



The *Force Publique* and frontier warfare in the late 19th Century Congo Free State

Mario Draper
University of Kent

ABSTRACT

During the late 19th Century, the *Force Publique* of the Congo Free State (1878-1908) found itself engaged in almost continuous fighting. Its campaigns against indigenous peoples, mutineers, interloping African Empires, and wars of expansion against the Mahdists, constitute some of the most diverse examples of frontier warfare of the period. They nevertheless remain largely unknown compared to the colonial campaigns of Britain and France, despite offering similar lessons. This article will explore the means through which the *Force Publique* learnt from experience and developed a colonial military tradition independently – though with many degrees of similarity – from its colonial neighbours. In doing so, it will reflect on the degree to which there were inherent overlaps in European approaches to late 19th Century frontier warfare.

KEYWORDS

Congo Free State, *Force Publique*, Frontier conflict

CITATION

Draper, M. (2023). The *Force Publique* and frontier warfare in the late 19th Century Congo Free State. *Historical Encounters*, 10(2), 95-105. <https://doi.org/10.52289/hej10.209>

COPYRIGHT

© Copyright retained by Author
Published 21 December 2023
Distributed under a [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License

Background and context

Among the myriad colonial campaigns examined and distilled by historians, those conducted by the *Force Publique* of the Congo Free State (CFS) in the late 19th Century have tended to be overlooked.¹ Survey studies, such as Thomas Pakenham's *Scramble for Africa* (1992) and Bruce Vandervort's (1998) *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa*, devote a few lines to the major encounters of the period, but generally skirt around the military implications in favour of the diplomatic. This is hardly surprising given the nature of these undertakings. What is perhaps more surprising is that, except for a very limited number of specialised studies on the Congo-Arab War (1892-1894), there is next to no attempt to situate the *Force Publique's* experience of frontier warfare within the wider sphere of colonial military art as developed in a British and French context.² Yet, the varied nature of its multifarious campaigns against opponents ranging from indigenous tribes to interloping African empires, and from wars of conquest to counter-insurgency operations, means there is ample opportunity for historians to draw useful comparisons.

Students of British and French colonial campaigns will be familiar with the strategic, operational, and tactical principles championed by the likes of Callwell and Lyautey – to name but two.³ Their writings represented the supposed culmination of colonial military traditions that were decades, if not centuries, in the making. This gave aspiring officers in Britain and France a blueprint to follow, regardless of the many variables encountered on imperial service. The importance of offensive action, morale, flexibility, and preparation were thus ingrained. This provided a degree of familiarity with the rhythms of colonial warfare that facilitated a ready acclimatisation and the further propagation of approaches such as the 'tache d'huile' (oil stain); 'hearts and minds'; and 'butcher and bolt' (Beckett, 2001; Rid, 2010; French, 2011; Porch, 2013). Not all colonial powers enjoyed such ready-made traditions, a fact easily overlooked, both at the time and in subsequent scholarship. This article offers an insight into how counter-insurgency methods developed and were appropriated by newcomers to the field, demonstrating how professional/technical knowledge was (and can) be transferred across borders whilst equally being adapted to suit local conditions.

Establishment of the *Force Publique*

The *Force Publique* had only just been created by the time Callwell published his first treatise on colonial warfare in RUSI in 1887. It was established in the wake of the Berlin Conference of 1884/85, which recognised the personal rule of King Leopold II of Belgium over the CFS on the basis that it remained a free trade zone. The recruitment of an army capable of securing the borders of these 1 million square miles of territory was, therefore, a priority (Gondola, 2002). In time, the *Force Publique* grew from a humble 200 men in 1886 to 3,186 in 1891, and 19,026 in 1898, reflecting its increasing centrality in the pacification, exploitation, ejection, and expansion projects that made King Leopold II one of Europe's wealthiest men (Gann & Duignan, 1979).

Initially, the *Force Publique* relied on mercenaries from beyond its borders to fill its ranks. These so-called 'coastal volunteers' (mainly Haoussas, Liberians, and Zanzibaris) were soon joined by indigenous recruits until annual levies virtually obviated the need for foreigners altogether (Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique, 1952). Throughout, preference for perceptibly loyal, reverent, and martial races – not dissimilar to British and French colonial recruitment practices – emerged (Military Report on the Congo Free State, 1904).⁴ Haoussas were supposedly ferocious in battle, while Bangalas were more deferential (*Le Soir*, 5 August 1955). The Batetela were particularly favoured until three mutinies in 1895, 1897, and 1901 compelled the *Force Publique* to focus its recruitment efforts beyond the Lualaba-Kasai region (Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique, 1952). Recruits were engaged for seven years and trained along European lines. Armed with the latest Albin precision rifles as well as Nordenfeldt and Krupp artillery pieces, they constituted a powerful military presence in the region.

Nevertheless, the *Force Publique* still found it expedient to raise local auxiliaries to support their military operations. Indigenous chiefs, keen to benefit from co-operation with the CFS (even if just temporarily) often provided thousands of men skilled in reconnaissance, pursuit, and local fighting methods. The Zappo-Zap and Ngongo Luteta's former 'Arab' Batetela are two good examples of such mutually-beneficial relations – that is until Ngongo's ill-advised summary execution for alleged atrocities in 1893 (Vincent, 2015; Draper, 2019).⁵ These allies not only helped to redress the inevitable numerical shortfall of the *Force Publique* but offered greater tactical and operational flexibility that complemented the rigidity of their own Europeanised native forces. Often more difficult to control, auxiliaries were given freer rein when on expedition, conducting razzias and engaging in all manner of "dirty work" that the *Force Publique* preferred to ignore (Marechal, 1992, p. 234). In many ways, they served the same purpose as British and French native contingents in Asia and other parts of Africa and reflected an organic extenuation of what might be termed the irregular colonial military tradition (Spiers, 1992; Porch, 2013).

These native forces were commanded by a handful of white officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs). The majority were, unsurprisingly, detached from the Belgian Army through the *Institut Géographique Militaire*, and benefitted from dual-pay for the duration of their time in Africa. Although imperial service was strictly 'ignored' in terms of metropolitan seniority, (as is further evident in the complexities of neutral Belgium loaning officers to a 'foreign' state), these men bore the unique distinction of having experienced active service, which did them no harm in the eyes of the king when it came to promotions (Draper, 2018). For those wishing to escape the trammels of European society and the boredom of sleepy garrison towns in Belgium, the allure of adventure and advancement in the Congo proved difficult to ignore (*Le Soir*, 5 August 1955). In total, the Belgian Army furnished 648 officers and 1,612 NCOs to the CFS between its founding in 1878 and its annexation by the Belgian government in 1908.

The presence of Scandinavians (126 officers and 25 NCOs between 1878 and 1914) and Italians (112 officers and 120 NCOs between 1885 and 1922), not to mention smaller numbers from elsewhere in Europe and the USA, completed its transnational composition (Gann & Duignan, 1979). Almost none of these officers and NCOs had any colonial military experience when they first set foot in Africa. What little they knew had been acquired through chance encounters and personal study. New arrivals were expected to learn on the job; often thrown in at the deep end on account of their dispersal in small numbers across the vast colony. When it is considered that there might only be, on average, around 350 white officers and NCOs in *Force Publique* service at any one time (for example, 122 in 1891 or 517 in 1913), it was not inconceivable that they might be split into groups of two or three and given a fair degree of autonomy and responsibility from an early stage in their colonial careers (Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique, 1952). Of course, more experienced senior officials were on hand to offer guidance. Officers and NCOs did reengage for multiple tours in the Congo with, for example, individuals such as Baron Francis Dhanis (the hero of the Congo-Arab War come 1894 and the villain of the failed Nile expedition of 1897) being described as "an old African [...] speaking all the languages of the country like they were his own" (*Le Soir*, 5 August 1955). Such local knowledge was an essential tenet in the strategic direction of the *Force Publique* as well as the administrative and commercial extension of the state apparatus it conveyed. After all, the environment in which it operated possessed innumerable challenges in terms of geography, climate, communications, and indigenous relations. Mastery of these elements could often be the difference between success or failure in military operations.

Challenges encountered and deaths beyond the battlefield

West Africa was long considered the white man's grave and proved to be a constant drain on human resources. The CFS was no different. Extremes in climate, challenging living conditions, and disease-carrying insects resulted in an annual mortality rate among officials of roughly 15% in 1890 (Gann & Duignan, 1979). In purely military terms, the mortality rate was much higher. Of the 2,260 Belgian officers and NCOs who served the CFS before 1908, 662 (or 29%) perished

whilst on imperial service (Vanderstraeten, 1985, p. 14). While deaths in battle contributed to this elevated figure, deprivation in terms of food and medicine during long and arduous expeditions often accounted for a much greater proportion of fatalities. Indeed, throughout the 1891/92 Vankerhoven expedition in the upper-Uele region, combat accounted for just one of the 18 European deaths. Of the remainder, two were killed in accidents and 15 died of sickness. This pattern repeated itself until the Mahdist campaigns around the turn of the century where, for the first time, deaths in battle outstripped all other causes (Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique, 1952).

The key to limiting wastage was preparation; the absence of which could prove disastrous. Many an expedition came to a calamitous end due to poor planning, which usually manifested itself in an absence of adequate provisions. The most famous example befell the ill-fated Nile expedition of Baron Dhanis, whose 3,000-strong column mutinied in 1897 when on the verge of starvation after more than 100 days of exhausting marches through impenetrable and largely unknown rainforest (Janssens, 1979). On other occasions, the *Force Publique* was simply forced into action before adequate preparations could be made. Captain Michaux's initial counter-insurgency operations against the 1895 Lualabourg mutineers were hampered by the meagre resources of the surrounding country. Not only had it been devastated by the recent Luba civil war (present day south-central Democratic Republic of Congo) and persistent Angolan slave runs, but the mutineers themselves effectively implemented a scorched earth policy as they traded space for time (De Boeck, 1987).

Topography, therefore, could prove equally as challenging as the climate. Situated, as the CFS was, in the heart of Africa and extending from the mouth of the Congo River in the west to Lake Tanganyika in the east, and from British and Portuguese possessions of Northern Rhodesia (present day Zambia) and Angola in the south to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (present day South Sudan and Sudan) and French Equatorial Africa (including present day Chad, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, and Republic of Gabon) in the north, the lay of the land could vary enormously. From savannah to dense rainforest, bush country to swamps and mountains, this was a land of juxtapositions. Whereas some areas might provide an abundance of food that could sustain military operations with relative ease, others were completely devoid of it. Good communications, bases of operations, and friendly relations with the indigenous peoples were essential to overcoming these natural obstacles.

Whereas the Congo basin possessed some 10,000 miles of navigable waterways, overland communications were sorely lacking, particularly on the relatively unexplored peripheries of the colony. The importance, therefore, of controlling key intersections and river crossings became self-evident and was reflected in the number of European settlements at these points. Trading, military, and missionary stations could be found along most of the region's key arteries linking the state capital of Boma to Stanley Falls (Gondola, 2002). Dirt tracks and forest paths transacted the region and connected some local communities but roads, in a European sense, were virtually unknown. Railway construction, too, was limited, not least on account of its exorbitant cost. In the west of the colony, it took the best part of nine years to lay the first 300 kilometres of track linking Matadi to Leopoldville which served to circumvent the impassable rapids at Stanley Pool (TNA WO/33/316, Military Report on the Congo Free State, 1904). The movement of men, goods, and information took time and became a defining characteristic of military operations in the region.

Concentrating forces against an often-ephemeral foe, therefore, was no easy task. During the Congo-Arab War of 1892-1894, Dhanis, Chaltin, and Michaux worked hard to coordinate efforts against multiple threats emanating from the various Arab chiefs situated throughout the Maniema region. Although forced to operate independently on occasion to secure the initiative through offensive action, the ultimate aim was to consolidate disparate *Force Publique* detachments for more decisive action (Draper, 2019). Internal disputes between the Arab chiefs often prevented them from concentrating their forces fully, offering an unparalleled opportunity for the *Force Publique* to defeat them in detail and bring the war to a successful conclusion within three years (Marechal, 1992).

Of course, the concentration of manpower was only half the problem. Equally as important was access to stores and ammunition. Consequently, it is no surprise that military stations were targeted by the enemies of the CFS, particularly the Batetela rebels who possessed *Force Publique*-issued Albini rifles. Commandant Michaux expressed concern that the Lualuaborug mutineers had gained access to at least 25,000 cartridges from the outset of the revolt, which all but prevented him from launching an immediate counter-offensive (Michaux to Gillain, 6 July 1895, in Verbeke, 1958). It was, as he put it: “a whole new Arab war once again and this time even more serious than the first as they are now armed and ready” (Michaux to Gillain, 6 July 1895, quoted in Verbeke, 1958, pp. 68-69). Likewise, the sheer size of Dhanis’ expedition to the Nile in 1897 afforded the mutineers access to 3,000 rifles and over 300,000 cartridges (Deuxième Section de l’État-Major de la Force Publique, 1952). This not only enabled them to keep State forces at bay for years but equally to exacerbate the violence of internecine wars through employment as guns-for-hire. In the end, denial of materiel resources – in the absence of any other strategic target of value – proved as effective in defeating the disparate groups of Batetela mutineers as did military force. Still, it took more than 25 engagements and cost the lives of 20 Europeans and thousands of Africans before the final remnants of the Ndirfi mutiny surrendered to Captain Anderson near Lake Tanganyika in 1901 (Janssens, 1979).

Firepower and the Development of a Colonial Doctrine

Firearms and their use were a key component of frontier warfare in the CFS. The introduction of firearms into sub-Saharan Africa dated back to the 17th Century through contact with European traders. Over time, the monopolisation of violence through ready access to increasingly potent weapons, as well as a rudimentary domestic industry that manufactured or at least modified existing pieces, contributed to a veritable military revolution between competing militaristic societies (Reid, 2012). As such, the introduction of direct European influence at the point of a gun simply accelerated processes already well underway in the region and contributed to an escalation of gunpowder politics – i.e. the use of armed force to settle local issues (Macola, 2016). When coming to blows with enemies, therefore – be they indigenous rebels, *Force Publique* mutineers, Zanzibari Arabs, or the Mahdists – firearms were a common feature. Indeed, it is recognised that by the late 19th Century, the use of firearms had been incorporated into tactics across the board.

A training manual from 1904 entitled *Les marches et le combat* recorded several precedents faced by the *Force Publique*, which are worth exploring in detail. One of these concerned Chaltin’s pacification operations in the Uele region against the Azande chiefs Bili and Ndoruma in the spring of 1896. On 5 April, his 500-strong column, supported by Avungura spearmen, engaged an enemy force estimated to be several thousand strong:

Ndoruma’s troops were divided in a large number of companies. Each company comprised five or six ranks of spearmen and archers, preceded by a rank of marksmen. The men armed with guns fired two or three rounds, before throwing themselves to the ground. Three ranks of spearmen launched themselves at us; if they were repulsed or killed, the marksmen were again called into action before more spearmen hurled themselves forward once more; in the event of defeat, the marksmen were the first to flee the field in order to take up positions in the rear to cover the retreat of the remaining spearmen. (*Les marches et le combat*, 1904, quoted in Deuxième Section de l’État-Major de la Force Publique, 1952, pp. 317-318)

While demonstrating a great degree of sophistication through the integration of firearms with other weapons, the outcome proved catastrophic: 500-600 dead against six killed and 21 wounded for the *Force Publique* (*Les marches et le combat*, 1904, in Deuxième Section de l’État-Major de la Force Publique, 1952, pp. 317-318). The concentrated fire and the rigid discipline of a European square formation wreaked havoc on the serried ranks of the Azande who, in the opinion

of Guy De Boeck (1987) suffered not from primitive weapons or tactics but, like many other African forces, simply a failure to discern the intentions and tactics of their opponents before it was too late (p. 29).

Les marches et le combat equally referenced other indigenous groups who made heavy use of firearm power. The Enguetttra revolt in the northeast of the colony around the turn of the century resulted in numerous engagements in which the *Force Publique* faced their own previously captured rifles. On 25 February 1900, Commandant Verstraeten's column made contact.

A veritable storm of projectiles rained down on us, and, immediately thereafter, the enemy who was in the process of enveloping us, fiercely rushed all sides of our square. We ordered rapid fire which the four platoons, who maintained perfect order, calmly executed. More than once, the assailants faltered, but resumed their attacks again and again, and only retired after being repulsed each time with great losses. (*Les marches et le combat*, 1904, quoted in *Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique*, 1952, pp. 484-485).

One final engagement a few days later was enough to elicit a surrender. The defensive power of the *Force Publique's* squares, once again, proved decisive.

Time and again it demonstrated that, with adequate training, supplies, and discipline, a numerically inferior *Force Publique* expedition would almost always emerge victorious. Be it in the use of square formations, concentrated firearm use, or the adoption of adequate precautions when marching and in camp, the basis of a CFS military art in frontier warfare was beginning to emerge. If anything, it built on the articles beginning to appear in *La Belgique Militaire* and the well-received publication *L'art militaire au Congo* by Colonel Albert Donny (1897).⁶ The approach to frontier warfare was a mixture of operational aggression to seize the initiative and, where possible, tactical defence to maximise the *Force Publique's* key strength of concentrated and disciplined firearm power. Another entry in *Les marches et le combat* stressed this point when referencing the campaigns against the irrepressible Budja people. Situated between the Mongala and Congo Rivers, they had proven to be a perennial thorn in the CFS' side since the early 1890s. A series of punitive expeditions produced unsatisfactory results, not least due to a series of well-executed ambushes, one of which even succeeded in breaking a *Force Publique* square (*Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique*, 1952, p. 480). More pacification efforts towards the turn of the century produced better results, such as Verdussen's second expedition in late 1900.

Around 9 o'clock, three shots were fired by the scouts, who hurried back, followed at the double by a large number of spearmen. The vanguard hastily took up its position in the first platoon. The natives, who had advanced *en masse* to within ten metres of the platoon, were repulsed having inflicted a few casualties. The white officers had great difficulty to restrain their men who wished to throw themselves in pursuit. We held them back, anticipating another native attack, which came a few minutes later; this one was again repulsed by the sustained and accurate fire of the first platoon. The battle had lasted seven minutes. (*Les marches et le combat*, 1904, in *Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique*, 1952, p. 482)

Convincing though this action was, tactical victories did not always produce operational or strategic results. The following year, the Mardulier expedition was launched against the same foe and succeeded in capturing 500 firearms and a great quantity of ammunition, yet the region was not completely pacified until 1905.

Heavier firepower, in the form of artillery and machine guns, could also produce rapid results and built upon European ideas of claiming the moral and psychological advantage in battle. Although few in number, 75mm Krupp, 47mm Nordenfeldt mountain guns, and Maxim machine guns appeared in the Congo in ever greater numbers from the 1880s onwards. Reports suggest that a good many of these pieces were used to strengthen the defences of key military stations rather than in offensive action. Nevertheless, there was an increasing need for heavier firepower, such as these, to be taken on an expedition (Report to the King on the political and military

measures taken to bring about the repression of the slave trade in the territories of the State, circa 1888; Janssens, 1979). This was to counter the earthworks and palisaded fortifications the *Force Publique* frequently encountered, known either as 'Bomas' or 'Zeribas' depending on the opponent. During the Congo-Arab War, artillery proved effective in dislodging Rumliza's forces from their defensive Bomas by setting them ablaze (Auguste Théophile Léon Rom, n.d). However, there were equally times when defensive works proved too difficult to breach resulting in protracted sieges or murderous storming operations (Letter from Captain Jacques to the Director of the Société Antiesclavagiste, 9 May 1894; Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique, 1952). Elsewhere, Lieutenant Wtterwulghé's defeat in a battle against the Mahdists in 1894 was as much a result of his Nordenfeldt jamming as it was the flight of his Ukwa auxiliaries (Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique, 1952).

At times, it proved more expedient to eschew firearm power in favour of the *arme blanche*. Edgard Cerckel, the last surviving Belgian witness to the Congo-Arab War, recounted in a 1952 newspaper how Dhanis often favoured charging the Arabs with fixed bayonets rather than engaging with them with firearms. Not only did this help conserve precious ammunition but, if circumstances allowed, a rush with cold steel could result in a more decisive victory given the enemy's propensity to melt away before a proper battle could take place (*Le Soir*, October 1952). For Émile Lémery this was the very crux of frontier warfare as he experienced it. In a letter to his mother in December 1893, he wrote the self-glorifying words: "Here, it is not a question of tactical operations [...] It is the *élan* which the white man imparts to his men, by launching himself forward, that inspires them to a furious attack" (Marechal, 1992, p. 240). He reiterated the sentiment in 1955 recollecting how "Nothing can stop the force of the *élan*; either everyone dies or ends up victorious. It is this savage and spontaneous attack, which, throughout this campaign, has been our strength" (*Le Soir*, 5 August 1955).

While almost certainly written with a degree of romantic bluster, it was precisely this hot-headedness that *Les marches et le combat* sought to temper. Too many expeditions had come to an ignominious end on account of officers' inexperience or blind faith in the superiority of European arms. Among those to pay the ultimate price was Lieutenant Bucquoy, whose expedition against the Budja in 1891 was essentially wiped out by an ambush at Yamikele (Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique, 1952, p. 478). Four years later, negligence forced Captain Francqui to abandon his expedition on Bahr-el-Ghazal when the vanguard, under the command of Lieutenant Frennet, was found to have been marching without loaded weapons and overrun by a surprise attack (*Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique*, 1952, pp. 308-309). Come 1897, it was Lieutenant Burke who fell victim to laxity. Having searched without success, a party of Lualabourg mutineers were finally sighted near Goie-Kabamba between the Kabongo and Lualaba lakes. Rather than properly reconnoitre the area or await reinforcements, the American launched his 100-strong force straight into a trap that cost him and 25 of his men their lives (De Boeck, 1987).

Knowing the country as well as they did, indigenous opponents routinely held an advantage beyond the established field of battle. More mobile than a *Force Publique* column – which routinely swelled to four or five times the number of active troops on account of the women, children, boys, and porters that accompanied it – ambushes were the most dangerous feature of frontier warfare in the Congo (De Boeck, 1987). This was particularly the case in difficult terrain when columns were strung out. The enemy would prey on stragglers or seek to defeat smaller sections of the expedition in detail such as the vanguard and rear-guard, which could be well distanced from the main body of troops. Equally, under the cover of darkness, unsupervised or ill-prepared camps offered enticing targets.

To counter this, the *Force Publique* established precautionary procedures for troops on the march. Michaux, for instance, organised his columns against the Batetela rebels by splitting his troops into six companies. One of these was comprised of loyal long-service regulars which acted as the commander's personal bodyguard and mobile reserve. The other five companies rotated daily between roles: the vanguard; in the main body; as porter protection; and in the rear-guard. A system was introduced that grouped men in fours, with numbers one and three responsible for

observational duties to the right and two and four to the left as they passed through dangerous territory or thick forest. When they were available, auxiliaries were used as scouts and flanking protection. What is interesting to note is the observation made by Lieutenant Gloire in 1897 that the Ndirfi rebels from Dhanis' column utilised a similar system (*Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique*, 1952).

In the event of attack, the rear-guard was to take-up the most defensible position it could find. The porters were to make for this group as quickly as possible, using their stores to build a make-shift barricade before laying down to clear the field of fire (De Boeck, 1987). Upon selecting a site for camp, four flags were placed at each corner, designating the extent of its boundaries within which each company knew their position. The vanguard faced the front: behind them was the company who were to take their place the next day. Company no. 3 faced right, no. 4 left, and no. 5 behind. The veterans company formed a circle in the centre around the commander's tent and the stores. Elements of company no. 2 were tasked with guarding the camp beyond its perimeters. The other companies were tasked with clearing 100 metres' worth of open space around the camp, collecting the branches and forming a mini redoubt which was fortified with earth from the digging of a trench. The camp had only one entrance and was guarded by a picket. Sentries were also stationed around the perimeter and were overseen by white officers or NCOs throughout the night. Any sentry found asleep on duty was stripped of his rank the next day and reduced to the status of a porter for the remainder of the campaign. While sound enough in theory, in practice mistakes and oversights could rarely be entirely avoided. Even one of Michaux's camps was penetrated by a surprise attack, resulting in a chaotic battle to eject the assailants (De Boeck, 1987).

Conclusion: Independent colonial military tradition

As with frontier and colonial warfare elsewhere in the world, there was no one solution or fool-proof method to achieve success. Instead, a broad set of principles revolving around preparation, adaptability, and common sense tended to inform best practice. Over time, this could be passed down between successive generations of colonial officers or codified in publications and training manuals. This is how militaries have processed learning and continue to do so today. They distil best practice from recent experience and adopt it from elsewhere when appropriate. In the case of the *Force Publique*, such publications were comparatively sparse compared to their British and French imperial neighbours. Nevertheless, a corpus of material did emerge, and with it, important lessons could be drawn from a wide variety of campaigns. Through trial and error, the *Force Publique* emerged as a successful proponent of frontier warfare. That it did so is no real surprise given the inherent materiel and other advantages enjoyed by European or Europeanised forces. That it did so organically and without a colonial military tradition of note behind it is, perhaps, a far more curious development.

References

- Auguste Théophile Léon Rom, n.d. Notes of Service. War Heritage Institute [WHI], Belgian Military Abroad [BMA], 43/56 XV 426.
- Beckett, I.F.W. (2001). *Modern insurgencies and counter-insurgencies: Guerrillas and their opponents since 1750*. Routledge.
- Callwell, C.E. (1896/2010). *Small wars: Their principles and practice*. Watchmaker Publishing.
- De Boeck, G. (1987). *BAONI: Les Revoltes de la Force Publique sous Léopold II. Congo 1895-1908*. Antwerp: Les Editions EPO.
- Deuxième Section de l'État-Major de la Force Publique. (1952). *La Force Publique de sa Naissance à 1914: Participation des militaires à l'histoire des premières années du Congo*. Gembloux: J. Duculot.

- Donny, A. (1897). *L'art militaire au Congo*. Brussels: G Muquardt.
- Draper, M. (2018). *The Belgian Army and society from independence to the Great War*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Draper, M. (2019) The Force Publique's campaigns in the Congo-Arab War, 1892-1894. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 30(4-5), 1020-1039.
- French, D. (2011). *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945-1967*. Oxford University Press.
- Gann, L.H., & Duignan, P. (1979). *The Rulers of Belgian Africa 1884-1914*. Princeton University Press.
- Gondola, Ch. D. (2002). *The History of Congo*. Greenwood Press.
- Gordon, D.M. (2014). Interpreting documentary sources on the early history of the Congo Free State: The case of Ngongo Luteta's rise and fall. *History in Africa*, 41, 5-33.
<http://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2014.6>
- Janssens, E. (1979). *Histoire de la Force Publique*. Brussels: Ghesquiere & Partners.
- La Belgique Militaire, 31 May 1891 and 15 January 1893.
- Le Soir, October 1952, 'Un survivant de la campagne antiesclavagiste du Congo'. WHI, BMA 43/55 XV/192, Edgard Cerckel Papers.
- Le Soir, 5 August 1955. WHI, BMA 43/55 XV/314, Émile Lémery Papers.
- Letter from Captain Jacques to the Director of the Societé Antiesclavagiste, 9 May 1894. WHI, BMA 43/55 XV 295.
- Lyautey, H. (1900). 'Du rôle colonial de l'armée', *Revue des deux mondes* (15 January, 1900).
- Macola, G. (2016). *The Gun in Central Africa: A history of technology and politics*. Ohio University Press.
- Marechal, P. (1992). *De 'Arabische' Campagne in het Maniema-Gebied (1892-1894) Situeren Binnen het Kolonisatieproces in de Onafhankelijke Kongostaat*. Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale.
- Military Report on the Congo Free State: Prepared in the General Staff, War Office (1904). The National Archives, Kew [TNA] War Office [WO]33/316.
- Pakenham, T. (1992). *The scramble for Africa: 1876-1912*. Abacus.
- Porch, D. (1986). Bugeaud, Galliéni, Lyautey: The development of French colonial warfare. In Paret, P. (Ed.), *Makers of modern strategy from Machiavelli to the nuclear age*. Clarendon Press.
- Porch, D. (2013). *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the myths of the new way of war*. Cambridge University Press.
- Reid, R.J. (2012). *Warfare in African history*. Cambridge University Press.
- Report to the King on the political and military measures taken to bring about the repression of the slave trade in the territories of the State. Undated [circa 1888]. By the Interim General Administrator of the Department of the Interior. Royal Archives [RA], Cabinet Léopold II 144/39.
- Rid, T. (2010). The nineteenth century origins of counterinsurgency doctrine. *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33(5), 727-758. <http://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2010.498259>
- Spiers, E. (1992). *The Late Victorian Army, 1868-1902*. Manchester University Press.
- Streets, H. (2010). *Martial races: The military, race and masculinity in British imperial culture, 1857-1914*. Manchester University Press.

- Vanderstraeten, L.F. (1985). *Léopold II et la Force publique*. In P. Lefèvre (et.al.) (Eds.), *Léopold II et la Force Publique du Congo*. Brussels: Cercle royal des anciens officiers des campagnes d'Afrique.
- Vandervort, B. (1998). *Wars of imperial conquest in Africa 1830-1914*. Routledge.
- Verbeken, A. (1958). *La Révolte des Batetela en 1895: Textes Inédits*. Brussels: Académie royale des Sciences coloniales.
- Vincent, J. (2015). *The black knights of fortune: A study of the Zappo-Zap and Euro-African encounters in the late nineteenth-century Kasai* [Masters thesis, University of Kent]. Kent Academic Repisotory. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/54342/>
- Whittingham, D. (2020). *Charles E. Callwell and the British way in warfare*. Cambridge University Press.

About the Author

Born and bred in Belgium to British parents, Mario came over to the UK to pursue his undergraduate degree in War Studies at the University of Kent, with his dissertation focusing on Irish regiments in the British Army during the First World War. Following this, he attended St Catherine's College, Oxford, for his Master of Studies (MSt) in Modern British and European History, taking the first steps towards a focus across the Channel with a dissertation entitled 'Anglo-Belgian Military Co-operation 1906-1914'. Mario returned to Kent to pursue his PhD on 'The Belgian Army, Society and Military Cultures, 1830-1918', and now holds a post as a Lecturer in the School of History teaching undergraduate and postgraduate military history modules. Mario has broad research interests that include British, Irish and European military history in the 19th and 20th centuries. More specifically, his interests lie in the links between armies and societies at all levels, but particularly with relation to national and regional identities.

Email: m.a.draper@kent.ac.uk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7240-343X>

Endnotes

¹ The *Force Publique* was the Congo Free State's (later Belgian) colonial army. Established in 1885, it recruited locally but was commanded by a handful of European officers and non-commissioned officers.

² For the most detailed account of the Congo-Arab War, see Marechal, P. (1992) De 'Arabische' Campagne in het Maniema-Gebied (1892-1894) Situerend Binnen het Kolonisatieproces in de Onafhankelijke Kongostaat. Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale. See also, Draper, M. (2019) The Force Publique's campaigns in the Congo-Arab War, 1892-1894. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 30(4-5), 1020-1039. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2019.1638553>

³ On the most recent influence of Callwell see Whittingham, D. (2020). *Charles E. Callwell and the British Way in Warfare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and on the influence of Galliéni and Lyautey see Porch, D. (1986). Bugeaud, Galliéni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare. In Paret, P. (Ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 376-407. See also Callwell, C.E. (1896). *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*. London: HMSO, Reprinted by Oregon: Watchmaker Publishing, (2010); & Lyautey, H. (1900). 'Du rôle colonial de l'armée', *Revue des deux mondes* (15 January, 1900).

⁴ On martial race theory, see Streets, H. (2010). *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

⁵ For alternative spellings of the name see, Gordon, D.M. (2014). 'Interpreting Documentary Sources on the Early History of the Congo Free State: The Case of Ngongo Luteta's Rise and Fall', *History in Africa*. 41, pp. 17-18.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/HIA.2014.6>

⁶ See, for example, *La Belgique Militaire*, 1052, 31 May 1891 & 1136, 15 January 1893.