamed for what happened in Congo.

One last remark should be made regarding the link between shame and stigma. Several participants explained that they were afraid to talk about the past (be it related to the

collaboration during WWII or the colonization). Yet, it is not always clear whether this fear signals the presence of stigma. Every family is unique in this regard. And within each family, every individual can react differently. Siblings position themselves in an unpredictable way.

At this stage, we need to explore further the complex interactions between shame and stigma. Three main questions remain open. The first is related to the limits of the categorization. Do some cases inevitably elude such clear-cut categorization? The second concerns the nature of the interactions between shame and stigma: what is their causal relationship - does shame produce stigma, does stigma generate shame, or do they operate as independent yet interrelated phenomena? The third question regards the factors that might account for movement between the four categories. Knowing that the scenarios presented here are not fixed once and for all, what factors are decisive in explaining the passage from one category to another? For instance, one colonist who was a high-ranked judge in colonial Congo explained that he never felt ashamed until the setting up of the Parliamentary Commission on the Belgian colonial past and the subsequent public debate about pros and cons of decolonization. In this case, the variables contributing to the passage from one category to another are contextual (additional information about the past from the opening of archives, multiplication of testimonies, new strategic narratives or new court decision⁶). Individual variables might also be decisive (such as a change of perspectives late in life, for instance).

	Shame	No shame
Stigma	<i>Repentant collaborator G0</i> <i>Mixed-raced children</i>	<i>Impenitent collaborator G0</i> <i>Colonist G0 in 2020</i>
No stigma	<i>Left-wing descendant of collaborator G3</i> <i>Descendant of colonist G3</i>	<i>Neo-Nazi descendant of collaborator G3</i> <i>Descendant of colonist G2</i>

Figure 4: Articulation between stigma and shame

(4) The analysis of the intergenerational transmission of stigma allows us to reflect on the dynamics between stigmatized parties (be they collaborators, colonizers or descendants) and stigmatizers (official representatives, neighbors, or former victims) over the *longue durée*. This perspective shows that the (de)stigmatization process does not only result from a balance of power between actors characterized by diverging interests (such as between the Belgian authorities in 1945 and the anti-Belgian collaborators or between representatives of companies that were active in Congo during colonial times and diasporic organizations supporting decolonization). It is also related to discrepancies in terms of temporalities.

If we consider the stigmatization of collaborators (G0), it is striking that some French-speaking interviewees belonging to the second or third generation (G3) still feel highly stigmatized despite the absence of any official stigmatizers since the end of WWII. Parliamentary debates about the potential amnesty of former collaborators in the 1980s certainly reactivated some stigmatization mechanisms. However, the passage of time and the death of a grandmother or grandfather sentenced in 1945 did not allow certain descendants to

get closure. This situation means that we are witnessing individuals feeling stigmatized without any active stigmatizers. Conversely, if we turn to former colonists, their official stigmatization almost started in their absence due to demographic reasons. In this case, we see a situation with stigmatizers without the majority of actors targeted by the stigmatization.

These two contrasting scenes demonstrate that stigma management does not only depend on the balance of power between stigmatizers and stigmatized parties (Link and Phelan, 2001). The intergenerational transmission of stigma does not systematically mean that the issue shifts from a political game to a psychological process. Political instrumentalizations remain pertinent and often decisive. Yet, the strategic dimensions of (de)stigmatization are not sufficient to fully understand the long-term impact of stigma. They must be completed by the emotional and moral dimensions that are inevitably attached to the legacy of mass atrocities. Along these lines, the issue cannot be reduced to a rational debate about the uses of stigma. Descendants of stigmatized people cannot resolve their situation by calculating the advantages and disadvantages of every potential strategy. They are involuntarily affected by the storm provoked by irreversible crimes. One could argue that people position themselves based on a cost-benefit analysis. Some might try to adopt this approach. Nonetheless, can they simply decide not to feel stigmatized?

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to explore how interactions between memory and stigma concretely evolve in the *longue durée*. The main findings of our research so far, while specifically drawn from Belgium historical cases, have broader implications for the study of stigma and International Relations. Thus, these findings extend beyond this particular national context, albeit with appropriate caution regarding direct generalizability. They concern both theory and practice. First, this study confirms that destigmatization processes take time. The analysis of the two case studies shows that the appropriate unit of measurement in conflict resolution is neither years nor decades, but generations. In this regard, it is worth questioning the notion of “post-conflict”, which is generally taken for granted. Despite all the definitions mentioned in handbooks, the duration of these “post-conflict” environments remains largely uncertain. What are the basic criteria that determine when a conflict is over? When does the stigmatizer/stigmatized dichotomy lose its meaning? And how long do the emotions related to this dichotomy continue to have an impact?

These interrogations lead to methodological challenges. If we take seriously the *longue durée* of (de)stigmatization processes, how can we concretely assess the “effects” and “after-effects” of a war? How can we measure the evolution of stigma from one generation to the next? How can we detect emotional and even unconscious processes? After four years of intensive interactions with families affected by the legacy of political violence, we recognize the need to maintain a healthy distance from the issue. Conducting numerous in-depth interviews with Belgians of all generations requires constant reflexivity. Such an attitude can be sustained thanks to the regular supervision of the entire team. Regarding methodology, the demanding nature of our approach – long-term cross-tabulation of corpora, interviews in several languages and across three generations, and methodological diversity ranging from discourse analysis to surveys – required an interdisciplinary perspective throughout all phases. The eagerness to encompass institutional and individual, public and intimate, political and emotional dimensions of stigma also leads to humility. As scholars, we can actively listen

to the words and silences of the interviewees, regardless of their personal trajectories, but we cannot provide closure (Rosoux, 2022).

The stickiness of stigma is also highly significant for practitioners and policymakers. In this respect, two main elements merit attention. The first concerns the link between family dynamics and international politics. The relationships between these levels are not apparent at first glance. Yet, the Belgian case demonstrates that the way families either nurture or reject stigmatization can directly influence broader trends, such as the social cohesion of national and international society, especially in terms of (de)securitization. In times of crisis, strategies individuals and groups use to manage stigma can contribute to precipitating or preventing intercommunity or international conflicts.

In this regard, the rising strength of radical right and right-wing populist parties favors an undeniable process of destigmatization, leading to a reduction in shame towards past crimes (Aktas, 2024). In the Belgian case, the far-right party Vlaams Belang has spent decades advocating amnesty for those who collaborated with the Nazi occupation in 1940-45. In 2019, a city councilor of this party openly expressed his sympathy for Nazi songs (including songs played in German concentration camps). The trend is identical in other European countries. The political uses of revisionist narratives by the FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) in Austria, the rhetoric of German victimization by AfD (Alternative for Germany), the various fascist nostalgia scandals related to members of the ruling Brothers of Italy party (Fratelli d'Italia) cofounded by Giorgia Meloni, or the notorious remarks by Marine Le Pen's father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, describing the Holocaust as a "detail" of the Second World War illustrate a common eagerness to destigmatize actors involved in past political violence and reduce shame towards the crimes committed in the past. Similarly, the positions of populist radical right movements regarding colonialism favor the destigmatization of actors engaged in colonial violence. In seeking recognition of the s-called "benefits" of colonialism (elimination of slavery, building of rail network, expanded education, or improved public health), they advocate a balance sheet approach to the history of colonialism (Mathys and Van Beurden, 2023). Understanding the impact of these destigmatization processes is paramount.

A second key point for practitioners concerns the enduring, yet paradoxically fluid, nature of (de)stigmatization processes. Stigma circulates within families, transmitted from one generation to the next like an unstoppable cascade in the mountains. However, the study reveals that this transmission in a "*bis repetita*" mode is not systematic. Nothing is fixed once and for all. Generations 1, 2 or 3 can alter the initial stigma trajectory. This finding is crucial if we consider the current state of international politics. Cycles of violence seem to follow one another, *as if* it was impossible to escape the "tyranny of the past" (Jervis, 1976: 218). The dreadful human toll of international and intercommunity conflicts across several continents can easily lead to feelings of discouragement and even hopelessness. However, the existence of upstream transmission processes demonstrates that nothing is irreversible.

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^[1] This article is based on two interdisciplinary research projects, namely the RE-Member project devoted to “the transmission of memories related to stigmatization: Official and family memories related to collaboration and colonization in Belgium” (2021-2026 - political science, history, and social psychology, funded by the UCLouvain Concerted Research Action grant ARC 20/25-110) and the TRANSMEMO project on “The Sorrows of Belgium: WWII Memories and Family Transmission” (2017-2020 – same disciplines, funded by the Belgian Research Action through interdisciplinary networks – BRAIN.be).

^[2] For the last 25 years, Valerie Rosoux has been working on the dilemmas of post-conflict peacebuilding in Europe and the African Great Lakes. After regular stays in the Balkans and Rwanda, where she worked with survivors, policymakers, and NGO workers, she spent one year at the United States Institute of Peace, where she trained diplomats and military officers based in post-conflict settings. In 2020, she was appointed by the Belgian Parliament to serve for 2.5 years on a commission to deal with the colonial past. Aline Cordonnier is a cognitive psychologist. Primarily interested in issues related to the functions of memory, she progressively focused on the

intergenerational transmission of family memories. Since 2017, she has been interviewing Belgian families affected by the Resistance or Collaboration during World War II, or the Belgian colonization of Congo.

^[2] The *Zangfeest* is a Flemish music festival which, in the aftermath of WWII, was fairly political, showcasing artists singing about amnesty and collaboration.

^[4] The original Yser pilgrimage was an event to honor Belgian soldiers who perished on the front lines during the First World War. However, by the 1960s, it had transformed into a symbol of the Flemish movement and a manifestation of opposition to the Belgian State.

^[5] The intensity of the colonial violence increased with the start of rubber exploitation in the 1890s. Heavy quotas were imposed on the indigenous populations, forcing them deeper and deeper into the equatorial forest. The consequences of this forced labor are incalculable: abandonment of villages, cessation of food production, destabilization of families and communities. However, violence did not cease after the annexation of the Congo as a Belgian colony in 1908. Massacres continued in the 1910s, 1930s and 1940s (Goddeeris *et al.*, 2020).

^[6] In December 2024, to take one example, the Brussels Court of Appeal qualified the abduction of the Métis children as a “crime against humanity”. This decision was a dramatic change of jurisprudence since the Court of First Instance had considered in 2021 that the facts were prescribed and did not constitute a crime against humanity.