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# *Special Issue*

## Belgian Parliamentary Negotiations on the Colonial Past

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*This article investigates the negotiation process initiated by the establishment of a Special Commission within the Belgian Parliament in 2020, tasked with addressing the country's colonial past. Based on two and a half years of fieldwork conducted within the Commission, the article traces how extensive negotiations, hearings, and meetings—both national and international—led to the signature of an ambitious pre-agreement, before the process ultimately collapsed in a complete and wholly unexpected failure. The analysis underscores how Belgium's deeply rooted societal cleavages—left/right, Francophone/Dutch-speaking, Catholic/secular, monarchist/republican—shaped the process into a distributive and highly emotional conflict.*

**Keywords:** negotiation, transitional justice, colonialism, memory, Belgium, restoration

*Living memory is never stagnant. It flows at a variable rate—sometimes a calm stream, sometimes a mountain waterfall that no one can stop. It passes from one generation to the next. And when blood has flowed, it floods.*

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[10.1162/NGTN.a.34](https://doi.org/10.1162/NGTN.a.34)

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*Negotiation Journal* Volume 41 2025 472

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## Introduction

This article analyzes the negotiation process triggered by the creation of a Special Commission within the Belgian Parliament in 2020 to address the country's colonial past. The Commission was composed of 19 Belgian MPs, representing all elected political parties from the far right to the far left. Some MPs were strong supporters of the Commission's work, while others were rather reluctant. After two and a half years of readings, hearings, and negotiations at all levels, the members of the Special Commission ultimately failed to reach a political agreement on specific recommendations for the Belgian government.

At first glance, this case could be understood as merely illustrating the absence of real negotiation, given that the initial divisions between the political parties at the origin of the initiative and those who were questioning its appropriateness remained unchanged until the end. Indeed, the prominence of intergenerational justice claims and the polarizing effects of reparations demands are not surprising (De Greiff 2006; Moffett 2023). But this process cannot be dismissed as a facade. Months of negotiation within the Belgian Parliament and government led to the signing of an ambitious pre-agreement that includes numerous detailed recommendations for addressing various issues. These issues encompassed international cooperation between Belgium and its former colonies, the fight against racism, the memorialization of the colonial past, as well as matters of restitution, reparation, and official apologies. Yet, the process collapsed in a crisis before the deadline (Zartman 2019). It mirrored the multiple cleavages within Belgian identity, including left vs. right, Francophone vs. Dutch-speaking, Catholic vs. secular, and monarchist vs. republican. The complete nature of this political failure was unprecedented. Since the creation of the Belgian Parliament in 1831, all previous Special Commissions had at least resulted in some kind of agreement—even if weak. This was the first complete breakdown.

The Commission's mandate was to examine Belgium's colonial past in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi and its long-term consequences. The goal was to provide recommendations for addressing the realities of this history and its ongoing effects. This initiative raised a crucial question: How can we confront our national past when it continues to create divisions? The stakes included the potential acknowledgment of historical injustices (committed in Congo from 1885 to 1960, and in Burundi and Rwanda from 1919 to 1962), the need to address the discrimination inherited from the past, and the desire to move forward together (Rosoux 2023a).

The Belgian case is emblematic for three main reasons. First, Belgian colonization is often portrayed as a paradigmatic case of colonial

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brutalization. King Leopold II has progressively become *the* symbol of colonial violence. In 2020, his statues were systematically targeted by anti-racist activists after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The international Black Lives Matter movement directly influenced the creation of the Special Commission. Second, the Commission's mandate was exceptionally broad. For the first time, the goal was to focus on the entire colonial era rather than a specific event, such as the assassination of the first Congolese Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba. Furthermore, the mandate also emphasized the need to confront the discrimination faced today by Afro-descendants in Belgium. This maximalist approach attracted considerable attention from other former colonial powers, such as France, the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands. Third, the political failure of the process deserves close attention to understand how not to design a commission on colonial legacies. The absence of any single recommendation, out of 128 proposed recommendations, was totally unexpected. It is therefore crucial to understand the variables that led from divergences to pre-agreement, and from pre-agreement to collapse.

This article is based on two and a half years of fieldwork within the Commission. I was part of both expert groups appointed by Parliament. In July 2020, the first group—ten experts from academia and civil society—was appointed to draft an initial report (689 pages). A smaller group of three experts was then appointed to organize the hearings and write a final report (112 pages).<sup>1</sup> Over 150 actors—academics, civil society members, diplomats, artists, religious leaders, and transitional justice practitioners—participated in weekly hearings from December 2021 to November 2022. I also organized an official visit to Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda for the Commission's MPs in September 2022. The final report, based on the hearings and the field visit, was submitted to the MPs in November 2022 as a basis for the final—and fatal—round of negotiations.

My double position as an “expert” gave me direct access to all key actors, including the MPs; representatives of Afro-descendants' and former colonists' associations; political actors from Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda; and representatives of the Church and Belgian companies.<sup>2</sup> This allowed me to study the dynamics at different levels. Nonetheless, this fieldwork was the most difficult I have ever conducted since the divisions that fragment Belgian national identity have turned the process into a distributive and highly emotional conflict.

The existence of constant tensions among actors and the effects of my own positionality compelled me to critically examine my own beliefs, judgments, and practices throughout the entire process. This continuous

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exercise in reflexivity paradoxically led to two distinct postures. On the one hand, my position as a white Belgian scholar undeniably shaped the dynamics of negotiation among the experts. On the other hand, the sequence of meetings with Belgian Afro-descendant associations, former colonialists' associations, and Burundian, Congolese, and Rwandan scholars and practitioners often placed me in a role akin to that of a third-party observer—similar to a peacekeeper navigating the complexities of a post-conflict environment.

This article is structured in three sections. The first presents the specificities of the Belgian context. The second examines the internal dynamics of the Commission's negotiations, emphasizing their strategic, moral, and emotional dimensions. The third and final section raises broader questions of relevance beyond the Belgian case, particularly with respect to ripeness, legitimacy, and the critical role of timing in transitional justice processes.

### **Context: “Taming” Burning Memories**

Unlike other European colonization efforts, the creation of the Congo was “one man's personal adventure” (Stengers 2007: 45). Created in 1885, the *État Indépendant du Congo* (EIC – Congo Free State) was the personal property of King Leopold II. Only in 1908, mainly due to international pressure, did the Congo officially become a Belgian colony. As for the territory of Ruanda-Urundi, it was administered by Belgium from 1922 to 1962 without being a colony in the strict sense of the term. From 1916 to 1922, it was under military occupation and later became a Belgian-controlled Mandate under the League of Nations. After World War II, it became a United Nations trust territory.

#### ***A Model Colony***

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Belgian authorities glorified their colonial past. Belgium's administration of a territory 80 times its size was presented to both Belgians and the international community as a “model colony.” No reference was made to the widespread violations of humanitarian standards that characterized the entire colonial era (Goddeeris, Lauro, and Vanthemsche 2024). Yet, the Congo Free State was a “nervous state” dominated by fear (Hunt 2015). It is often depicted as a case of predatory colonialism, rooted in racism and institutionalized impunity. In contrast, the Belgian Congo (from 1908 onward) was long portrayed as a colonialism of development. However, measures designed to promote the development of the population were rare until the final years before independence. The shift between the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo was marked more by continuity than rupture. While the legal framework changed, most administrative personnel

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and practices remained intact. Although the use of forced labor was officially banned in 1908, it persisted. Men, women, and children were still subjected to forced recruitment and displacement. The colonial ideology continued to justify Belgium's presence by depicting Africans as "inferior" or as "children" in need of "education" (Gahama 1983; Ndaywel 2008; Byanafashe and Rutayisire 2011).

After Congo's independence in 1960, and that of Rwanda and Burundi in 1962, Belgian officials systematically downplayed or concealed the intense criticism directed at colonization. This strategy was often justified either as a diplomatic necessity for preserving post-colonial relations or through the rhetoric of "Africa for the Africans." For four decades, Belgium sought to avoid any implication in neocolonialism. However, a shift occurred in 1999 with Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt's government, which adopted a more self-critical stance toward the colonial past. In 2000, the Belgian Parliament established a commission to investigate the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), who was assassinated on January 17, 1961 (Omasombo Tshonda 2002; De Witte 2020). The Commission's findings prompted an official apology from the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis Michel.

This change in tone was short-lived. In 2004, Karel De Gucht, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, reignited controversy by emphasizing the negative impact of corruption, impunity, and violence in the DRC. Rather than acknowledging Belgium's historical responsibility, De Gucht called for an end to what he saw as misplaced guilt, instead highlighting Belgium's contributions to "mass literacy campaigns," "the setting up of an educational system," and "generalized health coverage" (these expressions were mentioned in speeches delivered in Tervuren on February 3, 2005, and Kinshasa on April 21, 2008). His attitude provoked intense controversies and accusations of paternalism.

In 2019, former Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel—son of Louis Michel—apologized for the abduction, segregation, and forced adoption of thousands of mixed-race children across the African Great Lakes region. One year later, the Black Lives Matter movement reverberated through Belgian politics. On June 7, 2020, over 10,000 people gathered in Brussels to protest against racial injustice despite the restrictions imposed due to Covid 19. On June 30, 2020, to mark the 60th anniversary of the DRC's independence, King Philippe wrote to the Congolese President expressing his "deepest regrets" for the violence and brutality committed under Belgian rule. He acknowledged the "suffering" and "humiliation" inflicted on the Congolese people and stressed the lasting impact of these "wounds of the past" on collective memory. Encouraging ongoing parliamentary debate on the issue, he emphasized

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the importance of fully confronting the past in order to achieve lasting reconciliation. Shortly after, the Belgian Parliament established the Special Commission to address the country's colonial legacy (Bentrovato and Van Nieuwenhuysse 2020).

### ***Procedure and Legitimacy***

The procedure initiated by Belgian MPs was ambitious in its objectives. Their intention to address both historical and ongoing forms of discrimination explains the inclusion of diasporic representatives among the first group of experts. This inclusive approach was quickly questioned in both national and international media. In Belgium, 60 historians and colonial experts voiced their concerns about the inclusion of so-called activists, whose aim, they argued, was not to produce an impartial report but to shift power dynamics and influence the Commission members (Balace et al. 2020a, 2020b). However, the Commission's president defended this approach as a necessary move away from purely technical expertise, emphasizing the need to involve not just scholars but also practitioners with diverse backgrounds from the start.

Despite the appointment of four civil society representatives, some diasporic groups not selected as experts questioned the relevance of academic knowledge in this context. As one young diasporic representative remarked: "We are the real experts! This is not an academic matter—it's our life" (Hearing of February 16, 2021). Beyond this powerful assertion rooted in lived experience, major controversy emerged from Kigali. Concerns were raised over the absence of Rwandan experts and the inclusion of an individual considered a genocide negationist (Ntirenganya 2020). In response, *Ibuka*—the association representing survivors of the genocide against the Tutsi—refused to collaborate with the experts' panel, and Rwandan officials declined participation in hearings or formal meetings in Kigali. These tensions underscored the challenge of balancing international and domestic expectations and sensitivities.

Questions of legitimacy extended beyond the experts' group to the public hearings themselves. A fair negotiation process typically requires equal participation from all relevant stakeholders, fostering inclusivity and boosting the credibility and implementability of the outcome (Bakiner 2016). However, some diasporic groups rejected this principle of equality. They argued that the priority should be to amplify voices historically silenced, not to re-legitimize those long dominant. Including associations of former colonists, they argued, would only reinforce outdated narratives (Letter sent to the Parliament by 33 Afro-descendant associations, July 8, 2020). Despite these objections, the Commission decided to invite some representatives of former colonists' associations to participate in the hearings.

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Legitimacy was also a point of contention among representatives of colonized communities. In addition to Afro-descendants in Belgium, officials from the DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda claimed the right to speak on behalf of the descendants of colonized populations. Their Belgian counterparts appeared to acknowledge this, as evidenced by discreet high-level negotiations on the restitution of archives and sacred or artistic objects. However, this legitimacy was challenged by the descendants of “Congoese dynastic monarchs,” who claimed ancestral ownership of the Congoese lands (Letter signed by Marilyn Yav, Lunda Empire Lunda, August 10, 2020). These monarchs, it was argued, were deceived into signing treaties they could not read and were excluded from the Berlin (1885) and Brussels (1908) conferences that redefined Congo’s status. The descendants asserted a triple layer of victimhood: the conquests by Henry Morton Stanley from 1876 to 1879, the annexation of the Congo Free State by Belgium, and the independence of 1960. They concluded that the traditional monarchs of Congo should be “the first, if not the only” ones entitled to justice through restitution and rehabilitation. The MPs met one of their representatives in Kinshasa (September 4, 2022). Nevertheless, as we will see, the main negotiation process did not take place between Belgian officials and representatives from the Congoese, Rwandan, or Burundian governments, nor even between members of the Commission, but rather between Belgian political parties.

The Commission’s ambitions contrasted with its limited time and resources. Initially set up for four months, its mandate was extended twice, ultimately lasting two and a half years. After the release of the initial experts’ report, public hearings were held every Monday in Parliament and streamed online. All testimonies and analyses shared by witnesses, academics, artists, diplomats, or militants were recorded and transcribed. During their visit to Kinshasa, Bujumbura, and Kigali in September 2022, MPs met with government officials, scholars, activists, and students, whose views and recommendations were carefully documented and reported.

A list of 128 recommendations presented by the president of the Commission was officially published with the final experts’ report in November 2022. These recommendations covered all the issues analyzed throughout the process, from research, archives, and international cooperation between Belgium and its former colonies, to memorialization, restitution, reparation, official apologies, and the fight against racism. Specific attention was paid to the school textbooks, the commemoration of former Congoese combatants during World War I and World War II, the rehabilitation of anti-colonial resistance, and the restoration of the dignity of the victims of the human zoos, among others.<sup>3</sup>

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## **Process: Strategic, Moral, and Emotional Dimensions**

The process can be understood from at least three distinct yet intertwined perspectives. First, it can be viewed as a strategic, rational exercise shaped by the interests of various political actors. Second, it involved a moral dimension, driven by ethical imperatives and the call for justice. Third, beyond the rational and ethical dimensions, the process was also profoundly influenced by the emotional legacy of historical trauma and its continued impact on the descendants of victims.

### ***A Strategic Game***

Over the course of more than two years, the negotiations I observed revealed a structural dynamic shaped by the interests and positions of political parties. Those advocating for or resisting reparations for past and ongoing injustices tied to the colonial era disagreed not only on the extent of historical violence but also on the question of responsibility. Importantly, no Member of Parliament denied the systematic nature of human rights violations during colonial rule or contested the existence of massacres in the three former colonies. In this respect, the process was initially based on a relative consensus regarding historical facts.

Nevertheless, a fundamental divide persisted between left- and right-wing parties, particularly regarding whether the focus should remain on the future or also include an honest confrontation with the past. Some argued that “the past is the past,” asserting that the colonial era, while not devoid of wrongdoing, also brought advancements in health, education, and infrastructure. They viewed efforts to re-examine history as distracting from present-day national challenges. Others flatly rejected any attempt to balance the “negative” and “positive” aspects of colonialism, emphasizing that colonial violence continues to “haunt” contemporary society. For them, addressing these legacies through education and national debate—especially via school curricula—was essential.

These differing stances led to competing visions of reparation. For the president of the Commission, reparations were a vehicle for reconciliation—both within Belgium’s multicultural society and between Belgium and its former colonies. Other members, however, saw reparations as a Pandora’s box, a divisive issue that could polarize the country. The notion of reparation elicited even more diverse responses from Africa’s Great Lakes region. In the DRC, official representatives showed limited interest in symbolic gestures like statue removals. Instead, they prioritized securing Belgian diplomatic support to counter what they termed “Rwandan hostility.” In contrast, Rwandan officials rejected the entire process, citing their exclusion from its early stages as grounds for noncooperation. Meanwhile, Burundian authorities emphasized the necessity of reparations and revealed they were actively calculating the financial compensation they expected from Belgium.

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Back in Belgium, the idea of financial compensation sparked intense debate within Parliament. While consensus was possible on symbolic and educational initiatives—such as revising street names, developing academic research, or enhancing archival access—the issue of monetary reparations crystallized the contradictions. All parties claimed that it was “not about the money.” Yet, debates over potential compensation amounts and the question of who should bear the cost revealed the centrality of financial stakes.

Recognizing the divisiveness of financial reparations, some members of the Commission placed greater emphasis on symbolic measures like official apologies and memorial initiatives. However, early consultations in August 2020—gathering the views of 183 academics and civil society members—highlighted the need for a holistic approach: “Receiving a cheque without an apology would be indecent”; “An apology without any form of reparation lacks sincerity”; “Words alone are not enough—we need actions that ‘cost’ something to prove genuine change.” Given the political sensitivity of financial compensation, the president’s final list of 128 recommendations clarified that official apologies would not entail financial obligations (recommendation 69). This clarification enabled the ruling coalition to reach a pre-agreement in the fall of 2022 after intense closed-door negotiations. The draft accord addressed most issues raised by the first experts’ report. However, only three days later, one Commission member withdrew his support under pressure from his party leadership. The move, perceived as a betrayal by other signatories, significantly disrupted interparty relations. From that point onward, party positions hardened. Rivalries intensified not only between ideological blocs but also among left-wing parties vying for credibility as champions of diasporic communities. With elections looming, partisan calculations increasingly shaped the debate. Despite Belgium’s history of issuing official apologies, this measure became the most polarizing element. While some coalition members insisted on apologies as a nonnegotiable condition, others categorically opposed them, fearing they would open the door to financial claims. After six weeks of intense negotiation, no compromise emerged. The *Parti Socialiste* (PS) deemed apologies essential; the *Mouvement Réformateur* (MR) viewed them as unacceptable. Trapped in a deadlock, the coalition opted for no recommendation at all rather than a lowest-common-denominator solution—handing victory to intransigent voices on both sides.

This outcome, while disheartening, is not without precedent. It aligns with Jennifer Lind’s argument in *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics* (2008), which demonstrates that states rarely issue full, uncontested apologies for past atrocities—and when they do, the domestic backlash often outweighs any diplomatic gain. In the Belgian

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case, the Commission's early ambition was arguably both excessive and naïve, summarized by the phrase: "too much, too fast." This overreach triggered a "rubber band effect"—a concept used in psychology, physics, and economics to describe how overstretched systems eventually snap back to their original state. External pressure (including the global resonance of the Black Lives Matter movement) initially created political elasticity, but the Commission ultimately returned to Belgium's traditional posture: expressing "deepest regrets" while resisting reparations. This metaphor serves as a reminder that acknowledging historical responsibility requires a profound shift in national identity—a transformation that, even in the name of justice, inevitably meets resistance.

### ***A Moral Call for Justice***

Justice was both a central ambition and a deeply divisive issue throughout the Commission's work. Strikingly, all parties—from the far right to the far left—invoked the language of justice. Yet, they did so without any shared definition of what justice entails (Albin and Druckman 2014). The absence of a common normative framework led to a proliferation of conflicting claims and interpretations. On one side, representatives of former colonialist associations expressed feelings of stigmatization. They insisted they were being judged by contemporary moral standards that did not apply to the legal and cultural context of the colonial era (von Arnould 2021). They argued against retroactive accountability, highlighting that many acts under scrutiny had not been illegal at the time. These actors refused, in their own words, to participate in a "tricky game" that might culminate in what they saw as an "unfair and indecent" transfer of resources. Conversely, representatives of Afro-descendant organizations interpreted this reluctance as a continuation of colonial attitudes. For them, official apologies were essential but insufficient on their own. Without concrete and immediate measures to tackle ongoing racial discrimination, apologies would appear insincere—mere lip service to a history that continues to shape structural injustices today.

Despite these sharp divergences, the debate could not be reduced to a binary opposition between experiences of black and white people. The hearings themselves complicated such simplifications. One especially poignant case was that of the mixed-race children—the *métis* as they are called in French—who were literally kidnapped in the final years of Belgian rule in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. During the colonial period, interracial marriages were legally impossible. The existence of mixed-race children 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 point of view, these children were considered "children of sin," since the colonial and ecclesiastical systems

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refused to acknowledge the relationships that produced them. To solve this “problem,” the former metropole institutionalized their abduction from their maternal families. Hundreds of children were taken away and sent to religious institutions hundreds of miles away from their home. Some children were even brought over to Belgium.<sup>4</sup> In practice, their removal involved a wide range of actors: colonial agents, religious institutions, fathers who declined recognition, and extended families unwilling to accept a “shameful episode.”

Testimonies from these now-adult *métis*, delivered to the Commission in February 2022, had a profound emotional impact. Even members of far-right parties—initially hostile to the Commission’s mandate—were moved. These accounts revealed how children had grown up believing they had been abandoned, only to later discover boxes of letters their mothers had written, kept hidden for decades by religious institutions. For some, this discovery triggered urgent pilgrimages to Kinshasa, Kigali, or Bujumbura—journeys that sometimes ended in joyful reunion, but often came too late. Rather than deepening political divides, these testimonies helped forge a rare consensus across party lines. There was broad agreement among MPs on the need to “restore some kind of justice” (Shklar 1990) to this group of direct victims. The pre-agreement signed in 2022 attempted, albeit belatedly, to offer a measure of reparation to the *métis*.

In parallel, five mixed-race women born in the Belgian Congo between 1948 and 1952 initiated legal proceedings in 2021. After being forcibly removed from their mothers and placed in religious boarding schools, they lived in silence for over 70 years. In December 2021, the Brussels Civil Court rejected their claims for damages, citing statute limitations and the principle of intertemporality—the idea that acts must be judged by the legal norms that prevailed at the time. Crimes against humanity, the court argued, did not exist in Belgian law during the colonial period. This decision, however, was overturned in December 2024 by the Brussels Court of Appeal. The new ruling argued that the abduction of the *métis* children constituted a crime against humanity under international legal principles recognized by the Nuremberg Tribunal. The Belgian state, along with the Catholic Church, was found complicit in the commission of this crime. This jurisprudential shift underlines a key insight: interpretations of past wrongs are not fixed once and for all—they evolve. And with them, so too does the scope of moral and legal accountability. This fluidity helps explain why negotiations about historical violence are so fraught.

The Belgian Parliamentary Commission dealt with at least three groups of victims: primary victims who directly experienced colonial abuses and are still alive; secondary victims who are closely connected to the primary victims (such as family members); and tertiary victims,

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composed of diasporic communities still facing structural discrimination in Belgium and beyond. Negotiations that aimed to honor and rehabilitate direct victims—such as African soldiers who fought for Belgium during the World Wars—tended to be consensual and integrative. However, discussions around collective reparations—especially those involving financial compensation—were significantly more contentious. These debates were not only political or strategic; they were also emotionally charged.

### ***Powerful Emotions***

The significance of emotions such as guilt, humiliation, anger, hatred, and sorrow explains, to a large extent, why negotiating justice in a post-colonial context cannot be reduced to conventional bargaining (Rosoux 2023a). The intensity of these emotions gradually shaped all stages of the process—from the internal dynamics of the expert group to the public and international arenas. Various scenes merit closer examination.

First, the interactions among the ten experts who drafted the initial report can be described as a mutual “taming process.” Beyond the controversies surrounding the legitimacy of certain experts, the diversity of profiles selected by the Commission profoundly impacted our collective work. The plurality of backgrounds and generations was undeniably a source of richness and reflexivity. Yet, it required flexibility from all participants to establish a shared language, agree on methodological principles and ethical standards, and organize ourselves into subgroups (history, reconciliation, links with the diaspora). After extensive discussions regarding the degree of integration desired in the final report, we decided that each expert would contribute an individual section. Rather than negotiating every detail collectively, we limited interdependence in order to preserve intellectual autonomy. This did not prevent collaboration or even co-signing certain parts, but it helped reduce tensions and accommodate the group’s internal contradictions.

One anecdote is particularly telling in this regard. While writing my section, I quoted Victor Hugo’s words: “The dead are invisible, but they are not absent” (Hugo 1985). Minutes after sharing my text, I received a message from one expert warning me that Hugo was a racist and that I should not reference him. Initially, I was surprised. The quotation seemed apt for expressing the enduring effects of political violence and had originally been spoken in 1865 at the grave of Hugo’s son’s young fiancée—seemingly unrelated to colonialism. Yet, after reading Hugo’s *Discours sur l’Afrique* (1879), which reflects the racism underpinning colonial expansion, I understood the discomfort. I had simply been unaware of this dimension of Hugo’s legacy. Other remarks made within the group—such as comments describing white participants as “proud descendants of colonists”—did not seem especially constructive. However, I took them as eye-opening, and therefore significant.

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The second and most central scene of negotiation was the Parliament itself. As previously noted, certain hearings—particularly those involving testimonies from the *métis*—were deeply emotional. While some MPs repeatedly insisted they felt no personal guilt for crimes committed by others, they often shifted blame to “French-speaking elites,” “the companies,” “the King,” or “the Church,” depending on their party line. Nonetheless, all were visibly affected by the stories of individuals who had been told their mothers could not keep them, and that they were fortunate to be in Belgium rather than “in the bush.” In this respect, the process had a genuine transformative impact. The final breakdown does not negate the profound evolution observed in MPs’ understanding of colonization’s tangible effects.

A similar emotional intensity marked encounters between MPs and *métis* representatives who remained in the Great Lakes region. While their experiences partially mirrored those of the children sent to Belgium, a critical distinction emerged after the independence of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. One moment remains etched in memory. At the Belgian embassy in Kinshasa, an older man slowly and deliberately recounted: “Since I was abducted, no one has ever protected me. Never. You abandoned us. In 1960, when the violence began, the nuns left. I remained in the orphanage with many younger children. We were alone. No food. No protection. The Congolese found us and treated us brutally. Most of those I consider my brothers and sisters were raped. Since then, people have called us ‘bats.’ Unlike those who were sent to Belgium, we received no education. That’s why I speak slowly—I’m trying not to make any mistakes in French. I’m old now, but I’ve done my best my entire life. Still, I hear the voices saying I was just trash left on the sidewalk.” He paused before concluding: “Belgian blood flows through me. I am your son” (Kinshasa, September 4, 2022).

Beyond empathy and sadness, one of the most powerful emotions that surfaced throughout the process was anger. The emergence of a second generation of Afro-descendants in Belgium gave renewed energy to local activist groups, active since the late 1980s. Notably, the perceptions of colonialism have evolved among Congolese immigrants: older generations (born during the colonial period) often recall more positive aspects; younger generations are more critical, focusing on Belgian domination. The intermediate generation tends to express ambivalence (Figueiredo, Oldenhove, and Licata 2018). This generational shift was evident in their political claims.

A central demand from Afro-descendant representatives was a seat at the negotiating table. In 1885, the Berlin Conference was an exclusive gathering of white leaders. In 1960, during the Belgo-Congolese Round Table, Congolese voices were sidelined. This time, they insisted on full

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participation. As one Afro-descendant put it: “It is because my father was not respected at the Round Table of 1960 that I am fighting now” (Brussels, October 10, 2020). This sentiment explains why certain anti-racist groups rejected the principle of “equality” as formal symmetry. In their view, such a framework failed to account for the historical asymmetry of power (Hearing of September 25, 2020). In response, former colonists’ associations also invoked their right to a place at the table. While acknowledging the unequal nature of colonial rule, they refused to be excluded from the process. Their interventions often revealed a fear of a process that would protect one group’s interests at the expense of another’s. This deadlock reflects a dual process of stigmatization. Since the murder of George Floyd, the long-standing stigmatization of colonized communities (Fanon 2005) has provoked a counter-stigmatization of those who contributed to—or simply benefited from—the colonial legacy. The Belgian case shows how the dynamics of stigma shift over time, persist across generations, and profoundly shape negotiation processes at national and international levels.

This divide was mirrored in the political arena. Left-wing parties advocated for official apologies and equitable resource redistribution. Most right-wing parties categorically rejected the notion of retrospective responsibility. The process soon reached a stalemate, marked by the systematic disqualification of opposing viewpoints. Trust eroded further after the non-respect of the pre-agreement. On the final day of the Commission, the fracture was stark. MPs from MR and Open VLD reiterated that they could accept expressions of “regret” for colonial violence but not “official apologies” that might open the door to financial compensation (Maggie De Block (VLD member), December 19, 2022). They then stood and left the room. The remaining MPs expressed massive disappointment and bitterness, describing the failure as yet another chapter in the “system of domination and exploitation” (December 19, 2022).

Within hours, the national press issued scathing reviews: “flop” and “consternation” (*Courrier International*, December 20, 2022); “the commission ends in failure” (Belga 2022a, 2022b); “no reparations, no apologies, no consensus on a final declaration—in short, nothing” (De Clercq 2024); “we could have been proud of ourselves” (Braeckman 2024); “De Congo Commission: in vain” (Brickman 2022); “a pure shame” (*De Morgen*, December 19, 2022).

## **Lessons Learned: How Not to Set Up a Parliamentary Commission?**

The Commission was often described as “inappropriate,” “over- or under-ambitious,” “led by activists” or, conversely, “indifferent” to them, “rushed and acting in haste,” or, on the other hand, “taking far too long”

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compared to other parliamentary commissions—just a few of the criticisms voiced in Parliament and the media. The contradictory nature of these critiques underscores how delicate and demanding the mandate given to the Commission truly was. While this in-depth case study does not offer general lessons for theory and practice, it does raise fundamental questions that may be relevant to other contexts. These questions can be summarized in three words: ripeness, legitimacy, and timing.

One of the most essential conditions for successful negotiation is ripeness (Zartman and Berman 1982). When the Commission was established, many MPs across the political spectrum believed there was a “momentum” to confront the colonial past. The pressure from grassroots organizations was such that no political party dared to oppose the parliamentary initiative. Yet, over time, a growing number of MPs warned of opening a Pandora’s box. For them and their constituencies, the greatest risk was not the Commission’s potential failure but the possibility of having to provide financial compensation for colonial-era violence.

The polarization of the debate reflected deeper societal fractures. The hearings revealed not only divergent but also fundamentally contradictory narratives. On one side, the prevailing message was the need to reject any reference to the so-called positive aspects of colonization, since such claims could never justify the violence endured over decades. On the other side, there was an insistence on “nuance” and the danger of reducing colonialism to a litany of crimes. At the end of the process, the president of the Commission acknowledged the irreconcilability of these positions and concluded the debates by invoking the lack of ripeness: “Today, people were not ready. It will be up to others to decide” (Belga 2022b). In such circumstances, the concepts of “mutually hurting stalemate,” “way out,” or “mutually enticing opportunities” did not apply (Zartman 2019; Vuković 2022). None of the actors felt sufficiently cornered by the situation to change their stance. On both sides, zero recommendations were seen as less painful than even a single concession.

The second key lesson relates to the legitimacy of those involved in the intranational negotiations. The absence of any final recommendations invites critical reflection on the political nature of the process (Sarkin and Bandari 2020). Was a Parliamentary Commission the appropriate framework? Two main arguments initially justified this choice: (1) the legitimacy of the Commission’s members, as all were elected by Belgian citizens; (2) the official parliamentary framework was a signal of political will. However, the outsized influence of party presidents revealed the limits of this approach. It is particularly striking to contrast the pragmatism of the MPs—who signed a pre-agreement in the fall of 2022—with the intransigence of party leaders who ultimately rejected the compromise. That pre-agreement was built on a delicate

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balance: an official apology was recommended (a concession from right-wing parties), but with the explicit clarification that it would not lead to financial compensation (a concession from left-wing parties). Yet three days after this agreement, the president of one political party refused to endorse his MP's decision. For the other parties, the sense of momentum evaporated after this reversal. The formula of "apologies without compensation"—reiterated almost verbatim in final recommendation 69—could not be salvaged due to the radicalization of all positions. Rather than engaging meaningfully with the 128 draft recommendations prepared by the Commission president, most MPs ultimately deferred to the directives of their party leaders.

How can we explain the contrast between the flexibility that produced a compromise and the rigidity that precipitated the Commission's failure? Beyond individual differences, the answer lies in the transformational nature of the procedure. The gap between MPs—who participated in two years of hearings and debates—and party presidents—none of whom attended a single session—is stark. Unlike the MPs, the party leaders were not affected by the Commission's performative process. Their positions remained unchanged, oriented exclusively toward electoral calculations. The reports, testimonies, and emotional exchanges did not move them. For them, short-term political interest outweighed long-term reconciliation.

The third and final lesson concerns timing. The analyses, hearings, and debates that unfolded over more than two years mark only the beginning of a long journey. These are part of transformations that must be measured not in months or even years, but in decades. Emphasizing the *longue durée* does not negate urgency—but it underscores the magnitude of what remains to be done. Transforming beliefs, representations, and emotions takes time. Decolonization is a long-term project that cannot be carried out in haste.

In this light, the absence of final recommendations should not be read as a simple failure (Cole et al. 2022). Some proposals, though not adopted by the Commission, were taken up at other levels of governance. Municipal governments began implementing changes to public spaces and supported the opening of a Congolese cultural center in Brussels. The federal government commemorated, for the first time, the Congolese soldiers who fought for Belgium in World War I (November 2023), and again, in May 2024, those who died in both world wars. Former Secretary of State for Equal Opportunities, Marie-Colline Leroy, explained that this gesture aimed to "show Belgium's gratitude for the courage and sacrifice of the Congolese soldiers mobilized for the two world wars," and was also "a sign of recognition for the work of the Special Commission on Belgium's colonial past" (*Agence Belga*, November 11, 2024).

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Beyond these symbolic acts, the Commission helped catalyze real progress in other areas. This is illustrated by the law passed on June 30, 2022, which established legal procedures for the restitution of certain cultural objects acquired during the colonial period. But perhaps most importantly, many voices were heard for the first time in an official context. All testimonies were transcribed. The dignity of the witnesses was preserved on film. The Burundian, Congolese, and Rwandan representatives, scholars, artists, civil society members, and students who met the parliamentary delegation in Bujumbura, Kinshasa, and Kigali will not be forgotten. Their emotions, criticisms, and aspirations were systematically recorded and relayed to Parliament. The failure of the negotiation process does not erase their voices. Nor does it erase their legitimate hope.

### Notes

1. The initial and final reports can be found on the Belgian Parliament's website. *Chambre des Représentants de Belgique*, doc 55 1462/002, 26 October 2021 - <https://www.lachambre.be/doc/FLWB/pdf/55/1462/55K1462002.pdf>; and *Chambre des Représentants de Belgique*, doc 55 1462/006, 7 March 2024 - <https://www.lachambre.be/doc/FLWB/pdf/55/1462/55K1462006.pdf>.
2. I refer to the term "expert" since it was the notion mentioned in the mandate of the Special Commission and used by the MPs throughout the process (on this notion, see Pettai 2018).
3. These zoos are among the most dramatic expressions of dehumanization of African peoples. The first "Negro village" in Belgium appeared in Antwerp in 1885 with 12 Africans. In 1897, during the Tervuren colonial exhibition, 267 Congolese were put on display; seven died from illness (Blanchard, Couttenier, and Etambala 2021).
4. At this stage, the exact number of children who ended up in boarding schools in the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo remains unknown. Estimates regarding the number of mixed-race children born in Congo over time vary widely, in part because not all births were officially registered. Moreover, contrary to contemporary European assumptions, it was not possible to identify a mixed-race child solely by skin color (see Lambilotte 1991; Jeurissen 2003; Ceuppens 2006).

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