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MAPPING MEMORY: COLONIAL STREET NAMES AND PUBLIC MEMORY IN BELGIUM

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STATUTORY DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how Belgium remembers its colonial past through the persistence and renaming of colonial street names. It draws both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the spatial distribution, typology, and political context of colonial street names across Belgium's three regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. Based on datasets from regional governments, this thesis aims to identify patterns in which colonial street names remain, which have been changed, and how these decisions relate to institutional frameworks.

Subsequently, a case study analysis of four Flemish municipalities, Balen, Dendermonde, Ghent, Mechelen, and Kortrijk, reveals that three out of four confirmed renamings since 2002 targeted references to King Leopold II. These changes occurred exclusively in Flanders, highlighting regional divergences in public memory practices. The thesis situates these findings within the broader theoretical frameworks of collective memory, postcolonial legacies, and urban toponymy.

By mapping colonial traces in Belgian public space, the study aims to contribute to understanding how memory is (re)negotiated in parallel with debates about identity, responsibility and historical justice.

Key words: Colonialism, street names, Belgium, decolonization, collective memory

Word count: 17.271

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 THEMATIC, GEOGRAPHICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL COVERAGE

This study investigates how Belgium remembers its colonial past through the presence and potential renaming of streets with colonial associations. The idea is grounded in the understanding that street names, like monuments, are physical manifestations of collective memory. Therefore, they do not just reflect the dominant historical narrative, but in turn also help shape them. As permanent elements of the physical environment, they commemorate particular figures, events, and ideologies. This often without active reflection by the people who daily encounter them. The decision to keep or change such names is thus an important indicator of how societies manage their relation with history.

The study focuses on the early twenty-first century for two main raisons. First, this period coincides with a growing postcolonial consciousness in Belgian and international society. This has been marked by increased attention to colonial injustice and public debates about historical responsibility. In Belgium, questioning the colonial legacy came relatively late compared to countries like France or the UK. Yet there were significant shifts in the last two decades: from academic publications such as *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) and *The Assassination of Lumumba* (1999), to the "Congomania" around the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence in 2010, and more recently, the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. Each of these moments catalyzed new discussions about the colonial traces embedded in Belgium's public space, including street names. Secondly, the availability of reliable data sources makes this period methodologically significant. Since the early 2000s, regional authorities have been systematically collecting extensive regional datasets for street names. This allows a systematic and comparative analysis of colonial references across time and space.

Geographically, this thesis covers the three Belgian regions: Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels Capital Region. This multi-regional approach allows an analysis of regional and

local differences in how municipalities and regions have (not) addressed their colonial street names. This reflects the regional diversity of Belgium in terms of language and governance, political culture, and historical engagement with colonial memory.

By narrowing its focus to the presence and renaming of streets with colonial connotations, this thesis contributes to understanding how the Belgian colonial past is dealt with in everyday space. In this way, it aims answers the central research question: How have street names and street renaming practices in Belgium served to preserve or challenge the memory of its colonial past during the early twenty-first century?

To answer this question, the study asks:

- Where are colonial street names located, and how many have been renamed or retained?
- What political, institutional, and regional factors account for differences in street name policies?
- How do these practices connect to broader patterns in Belgian public memory of colonial history?

1.2 STATUS QUAESTIONIS

1.2.1 MEMORY STUDIES

This thesis is situated within the field of Memory Studies, an interdisciplinary field that brings together disciplines such as literary and cultural studies, anthropology, media studies, history, sociology and political science.[1] It focusses on how societies and groups remember, represent and reinterpret the past. While also looking at how this memory is formed and how it functions within social and political contexts.[2]

The early roots of this field date back to the late nineteenth century when the first works are being written on the self-conscious reflection on the nature of memory. Remarkable

[1] Jade McGlynn and Oliver T. Jones, 'Memory Methods: An Introduction', in *Researching Memory and Identity in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2022), 1–2, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99914-8_1.
[2] Ansgar Nünning and Astrid Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction', in *Cultural Memory Studies*, vol. 8, Media and Cultural Memory / Medien Und Kulturelle Erinnerung (De Gruyter, Inc, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262.0.1.

authors are the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), the novelist Marcel Proust (1871–1922), and the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) who focused on the psyching processing of the memory. It is however only in the twentieth century that scholarly attention shifted to memory at the group level and the first theories emerged about how societies collectively deal with their past.[3]

It is the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) who is generally mentioned as the founder of the discipline of memory studies. Influenced by Émile Durkheim's sociology and by Arnold van Gennep's work on cultural rites, he introduced the concept of *mémoire collective* or collective memory. In his work *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire (1925)*, Halbwachs argued that memories are not merely individual, internal processes, but that are created within social frameworks: individuals remember as members of a group. Therefore family, friends or social institutions (such as schools, museums, media) give direction to what and how people remember. This happens through shared rituals, symbols and stories which form, confirm and pass on memory, which Halbwachs referred to as *social frameworks of memory*. This creates a sense of continuity between generation, which helps to sustain the identity of social groups.[4]

In the following decades, the concept of collective memory was further explored by scholars associated with the Annales School in France. Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, cofounders of the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* in 1929, invited him to join the editorial board. It was Lucien Febvre and, especially, Marc Bloch who investigated the relationship between *mémoire collective* and the *histoire des mentalités* (the history of mentalities). They sought to explore not simply political events but also

[3] Anna Maerker et al., eds, *History, Memory and Public Life: The Past in the Present* (Routledge, 2018), 5–6, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351055581.

[4] Maerker et al., *History, Memory and Public Life*, 6; Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres Sociaux de La Mémoire* (1925), 370–94, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k11657053; Dietrich Harth, 'The Invention of Cultural Memory', in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (De Gruyter, 2008), 90–91, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262.2.85; 'History, Record of Events; Collective Memory, Depository of Tradition', in *The Collective Memory*, 1st ed, by Maurice Halbwachs, Harper Colophon Books ; CN/800 (Harper & Row, 1980); 'Individual Memory and Collective Memory', in *The Collective Memory*, 1st ed, by Maurice Halbwachs, Harper Colophon Books ; CN/800 (Harper & Row, 1980).

the symbolic frameworks, mental tools, and beliefs by which past societies made sense of their world.[5]

After World War II, scholarly attention to collective memory increased, culminating in the so-called *memory boom* from the 1980s onward. This surge was partly driven by the growing international academic and public debate on trauma and memory culture, particularly surrounding the Holocaust. During this period Memory Studies was established as a distinct academic field where historians, sociologists, and others began to systematically study the role of memory on culture and identity, introducing new theoretical frameworks and concepts.[6]

One of these concepts, and key in the field of memory studies, is *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), developed by the French historian Pierre Nora in the 1970s and 1980s. He used this term, which became widely known in the 1990s, for places or symbols in which embody collective memory. Such places "represent the enduring physical places where the past is remembered, commemorated and constructed in the present day."[7] These sites are not limited to physical locations such as monuments or memorials but also include symbolic spaces where memory and history intersect. They can thus range from monuments and national flags to festivities and rituals.[8] In this sense, *lieux de mémoire* carry profound political and cultural significance, as they not only keep the past alive but also shape contemporary forms of commemoration through their very existence.

A second key concept is *kulturelles Gedächtnis* (cultural memory), introduced by Jan and Aleida Assmann.[9] Building on Halbwachs' ideas of collective memory, they distinguish between everyday, short-range communicative memory and long-term cultural memory.[10] Communicative memory covers about three or four generations and spreads

[5] Alon Confino, 'Memory and the History of Mentalities', in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (De Gruyter, 2008), 77–79, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262.2.77.
[6] Maerker et al., *History, Memory and Public Life*, 7–11; Jay Winter, 'The Memory Boom in Contemporary Historical Studies', *Raritan* (New Brunswick, United States) 21, no. 1 (2001): 52–66; Silvana Mandolessi, 'Cultural Memory', in *50 Key Terms in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Joost de Bloois et al. (Pelckmans Pro; Kalmthout, 2017).
[7] Keir Reeves, 'Sites of Memory', in *History, Memory and Public Life* (Routledge, 2018), 65.
[8] Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7–24, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520; Reeves, 'Sites of Memory'.
[9] Nünning and Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies', 5.
[10] Frank Bongiorno, 'Remembering Anzac: Australia and World War I', in *History, Memory and Public Life* (Routledge, 2018), 199.

informally through family stories and conversations. Cultural memory, by contrast, is maintained longer, sustained by practices like archiving, rituals, and monument building. This ensures that certain media: figures, objects, and symbols can continue shaping group identity even when firsthand recollections have vanished. In this sense, cultural memory is more "institutionalized" than collective memory in general.[11] This perspective helps explain how something as enduring as a street name can continue to influence how a community relates to its past.

Recent scholarship in memory studies has increasingly turned toward the legacies of colonialism, a "postcolonial turn" that redresses earlier blind spots. For decades, mainstream memory studies focused on European and national memories (e.g. war, Holocaust) with little attention to colonial violence. Conversely, postcolonial studies only sporadically engaged with theories of cultural memory. This mutual neglect has given way to a more integrative approach: scholars now examine how colonial pasts how colonial and imperial pasts shape contemporary collective memories, identities, and power relations.[12] In practice, this means interrogating the "imperial amnesia" once prevalent in countries like Belgium, where the atrocities of empire were long marginal in public remembrance. The limited migration from the former colony to Belgium meant that, unlike in say France or the UK, there were fewer diasporic communities to demand recognition of colonial history. As a result, Belgium historically *"lacks critical counter voices in the postcolonial debate.*[13]

Parallel to the postcolonial turn, memory studies experienced a spatial turn, recognizing that memory is inextricably bound to place. Building on influential early works like Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, recent scholarship examines urban space, city streets, squares, monuments, as a kind of memory text to be read.[14] Modern and postmodern approaches increasingly focus on monuments as dynamic social agents. In this view, monuments are not just a passive container of memory but an active force,

[11] Jan Assmann, 'Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität', in *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, by Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher, Suhrkamp Taschenbucher Wissenschaft 724 (Suhrkamp, 1988); Nünning and Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies', 9.
[12] Maerker et al., *History, Memory and Public Life*, 7–9.
[13] Julie Vande Broek, 'Vijftien jaar sluimerend schuldbesef. Postkoloniale herinnering in straatnamen en standbeelden in Vlaamse gemeenten (2000-2015)' (KU Leuven. Faculteit Letteren, 2016), 1–4.
[14] Ulrike Capdepón and Sarah Dornhof, 'Introduction: Contested Memory in Urban Space', in *Contested Urban Spaces* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2022), 4–5, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87505-3_1.

shaping what and how we remember. Therefore, their social significance often lies less in their material form and more in what they do: how they act upon individuals and societies, and how they mediate past, present, and future.[15]

The concept of "memoryscapes" captures the idea of physical space as a patchwork of memory-laden sites. It sees urban landscapes as living archives of historical narrative: cities are layered with names, statues, and monuments that reflect successive chapters of national history, how specific events are commemorated and influence how they are understood.[16] Who gets honored, and who is omitted, in these landscapes is a question of power. As Samuel Merrill observes, "the power to collectivize memory in the urban built fabric is not equally shared" but "unevenly distributed across different 'mnemonic communities'", typically privileging elites or authorities.[17] On other words, these names, statues, and monuments have historically been imposed from above. Duncan Bell's concept of the "mythscape" is useful here: he defines the mythscape as "the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, negotiated, and reconstructed constantly."[18]

Colonial street names and statues are prime components of Belgium's mythscape. They narrate a selective story of the past (e.g. heroic explorers, benevolent kings) inscribed onto the city itself. They transform urban space into a landscape of collective memory and mythology, what Bell calls a realm of ongoing narrative construction. Such urban public memory can anchor national identity and pride, yet it can just as easily become a battleground when those myths are questioned.[19]

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[15] Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin, *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1–8.
[16] Simon Sleight, 'Memory and the City', in *History, Memory and Public Life* (Routledge, 2018); Anett Árvay and Kenneth Foote, 'The Spatiality of Memoryscapes, Public Memory, and Commemoration', in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory and Place* (Routledge, 2019), 129–30.
[17] Samuel Merrill, 'Thinking Volumetrically about Urban Memory: The Buried Memories and Networked Remembrances of Underground Railways', in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory and Place* (Routledge, 2019), 224.
[18] Duncan S. A. Bell, 'Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity', *The British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003): 66, https://doi.org/10.1080/0007131032000045905.
[19] Bell, 'Mythscapes', 66–69.

1.2.2 MEMORY ACTIVISM AND "RHODES MUST FALL"

Over the past decade, grassroots initiatives have increasingly sought to contest and transform the long-dominant, top-down version of history found in many urban spaces, a phenomenon called the "activist turn" in memory studies. Memory activism is "the strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels."[20]

A turning point for such movements came with "Rhodes Must Fall," which began at the University of Cape Town in 2015 and succeeded in removing Cecil Rhodes's statue, widely seen as a reminder to the apartheid rule. The hashtag #RhodesMustFall soon reached Oxford and beyond, igniting global debates over who or what is commemorated in city squares and on university campuses. In 2020, the resurgence of Black Lives Matter following George Floyd's murder sharply accelerated these protests, as monuments to slave traders and imperial conquerors faced defacement or removal across North America and Europe.[21] Belgium was no exception, with Leopold II's statues being splashed with paint.[22]

By physically contesting monuments, activists renegotiate the identity and values that those monuments stand for. Such interventions are not merely acts of "erasing history" (as critics often claim)[23]; they are strategic gestures in the present, aimed at broadening the range of stories and people represented in the urban landscape.

The Rhodes Must Fall protests, the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol, or the graffiti on Leopold II, all are performances of resistance that use urban space as their stage and collective memory as their stakes. These waves of protest have spurred critical

[20] Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg, 'Introduction: The Activist Turn in Memory Studies', in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (Routledge, 2023), 5–6.
[21] Britta Timm Knudsen et al., 'Introduction', in *Decolonizing Colonial Heritage* (Routledge, 2021).
[22] Marc Reynebeau, 'Sokkel onder Leopold II begint te wankelen', *De Standaard*, 10 June 2020, https://www.standaard.be/binnenland/sokkel-onder-leopold-ii-begint-te-wankelen/41160216.html; 'Borstbeeld Leopold II beschadigd in Oudergem', *De Standaard*, 12 June 2020, https://www.standaard.be/binnenland/borstbeeld-leopold-ii-beschadigd-in-oudergem/41170951.html; 'Leopold II in tuin Afrikamuseum opnieuw beklad', *De Standaard*, 2 August 2020, https://www.standaard.be/binnenland/leopold-ii-in-tuin-afrikamuseum-opnieuw-beklad/41172595.html.
[23] Anja Berninger, 'Erasing History as a Form of Defensive Forgetting', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* n/a, no. n/a (n.d.), https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12774.

reflection within academia and institutions, prompting museums to reinstall exhibits with more context and prompting re-evaluation of who is honored on the street map.[24]

1.2.3 Scholarship on Belgian colonial memory

These global currents were also reflected in Belgium, where debates over colonial history shifted from the margins to the mainstream. This evolution is equally visible in academic research on the subject. Whereas during the 1960s to the 1980s Belgium largely ignored its colonial past, treating it either with silence or through a paternalistic lens, two publications in the late 1990s fundamentally altered the landscape. Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) and Ludo De Witte's *The Assassination of Lumumba* (1999) exposed the darker aspects of Belgian colonization.[25] The latter even prompted the Belgian Parliament to establish a commission of inquiry, which officially acknowledged the responsibility of Belgian authorities in the killing of Patrice Lumumba.[26]

The Congomania around the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence in 2010 further intensified interest in colonial history. *Congo: A History* by David Van Reybrouck (2010), blending archival research with oral testimonies, became a bestseller and played a key role in popularizing the subject.[27]

Around this period, academic interest in the collective memory of Belgian colonialism also deepened. As after 2010, Belgian academics began engaging more substantially with

[24] Sebastiaan Faber, 'Populism and the Collective Past: Revisionism or Memory Activism?', in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (Routledge, 2023), 29–30; Assmann Aleida, 'Foreword', in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (n.d.), accessed 1 April 2025, https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Memory-Activism/Gutman-Wustenberg/p/book/9780367650414.

[25] Pedro Monaville, 'A Distinctive Ugliness: Colonial Memory in Belgium', in *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations: The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945–2013*, ed. Dietmar Rothermund (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 58–62, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316182543.005; Georgi Verbeeck, 'Legacies of an Imperial Past in a Small Nation. Patterns of Postcolonialism in Belgium', *European Politics and Society* 21, no. 3 (2020): 296, https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1645422.

[26] Denise Bentrovato and Karel and Van Nieuwenhuyse, 'Confronting "Dark" Colonial Pasts: A Historical Analysis of Practices of Representation in Belgian and Congolese Schools, 1945–2015', *Paedagogica Historica* 56, no. 3 (2020): 311, https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2019.1572203; Idesbald Goddeeris et al., eds, *Colonial Congo: A History in Questions*, trans. Suzanne Heukensfeldt Jansen (Brepols Publishers, 2024), 325, https://doi.org/10.1484/M.STMCH-EB.5.127497; Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Proposition Visant à Instituer Une Commission d'enquête Parlementaire Chargée de Déterminer Les Circonstances Exactes de l'assassinat de Patrice Lumumba et l'implication Éventuelle Des Responsables Politiques Belges Dans Celui-Ci.* (2000).

[27] Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Postcolonial Belgium: The Memory of the Congo', *Interventions* 17, no. 3 (2015): 437–38, 445–46, 449, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.998253.

these questions. At KU Leuven, Idesbald Goddeeris emerged as a leading figure, contributing key studies such as *Postcolonial Belgium: The Memory of the Congo* (2016) and *The Nazi and the Colonizers: Flemish Debates on Street Names in 2017* (2019). In 2020, Goddeeris, together with other editors Amandine Lauro and Guy Vanthemsche, published the volume *Colonial Congo: a history in questions* which was rapidly translated into French and English. Notably, chapter 28 of this work addresses "The Colonial Past through a Belgian Lens."[28] On the francophone side, research at UC Louvain has been spearheaded by scholars such as Valérie Rosoux, who has similarly contributed to the study of colonial memory.[29] International scholars have also continued to shape the field. The book *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium* (2019) from the American historian Matthew G. Stanard quickly became a standard reference on how Belgium has confronted its colonial past through public monuments and commemorations.[30]

In addition to academic work, important contributions have been made by other institutions. The critical *2019 Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent*, mandated by the UN OHCHR, spurred renewed debate about structural racism and colonial legacies.[31] Furthermore, several governmental initiatives have produced significant research outputs, including the *Special Parliamentary Commission on the Colonial Past* (established in July 2020), the *Flemish Guidelines for Dealing with Colonial References in Public Spaces* (2020), and the *Reflection Framework and Recommendations on the Decolonization of Public Spaces in the Brussels-Capital Region* (2022). Together,

[28] Goddeeris, 'Postcolonial Belgium'; Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 323–33; Idesbald Goddeeris, 'The Nazi and the Colonizers: Flemish Debates on Street Names in 2017', *Zeitgeschichte* 46, no. 1 (2019): 61–82, https://doi.org/10.14220/zsch.2019.46.1.61; Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Colonial Streets and Statues: Postcolonial Belgium in the Public Space', *Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 4 (2015): 397–409, https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2015.1191986.

[29] Valérie Rosoux, 'La mémoire respire:Réparer le passé colonial belge', *Esprit*, no. 3 (March 2024): 75–85, https://doi.org/10.3917/espri.2403.0075.

[30] Matthew Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium* (Leuven University Press, 2023), https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461665218; Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 323–33.

[31] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Visit to Belgium: Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent*, A/HRC/42/59/Add.1 (United Nations, 2019), https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/42/59/Add.1; 'Statement to the Media by the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, on the Conclusion of Its Official Visit to Belgium, 4-11 February 2019', OHCHR, accessed 26 April 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2019/02/statement-media-united-nations-working-group-experts-people-african.

these developments have significantly broadened the academic and public engagement with Belgium's colonial past.[32]

Regarding the specific theme of street names and their changes, this thesis primarily draws on the academic work of Idesbald Goddeeris, who also supervised the master's thesis *Fifteen Years of Dormant Guilt: Postcolonial Memory in Street Names and Monuments in Flemish Municipalities (2000–2015)* by Julie Vande Broek, which offers valuable insights into how Flemish municipalities have engaged with colonial memory through monuments and toponomy. Together with the master's thesis *The Independence of the Belgian Congo: The Beginning of a History: Collective Memory of the Colonial Period (1960–2010)* by Davy Verbeke (2011), they served as a useful starting point for this research, particularly in mapping early patterns of collective memory formation following Congo's independence.[33]

The idea of linking street names to cultural identity and collective memory is not new. Numerous scholars have examined this theme, both through theoretical approaches, such as *"What do street names tell us? The 'city-text' as socio-cultural data"*, and through case studies focused on countries like South Africa, Poland, and Spain.[34] In Belgium, too,

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[32] Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, 'Omgaan Met Koloniale Verwijzingen in de Publieke Ruimte: Handreiking Voor Lokale Besturen', with Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur, Vlaamse overheid, 2020, https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/sites/default/files/2021-04/20201022_handreiking_omgaan_met_koloniale_verwijzingen_in_de_publieke_ruimte.pdf; Ponthier Annick et al., *Commission Spéciale Chargée d'examiner l'état Indépendant Du Congo (1885-1908) et Le Passé Colonial de La Belgique Au Congo (1908-1960), Au Rwanda et Au Burundi (1919-1962), Ses Conséquences et Les Suites Qu'il Convient d'y Réserver*, DOC 55 1462/000 (Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, 5e session de la 55e législature, 2023), https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://ds1.static.rtbf.be/uploader/pdf/f/f/c/beta_c6a5432a5f5d344dc9ce6884b71c4a1c.pdf; Werkgroep Dekolonisering van de Openbare Ruimte, *Voor de dekolonisering van de openbare ruimte in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest: een reflectiekader en aanbevelingen* (Urban – Brussel, 2022), https://cloud.urban.brussels/s/aiCpR5pw4j2E9rR.

[33] Vande Broek, 'Vijftien jaar sluimerend schuldbesef. Postkoloniale herinnering in straatnamen en standbeelden in Vlaamse gemeenten (2000-2015)'; Davy Verbeke, 'De onafhankelijkheid van Belgisch Congo : het begin van een geschiedenis' (UGent. Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte., 2011), https://lib.ugent.be/nl/catalog/rug01:001797294.

[34] Daniel Oto-Peralías, 'What Do Street Names Tell Us? The "City-Text" as Socio-Cultural Data', *Journal of Economic Geography* 18, no. 1 (2018): 187–211, https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbx030; Radoslaw Nielek et al., 'Collective Memory in Poland: A Reflection in Street Names', in *Social Informatics*, ed. Akiyo Nadamoto et al., vol. 8359, Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-55285-4_11; Philippa Margaret Irvine et al., 'Navigating Community and Place Through Colloquial Street Names in Fingo Village, Makhanda (Grahamstown)', *Urban Forum (Johannesburg)* (Dordrecht) 32, no. 3 (2021): 333–48, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12132-021-09416-w; Iker Arregui-Alegria, 'Threat to Identity and Right-Wing Populism: Evidence from Francoist Street Names (Draft)' (Ph.D, Lund University, n.d.), https://sites.google.com/view/ikerarreguialegria/home/#h.jlllh3vtvsfl.

this topic has drawn attention. Once again, it is Idesbald Goddeeris who contributed foundational work, notably in 2015 and 2019, with research based on media analysis of contested colonial-era street names. [35]

1.3 METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

While media-based research can yield valuable insights, it also presents a significant limitation: it primarily captures explicit acts of memory, examining only those aspects of memory that are lit up by public attention.[36] Yet collective memory consists not only the realm of visibility but also the invisible, habitual, and unspoken. Astrid Erll refers to this as *implicit collective memory*, a powerful but hidden form of remembrance embedded in narrative templates, cognitive schemata, and everyday practices that often escape conscious recognition. [37] In this view, memory does not reside solely in commemorative acts or symbolic ruptures, but also in the mundane, the banal, and the unremarked. The street one takes to buy bread each morning, for example, may silently perpetuate historical narratives long removed from public debate.

Therefore, this thesis therefore aims to move beyond media-visible contestation and systematically map both contested and uncontested colonial street names. Where are such names located? Which have been formally renamed? And what political or institutional dynamics account for these outcomes? Combining quantitative data from regional street name datasets three datasets covering Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia, containing street name data from 2002 and 2024, with qualitative case studies of selected municipalities, this study traces when and why renamings occurred, or did not. This enables a comparison of which names have changed, and in which kinds of municipalities; large or small, urban or rural.

In addition, this thesis conducts archival case studies of specific colonial street names that appear in multiple cities. By examining local municipal council records, it traces

[35] Goddeeris, 'Colonial Streets and Statues'; Goddeeris, 'The Nazi and the Colonizers'.
[36] Michael Schudson, 'Lives, Laws, and Language: Commemorative versus Non-commemorative Forms of Effective Public Memory', *The Communication Review* 2, no. 1 (1997): 3–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/10714429709368547.
[37] Astrid Erll, 'The Hidden Power of Implicit Collective Memory', *Memory, Mind & Media* 1 (January 2022): e14, https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2022.7.

when and why certain names were (or were not) changed, and which political parties held power at the time. To determine whether a street name has a colonial connotation, this research relies on both the terminology developed by the *Agency Information Flanders* with the *Royal Museum for Central Africa,* and the free digital appendix of *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*. It is worth noting that their dataset also includes a number of ambiguous terms; names that may point to a colonial reference but for which the historical connection remains uncertain. These ambiguities are acknowledged and treated with caution in the present analysis.

2 POSTCOLONIAL MEMORY IN BELGIUM: PUBLIC DEBATE, DISCUSSION, AND GOVERNMENTAL ACTIONS

2.1 COLONIAL AMNESIA AND CIVIC INVISIBILITY (1960-1990)

During the 1960s and 1980s, Belgium was largely preoccupied by Cold War alignments and Flemish-Walloon tensions. As a result, any reckoning with the colonial past took a back seat. From the Congo's independence in 1960 onward, Belgium's public memory of its colonial era was marked by silence and self-exoneration, what historians have called "collective amnesia." References to the Congo Free State (1885–1908) under Leopold II were scant, and as Monaville notes, colonialism was treated as a "detachable appendix," marginal in national history and institutionally severed from broader Belgian narratives.[38]

In popular discourse, paternalistic perspectives highlighted infrastructure development and missionary endeavors, framing the colonial project as largely beneficial or "civilizing."[39] This viewpoint was echoed in Belgian school materials from the 1960s to the 1980s: once triumphant in tone, textbooks transitioned to near silence on

[38] Monaville, 'A Distinctive Ugliness', 58–62; Verbeeck, 'Legacies of an Imperial Past in a Small Nation. Patterns of Postcolonialism in Belgium', 296.
[39] Monaville, 'A Distinctive Ugliness', 62; Verbeeck, 'Legacies of an Imperial Past in a Small Nation. Patterns of Postcolonialism in Belgium', 296.

colonialism, focusing largely on Leopold II while overlooking Belgian rule after 1908 and attributing the violence of decolonization to the Congolese themselves. [40]

2.2 The Rise of Critical Engagement (1990-2020)

This began to change in the late 1990s, when two popular books, Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) and Ludo De Witte's *The Assassination of Lumumba* (1999), rather than academic scholarship began drawing broad attention to the colonial record. [41] The American journalist Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) played a defining role in reopening that debate. It was soon translated into Dutch and French and reached a wide readership in Belgium and elsewhere. The publication's stark depiction of colonial abuses provoked both widespread astonishment and renewed public interest in the crimes of Leopold II's Congo Free State.[42]

The second publication appeared on year later, in 1999. In *The Assassination of Lumumba*, sociologist Ludo De Witte implicated Belgian leaders in the 1961 murder of Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba. [43] This prompted the Belgian Parliament to establish a commission of inquiry in 2000.[44] That commission's final report in 2001 acknowledged the responsibility of Belgian authorities in Lumumba's killing and declared the state's "moral responsibility" for the crime.[45] In response, the government issued a formal statement of regret and Foreign Minister Louis Michel

[40] Bentrovato and and Van Nieuwenhuyse, 'Confronting "Dark" Colonial Pasts', 303–5, 307–9.
[41] 'Congomania in Academia: Recent Historical Research on the Belgian Colonial Past - KU Leuven', 54–55, accessed 9 April 2025, https://kuleuven.limo.libis.be/discovery/fulldisplay/cdi_scopus_primary_2_s2_0_84855374319/32KUL_KUL:KULeuven; Laurent Licata and Olivier Klein, 'Regards croisés sur un passé commun : anciens colonisés et anciens coloniaux face à l'action belge au Congo', in *L'Autre: Regards psychosociaux* (Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2005), 248–52, https://doi.org/10.3917/pug.sanch.2005.01.0241.
[42] Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 51.
[43] Ludo De Witte, *De moord op*(Leuven: Van Halewyck, 1999).
[44] Bentrovato and and Van Nieuwenhuyse, 'Confronting "Dark" Colonial Pasts', 311; Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 325; Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Proposition Visant à Instituer Une Commission d'enquête Parlementaire Chargée de Déterminer Les Circonstances Exactes de l'assassinat de Patrice Lumumba et l'implication Éventuelle Des Responsables Politiques Belges Dans Celui-Ci.*
[45] Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Enquête Parlementaire Visant à Déterminer Les Circonstances Exactes de l'assassinat de Patrice Lumumba et l'implication Éventuelle Des Responsables Politiques Belges Dans Celui-Ci.* (2001), https://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/comm/lmb/312_6_volume1.pdf; Chambre des représentants de Belgique, *Compte Rendu Analytique, Scèance Plénaire* (2002), https://www.droitcongolais.info/files/assassinat-de-Lumumba,-analye-senat-belge--Fev.-2002-.pdf.

created a Patrice Lumumba Foundation to educate future generations.[46] These steps marked the first official recognition of wrongdoing during Belgium's colonial era.

Following these two publications, during the turn of the millennium, debates about how to interpret the colonial past became frequent in media, university symposia, and local politics. By the late 2000s a new generation of historians, writers, and artists had begun engaging critically with Belgium's imperial legacy. David Van Reybrouck's *Congo: A History* (2010), a bestselling Dutch-language history, exemplified this.[47]

At the same time, the colonial-era statues, plaques and toponyms which for a long time had been largely unchallenged, became lightning rods for contestation. In 2004, shortly after the BBC documentary *Congo: White King, Red Rubber, Black Death* aired on Belgian TV, unknown activists sawed off the hand of a Congolese figure on the Leopold II monument in Ostend. The gesture referenced the notorious practice of severing hands as punishment in Leopold's Congo, directly attacking the "glorifying representation" of colonial rule embodied by the statue. This act did not stand alone. Throughout the late 2000s and 2010s, several similar acts of defiance against colonial glorification were caried out. Statues of Leopold II were repeatedly vandalized in red paint or graffiti in cities like Brussels (2008), Tervuren (2009), and Liège (2006), signaling a growing rejection of colonial monuments as untouchable heritage.[48]

Belgian municipalities initially responded to these controversies by installing contextual plaques rather than removal. Between 2009 and 2019, cities such as Ostend, Ekere, Ghent, and Hasselt affixed explanatory signs to colonial monuments. However, these plaques often many signs prioritized technical details (dates, materials) over ethical reflection, reflecting what Stanard termed a "failure to confront the core of the problem.".[49] These municipal actions mirrored a broader Belgian reluctance to center Congolese perspectives or explicitly name colonial crimes.[50] This contrasted with Dutch

[46] Sénat de Belgique, 'Question écrite n° 5-4760 de Bert Anciaux au vice-premier ministre et ministre des Affaires étrangères concernant "République démocratique du Congo – Assassinat de Patrice Lumumba – Reconnaissance par la Belgique de sa culpabilité – Actes concrets"', Sénat de Belgique, 30 January 2012, https://www.senate.be/www/?MIval=/Vragen/SVPrint&LEG=5&NR=4760&LANG=fr.
[47] Goddeeris, 'Postcolonial Belgium', 437.
[48] Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 326.
[49] Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, 267; Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 329–30.
[50] Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, 203–5; 'Mapping the Colonial Past in the Public Space A Comparison between Belgium and the Netherlands - KU Leuven', 81, accessed 6 April 2025, https://kuleuven.limo.libis.be/discovery/fulldisplay/lirias3018125/32KUL_KUL:Lirias.

efforts to reinterpret slavery-era monuments through community-guided narratives, as observed by Goddeeris.[51]

The debate was far from unified. While some cities grappled with reinterpretation, others doubled down on preserving colonial heritage. Brussels ignored criticism when it restored a colonial monument between 2008 and 2010, in June 2005 Genval moved a bust of Leopold II from a closed colonial veterans' residence to a roundabout in June 2005 , and in 2009 Diksmuide got protected status for a statue of General Jacques, a Congo Free State officer implicated in multiple atrocities.[52] Meanwhile, new memorials emerged, such as Neerpelt's 2002 tribute to missionary Father Désiré Pellens.[53]

From the late twentieth century onward, the status of streets, squares, and monuments named after colonial figures became an increasingly contentious subject in Belgium's public sphere. During the 1920s, around 170 streets across Belgium had been named in reference to Central African colonies, often glorifying colonial actors like Leopold II or military figures tied to the Congo Free State. [54]

The 50th anniversary of Congolese independence in 2010 sparked *Congomania*, a surge of public engagement with colonial history through exhibitions, documentaries, and bestsellers like David Van Reybrouck's *Congo: A History* (2010). Van Reybrouck's narrative, blending archival research and oral histories, acknowledged colonial violence but framed Belgium's role as idealistic yet naïve, emphasizing African resilience and the mythologized *sourire congolais* ("Congolese smile"). Critics like Ludo De Witte condemned the book for downplaying atrocities and perpetuating colonial tropes, yet mainstream media picked up on it. This narrative, amplified by nostalgic retrospectives, fostered a consensus: Belgians acknowledged colonial violence as historical "errors" while emphasizing paternalistic achievements like infrastructure and education. This approach allowed superficial reconciliation, which alongside nostalgic media

[51] 'Mapping the Colonial Past in the Public Space A Comparison between Belgium and the Netherlands - KU Leuven'.
[52] Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed, 'Standbeeld voor Generaal Jacques de Dixmude', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, 14 May 2024, https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/78004; Idesbald Goddeeris, *Square de Léopoldville of Place Lumumba? De Belgische (post)koloniale herinnering in de publieke ruimte*, P. Noordhoff, 2016, 359, 361; Goddeeris, 'Colonial Streets and Statues', 399–400; Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, 58–59.
[53] Goddeeris, *Square de Léopoldville of Place Lumumba?*, 129.
[54] Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 285.

retrospectives, fostered a homogenized narrative that bridged Flanders and Wallonia's earlier divides.[55]

This convergence was strategic. Amid Belgium's protracted political crisis, including 541 days of government negotiations (2010–2011) and rising Flemish nationalism, colonial debates became gradually an unexpected unifying force.[56] With some narratives softening critiques of Leopold II, recasting colonialism as a shared, if imperfect, national project. For instance, Louis Michel, a former Belgian foreign minister and European Commissioner, controversially hailed Leopold II as "a hero with ambition."[57] While some media critiqued this, Flemish media also emphasized nostalgic accounts of colonial life, republishing memoirs like *The Most Beautiful Time of My Life* and airing colonial-era propaganda films like *Buana Kitoko* (1955) during prime time. On the other side of the language border, while also including nostalgic voices, hosted more critical voices. The RTBF for example broadcasted Raoul Peck's film *Lumumba*, and filmmaker Thierry Michel's documentaries (*Mobutu, Roi du Zaïre*; *Congo River*).[58]

Efforts to decolonize street names mirrored this ambivalence. Activist groups like Le Collectif "Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations" (CMCLD) campaigned for renaming key sites, notably demanding a *Place Lumumba* in Brussels' Matonge district: they covered street signs with Lumumba's name, circulated petitions and even succeeded in getting Google Maps to label an unnamed triangle in Ixelles as "Future Lumumba Square". Notably, Brussels was not the first to break this ground: a few months prior, in late 2017, the city of Charleroi in Wallonia had quietly approved renaming a street after Lumumba, replacing the name of a local politician with that of

[55] Goddeeris, 'Postcolonial Belgium', 437–38, 445–46, 449.
[56] Guy Vanthemsche and Roger De Peuter, *A Concise History of Belgium*, 1st edn (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 330, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139018005.
[57] Rik Van Cauwelaert, 'Hardnekkig geheugenverlies', *Knack*, 30 June 2010; 'Louis Michel: "Leopold II was een held voor België"', *De Morgen*, 10 September 2015, https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/louis-michel-leopold-ii-was-een-held-voor-belgie~b6bc3a2b/; VRT NWS, 'Michel noemt Leopold II "visionaire held"', *vrtnws.be*, 22 June 2010, https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2010/06/22/michel_noemt_leopoldiivisionaireheld-1-807747/; 'Louis Michel noemt Leopold II "held"', *De Standaard*, 22 June 2010, https://www.standaard.be/buitenland/louis-michel-noemt-leopold-ii-held/46649749.html.
[58] Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 327–28.

the Congolese leader, and inaugurating Rue Patrice Lumumba in May 2018.[59] Similarly, Dendermonde and Kortrijk renamed *Leopold II Lanes* in 2019. [60]

Institutional resistance to confronting colonial legacies persisted into the following decade. In 2019, the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent visited Belgium and described racial discrimination within its institutions as "endemic" and inequality as "deeply entrenched." Prime Minister Charles Michel responded with "surprise" and "incomprehension," demonstrating a lack of political willingness to acknowledge systemic issues tied to Belgium's colonial history. When the Working Group released its final report in September 2019, it received scant media coverage, further illustrating Belgium's reluctance to engage with its colonial past at an institutional level. [61]

2.3 THE TURNING POINT: BLACK LIVES MATTER AND BEYOND (2020)

Right before the 60th anniversary of Congolese independence in June 2020, the global Black Lives Matter protests sparked an unprecedented reckoning with colonial symbols in Belgium. The international attention to the issue caused that in Brussels and other cities, long-standing activist demands for acknowledgment of Belgium's violent colonial history now gained public attention. For the first time, several monuments to King Leopold II were defaced or swiftly removed, including statues in Ekeren (Antwerp), Mons, Leuven, and Ghent.[62] These actions, alongside marches, polarized public opinion: some hailed the iconoclasm as overdue justice, while others continued to decry it as erasing history.[63]

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[59] Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 326–27; 'Nos réalisations', Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations, 5 June 2022, https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/a-propos/nos-realisations.
[60] Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 330; Gemeenteraad Kortrijk, '14/2021_GR_00029: Straatnaamgeving - Wijziging Straatnaam Koning Leopold II-Laan Naar Rosa Laperelaan - Definitief Goedkeuren.', Gemeenteraad Kortrijk, 8 February 2021, https://www.kortrijk.be/sites/kortrijk/files/2021-03/straatnaamwijziging-koning-leopold-ii-laan-naar-rosa-laperelaan.pdf; Nele Dooms, 'Stadsbestuur wijzigt straatnaam Leopold II-laan naar Leopoldlaan', Dendermonde, *hln.be*, 16 January 2020, https://www.hln.be/dendermonde/stadsbestuur-wijzigt-straatnaam-leopold-ii-laan-naar-leopoldlaan~a035da64/.
[61] Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 329.
[62] Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 330–31.
[63] Bernard Meeus, 'On ne va pas guérir le fléau du racisme en déboulonnant notre passé', *Le Soir Magazine*, 17 June 2020; Fleur Mees, 'Moeten standbeelden Leopold II weg? En moet koning Filip excuses

This time the wave of protests prompted Belgian officials into formal initiatives. On June 30, 2020 (the independence anniversary and climax of the protests), King Philippe expressed his "deepest regrets" for the atrocities of Leopold II's regime in Congo.[64] At the federal level, Parliament established a Special Commission on the Colonial Past in July 2020, tasking it with examining Belgium's colonial history in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi and formulating recommendations for reconciliation.[65]

The Belgian Parliamentary Commission on the Colonial Past had the mandate of investigating the legacy of Belgian colonial rule in the Congo Free State (1885–1908), the Belgian Congo (1908–1960), and the mandates in Rwanda and Burundi (1919–1962). Beyond historical inquiry, it was also expected to formulate recommendations for restitution, reconciliation, education, and structural measures against racism, thus acknowledging the colonial past's enduring impact on Belgian society.[66] However, as Mathys and Van Beurden, two of the participating experts, later observed, the commission's framework was shaped by an overly positivist understanding of history. The mandate expected the historians to "name the facts" and offer a straightforward

aanbieden voor koloniaal verleden? Dit vinden onze partijen', De Krant, *hln.be*, 16 June 2020, https://www.hln.be/de-krant/moeten-standbeelden-leopold-ii-weg-en-moet-koning-filip-excuses-aanbieden-voor-koloniaal-verleden-dit-vinden-onze-partijen~aaf34157/; '"Als we alle standbeelden moeten neerhalen die een link hebben met slavernij, blijven er niet veel over"', Nieuws, *Knack*, 21 June 2020, https://www.knack.be/nieuws/als-we-alle-standbeelden-moeten-neerhalen-die-een-link-hebben-met-slavernij-blijven-er-niet-veel-over/.

[64] *Colonialisme par la Belgique : en RDC, le roi Philippe exprime ses « plus profonds regrets pour les blessures, les exactions et les humiliations » du régime colonial*, 8 June 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/06/08/en-rdc-le-roi-des-belges-exprime-ses-plus-profonds-regrets-pour-les-blessures-les-exactions-et-les-humiliations-causees-par-le-colonialisme_6129438_3212.html; 'Discours du roi Philippe au Congo : des "profonds regrets" pour un "régime colonial" basé sur "l'exploitation" et "le racisme" - RTBF Actus', RTBF, accessed 22 April 2025, https://www.rtbf.be/article/discours-du-roi-philippe-au-congo-des-profonds-regrets-pour-un-regime-colonial-base-sur-l-exploitation-et-le-racisme-11008434; VRT NWS, 'Koning Filip betuigt "diepste spijt" in Congo: "Koloniale regime was gekenmerkt door discriminatie en racisme" | VRT NWS: nieuws', VRTNWS, 8 June 2022, https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2022/06/08/koning-in-congo-toespraak/.

[65] Goddeeris et al., *Colonial Congo*, 330–31.

[66] Annick et al., *Commission Spéciale Chargée d'examiner l'état Indépendant Du Congo (1885-1908) et Le Passé Colonial de La Belgique Au Congo (1908-1960), Au Rwanda et Au Burundi (1919-1962), Ses Conséquences et Les Suites Qu'il Convient d'y Réserver*, 3–14; Chambre des représentants de Belgique, *Rapport des experts – Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'État indépendant du Congo et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi, ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver*, DOC 55 1462/002 (Chambre des représentants de Belgique / Belgische Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers, 2021), 1–29, https://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1462/55K1462002.pdf.

consensus, which clashed with the interpretative nature of historical research and the diversity of voices within postcolonial historiography.[67]

It met regularly from July 2020 through December 2022. Over two years the commission organized 27 hearings and listening sessions with 144 individuals, experts, and civil society actors, including diaspora organizations, a fact-finding mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, and consultations with a multidisciplinary panel of 10 experts in history, law, philosophy, and art. The experts' preparatory report, officially submitted in October 2021, comprised 681 pages of historical analysis and reflections on memory, racism, and institutional reform.[68]

By December 2022, a draft final report with 128 proposed recommendations was prepared by late 2022. These included a formal apology by the Belgian state, measures for restitution of looted artifacts and human remains, improved access to colonial archives, investment in decolonial education, and structural policies to combat racism and discrimination. The core controversy in these recommendations was whether Belgium should issue a formal state apology for colonial violence. At the final vote, political consensus collapsed in December 2022 over the most symbolically significant recommendation: issuing a formal apology for colonial domination, violence, and exploitation, with the governing parties Open VLD, MR and CD&V withdrawing their support. Without agreement on this central issue, the remaining 127 recommendations were never adopted, and the final report did never officially get published, but February 2024 the RTBF obtained and released the 729-page report via a freedom of information

[67] Gillian Mathys and Sarah Van Beurden, 'History by Commission? The Belgian Colonial Past and the Limits of History in the Public Eye', *The Journal of African History* 64, no. 3 (2023): 336–37, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853723000683.

[68] Annick et al., *Commission Spéciale Chargée d'examiner l'état Indépendant Du Congo (1885-1908) et Le Passé Colonial de La Belgique Au Congo (1908-1960), Au Rwanda et Au Burundi (1919-1962), Ses Conséquences et Les Suites Qu'il Convient d'y Réserver*, 3–14; Chambre des représentants de Belgique, *Rapport des experts – Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'État indépendant du Congo et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi, ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver*, 1–29.

request, ensuring it could still enter public archives.[69] One month later, in March 2024, the 112-page final consolidated report was published.[70]

Observers noted that the parliamentary process ending in failure, signaled Belgium was "not yet ready to shake off its [colonial] past", as political considerations (including a looming 2024 election) overrode the push for official contrition.[71] And while no new parliamentary commission has replaced it, the process of the commission itself triggered public debates, surfaced unheard testimonies, and revealed ongoing wounds tied to colonial history. Memory, Rosoux argues, "breathes", it resurfaces unpredictably, and ignoring it does not erase its effects and even an incomplete or "failed" attempt to confront the past can set new processes of reckoning into motion.[72] In fact, the commission's very collapse can also be seen as further galvanizing bottom-up mobilization as the debate has increasingly migrated to local governments and activist networks, and municipalities continue to reassess colonial-era street names and memorials. This reinforces the idea, stressed by scholars and activists alike, that the reckoning with Belgium's colonial legacy would need to be driven by civil society rather than state-led mechanisms.[73]

In parallel, regional governments initiated their own reflection processes on colonial heritage. In Flanders, Minister of the Interior Bart Somers commissioned a practical guide in autumn 2020 titled *Guidelines for Dealing with Colonial References in Public*

[69] 'Voici le rapport sur le passé colonial belge : quand l'histoire continue de déranger notre monde politique - RTBF Actus', RTBF, accessed 15 April 2025, https://www.rtbf.be/article/voici-le-rapport-sur-le-passe-colonial-belge-quand-l-histoire-continue-de-deranger-notre-monde-politique-11324605;
Annick et al., *Commission Spéciale Chargée d'examiner l'état Indépendant Du Congo (1885-1908) et Le Passé Colonial de La Belgique Au Congo (1908-1960), Au Rwanda et Au Burundi (1919-1962), Ses Conséquences et Les Suites Qu'il Convient d'y Réserver*; Lieven Sioen, 'Laat werk Congocommissie niet voor niets geweest zijn', *De Standaard*, 21 December 2022, https://www.standaard.be/nieuws/laat-werk-congocommissie-niet-voor-niets-geweest-zijn/47514753.html; Belga, 'Geen overeenstemming in Congocommissie over excuses: liberalen verlaten de zitting', Nieuws, *Knack*, 19 December 2022, https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/politiek/geen-overeenstemming-in-congocommissie-over-excuses-liberalen-verlaten-de-zitting/.

[70] Chambre des représentants de Belgique, *Constats des experts - Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'État indépendant du Congo et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi, ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver* (Chambre des représentants de Belgique, 2024), https://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1462/55K1462006.pdf.

[71] Ketrin Jochecová, 'Belgium Still Struggling with Its Colonial Ghosts', *POLITICO*, 30 March 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/belgium-still-struggling-with-its-colonial-ghosts/.

[72] Rosoux, 'La mémoire respire'.

[73] Mathys and Beurden, 'History by Commission?', 341.

Spaces.[74] Developed by the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, this handbook was designed to support local authorities in navigating sensitive debates about colonial-era symbols, such as street names, monuments, and buildings. It offers a step-by-step framework for municipalities to engage with their residents and stakeholders in a constructive dialogue, aiming to foster a more inclusive public space. The guide outlines different approaches, from adding historical context to renaming streets or relocating monuments, and stresses the importance of public dialogue, historical research, and transparency throughout the decision-making process.[75] In addition to the guide, the Flemish authorities also developed an online visualization tool titled "Colonial References in Your Municipality", based on the digital appendix to the book *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, which provides an Excel file listing 563 public references to Belgium's colonial past, including buildings, busts, engravings, funerary monuments, memorials, chapels, paving stones, plaques, squares, statues, tombs, and street names. Among these, 226 street names across Belgium are identified as having direct colonial associations.[76]

Since the BLM protests, Brecht Warnez, member of the Flemish Parliament and alderman in Wingene, has consistently followed up on this issue. Each year since 2020, he has submitted a written parliamentary question inquiring about changes to street names with colonial connotations and about broader governmental efforts to support local decolonization initiatives. His first parliamentary question, submitted on 28 October 2020, inquired how many street names had been abolished over the past

[74] Annick et al., *Commission Spéciale Chargée d'examiner l'état Indépendant Du Congo (1885-1908) et Le Passé Colonial de La Belgique Au Congo (1908-1960), Au Rwanda et Au Burundi (1919-1962), Ses Conséquences et Les Suites Qu'il Convient d'y Réserver*, 508, 621.

[75] Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, 'Omgaan Met Koloniale Verwijzingen in de Publieke Ruimte: Handreiking Voor Lokale Besturen'; Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, 'Koloniale verwijzingen in de publieke ruimte', accessed 24 April 2025, https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/nl/wat-kunnen-we-voor-jou-doen/ondersteuning-voor-je-organisatie-of-lokaal-bestuur/verbinding/ondersteuning-bij-maatschappelijke-spanningen/koloniale-verwijzingen-in-de-publieke-ruimte.

[76] Matthew G. Stanard, 'Appendix-The_Leopard_the_Lion_and_the_Cock', 11 2023, https://lup.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Appendix-The_Leopard_the_Lion_and_the_Cock_19.11.2023.xlsx; Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, 'Koloniale verwijzingen in jouw gemeente', Agentschap Integratie & inburgering, accessed 24 April 2025, https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/nl/wat-kunnen-we-voor-jou-doen/ondersteuning-voor-je-organisatie-of-lokaal-bestuur/advies-en-begeleiding/omgaan-met-koloniale-verwijzingen-in-de-publieke-ruimte/koloniale-verwijzingen-in-jouw-gemeente.

decade, and how many of those referenced Belgium's colonial past. [77] This question was referred to the Data and Services Integration Division of the Agency Information Flanders, which collaborated with the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren to compile a dataset of colonial-era street names. Together, they developed a list of 184 street names in the Flemish, Brussels-Capital, and Walloon Regions that were considered to have a colonial association. The selection was based on the identification of key terms and references, developed in collaboration with the *AfrikaMuseum*, and applied to existing datasets on street nomenclature.[78] Interestingly enough this list is less exhaustive than the free digital appendix of *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock* which included 226 street names with colonial references.

This reduction in activity appears to reflect a broader trend already identified in a 2022 study by the University of Antwerp and the Royal Museum for Central Africa. That study, which examined the impact of political dynamics on the decolonization debate in Belgium, found a notable decline in public support for decolonization measures between 2020 and 2022. This was particularly evident for "subtractive" measures, those involving the removal or alteration of colonial references in public space, such as renaming streets or removing statues. The researchers attributed this decline to increased politicization and polarization surrounding symbolic decolonization initiatives.[79]

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[77] 'Schriftelijke Vraag 42 (2020-2021) | Lokale Besturen - Wijziging of Afschaffing Straatnamen', Vlaams Parlement, n.d., accessed 23 April 2025, https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/nl/parlementaire-documenten/schriftelijke-vragen/1439532; 'Schriftelijke Vraag 318 (2020-2021) | Lokale Besturen - Wijziging of Afschaffing Straatnamen (2)', Vlaams Parlement, n.d., accessed 23 April 2025, https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/nl/parlementaire-documenten/schriftelijke-vragen/1521643; 'Schriftelijke Vraag 349 (2021-2022) | Lokale Besturen - Wijziging of Afschaffing Straatnamen', Vlaams Parlement, n.d., accessed 23 April 2025, https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/nl/parlementaire-documenten/schriftelijke-vragen/1641321; 'Schriftelijke Vraag 336 (2022-2023) | Lokale Besturen - Wijziging of Afschaffing Straatnamen', Vlaams Parlement, n.d., accessed 23 April 2025, https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/nl/parlementaire-documenten/schriftelijke-vragen/1742232; 'Schriftelijke Vraag 12 (2024-2025) | Lokale Besturen - Wijziging of Afschaffing Straatnamen', Vlaams Parlement, n.d., accessed 23 April 2025, https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/nl/parlementaire-documenten/schriftelijke-vragen/1834746; 'Brecht Warnez', cd&v, accessed 23 April 2025, https://www.cdenv.be/brechtwarnez.

[78] Patricia Van Schuylenbergh and Jan Laporte, 'RE: Onderzoek straatnamen met een koloniaal verleden', personal communication, 5 November 2020; 'Schriftelijke Vraag 42 (2020-2021) | Lokale Besturen - Wijziging of Afschaffing Straatnamen'.

[79] Samira Azabar et al., *Dekolonisering, Erkend Maar Onbeantwoord: Een Onderzoek Naar de Impact van Politisering Op Het Publieke En Politieke Dekoloniseringsdebat in België*, with Aaron Broos et al. (Antwerp University, 2022), https://medialibrary.uantwerpen.be/files/53356/d7fdec07-f124-4fca-a81b-8f884f8f824b.pdf.

In the Brussels-Capital Region, State Secretary for Urbanism and Heritage Pascal Smet convened a working group composed of 16 experts from academia and civil society, supported by four representatives of Brussels regional administrations to examine the presence of colonial symbols in public space across the region.[80]

This initiative resulted in the February 2022 report entitled *Working on decolonizing public spaces in the Brussels Capital Region: reflection framework and recommendations*. The report emphasized that colonial markers, ranging from statues and plaques to street names and buildings, reflected a unilateral propagandistic narrative which excluded colonial subjects and their descendants. This asymmetry, they argued, perpetuated structural racism and failed to represent Brussels' contemporary, diverse population. It proposed a typology of interventions ranging from temporary contextualization to structural transformations such as removal, artistic reappropriation, or the creation of counter-monuments. Importantly, stressing that colonial legacies must not be erased, but critically engaged with.[81]

Building on the 2022 groundwork, Urban.Brussels integrated decolonization into broader regional strategies for urban planning, heritage policy, and cultural programming. The Brussels government adopted the *Action Plan 2024–2025 for the Decolonization of Public Space* in May 2023. The action plan includes 14 concrete measures across three main areas: regional-level initiatives, joint actions with Brussels' 19 municipalities, and collaborations with federal institutions. With a proposed budget allocated across multiple years and coordinated by Urban.brussels, the plan aspires to embed decolonization within the urban fabric and cultural consciousness of Brussels, transforming public space into a site of historical accountability and democratic dialogue. Related to street names the working group recommended to create a chronology of street names that should be changed as a priority.[82]

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[80] Annick et al., *Commission Spéciale Chargée d'examiner l'état Indépendant Du Congo (1885-1908) et Le Passé Colonial de La Belgique Au Congo (1908-1960), Au Rwanda et Au Burundi (1919-1962), Ses Conséquences et Les Suites Qu'il Convient d'y Réserver*, 332–33, 623; Groupe de travail sur la décolonisation de l'espace public, 'Communiqué de presse du GT sur la décolonisation de l'espace public en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale', Gouvernement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, 17 February 2022, https://cloud.urban.brussels/s/pqeZE8yGMSoni6Z.

[81] Werkgroep Dekolonisering van de Openbare Ruimte, *Voor de dekolonisering van de openbare ruimte in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest: een reflectiekader en aanbevelingen*, 8–11, 131–80.

[82] Urban.Brussels, *Naar een dekolonisatie van de openbare ruimte in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest. Actieplan mei 2023.* (Urban.Brussels, 2023), https://cloud.urban.brussels/s/oDcefJBarZjTpNs.

Compared to the Flemish approach, the Brussels approach is more centralized, and policy driven. Brussels invested in structural governance mechanisms, such as a dedicated coordinator and oversight committee, and allocated funding to implement long-term memory infrastructure. [83] Moreover, Brussels explicitly situates decolonization within the broader fight against racism and inequality, while the Flemish guide remains more focused on heritage management and local deliberation. Both models, however, reject one-size-fits-all solutions and converge on the need for historically informed, inclusive, and participatory engagement with colonial legacies in the public sphere.

In francophone Wallonia, the responses to colonial toponymy have been comparatively more locally driven. Answering to a parliamentary question on tackling colonial legacies in public spaces of mid 2020, the Walloon government proposed in mid-2020 that initiatives should avoid erasing history but instead emphasize contextualization. As Minister Pierre-Yves Dermagne stated, "history should not be erased but explained".[84] He suggested developing a participatory framework to guide municipalities in dealing with controversial colonial references, potentially including contextual plaques near contested statues and place names. However, no formal regional framework, similar to the Flemish or Brussels initiative was adopted: municipalities retained discretion over renaming or reinterpreting colonial references. Although the idea of drafting guidelines inspired by Brussels' participatory model was floated, Wallonia ultimately seems to prioritize encouraging local initiatives over imposing top-down measures.[85]

[83] Urban.Brussels, *Naar een dekolonisatie van de openbare ruimte in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest. Actieplan mei 2023.*

[84] Parlement de Wallonie, *La décolonisation de l'espace public. Question écrite n° 259 (2019-2020)* (Parlement de Wallonie, 2020), https://www.parlement-wallonie.be/pwpages?p=interp-questions-voir&type=28&iddoc=97919#:~:text=La%20d%C3%A9colonisation%20de%20l'espace%20public%20est%20une%20%C3%A9tape%20importante,une%20image%20st%C3%A9r%C3%A9otyp%C3%A9e%20des%20Africains.

[85] Parlement de Wallonie, *Compte rendu intégral – Commission du logement et des pouvoirs locaux*, C.R.I.C. n° 136 (2019-2020) (Parlement de Wallonie, 2020), 22–23, https://nautilus.parlement-wallon.be/Archives/2019_2020/CRIC/cric136.pdf; Parlement de Wallonie, *La décolonisation de l'espace public. Question écrite n° 259 (2019-2020)*; Parlement de Wallonie, *Les villes décoloniales. Question écrite N° 336 (2020-2021)* (Parlement de Wallonie, 2021), https://www.parlement-wallonie.be/content/print.php?print=interp-questions-voir.php&iddoc=105049&type=32.

2.4 Rules and Procedures for Changing Street Names in Belgium

In Belgium, the authority to name or rename streets is fundamentally local, guided by formal and informal procedures, which vary slightly across the regions of Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels-Capital Region.[86]

In the Brussels-Capital Region and Wallonia, municipal authorities are legally required to consult the Royal Commission for Toponymy and Dialectology (KCTD) when renaming streets. In Flanders, this is not mandatory but may still be sought voluntarily for linguistically and historically grounded advice. [87]

In Flanders, local authorities are empowered to change the names of public roads and squares without needing approval from higher-level bodies. However, the Flemish region recommends municipalities typically involve a local street-naming commission and/or cultural council early in the process, enabling the development of broadly supported proposals in collaboration with residents. [88]

[86] *Adviesverlening en richtlijnen voor straat- en gemeentenamen – Toponymie & dialectologie*, n.d., accessed 1 May 2025, https://www.toponymie-dialectologie.be/adviesverlening/.
[87] Werkgroep Dekolonisering van de Openbare Ruimte, *Voor de dekolonisering van de openbare ruimte in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest: een reflectiekader en aanbevelingen*, 191–93; *Adviesverlening en richtlijnen voor straat- en gemeentenamen – Toponymie & dialectologie*.
[88] Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, 'Omgaan Met Koloniale Verwijzingen in de Publieke Ruimte: Handreiking Voor Lokale Besturen', 26.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research employs a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative data analysis of street names with qualitative historical verification. The goal is to systematically map colonial-era street names across Belgium's regions, examine how these names have persisted or changed over time, and analyze factors that have influenced this. Quantitatively, the study leverages large-scale datasets of street names to identify patterns such as the prevalence of colonial street names and recent renaming trends. Qualitatively, identified names are cross-checked against historical records to confirm its colonial significance and context. This sequential approach ensures that raw data patterns are interpreted with accuracy: first generating a data-driven inventory of candidate colonial street names, then refining it through manual verification and context gathering. By combining numeric analysis (counts, distributions, correlations) with in-depth archival research, the methodology provides a comprehensive mapping of colonial toponyms in public space. The section is structured into different stages, Data Sources, Data Processing, Analytical Techniques, and Limitations, to transparently document how the data were collected, processed, analyzed, and what constraints affected the results.

3.1 DATA SOURCES

The study draws on official street name registers for all three regions of Belgium. For Flanders, the source is the Flemish Central Register of Addresses, which includes all street names on Flemish territory (with unique identifiers and status) from 2002 onward. Brussels-Capital Region data comes from the UrbIS – Adresses dataset maintained by the Brussels Regional Informatics Centre, which consolidates street name information from the 19 Brussels municipalities. For Wallonia, the ICAR project, serves as the regional address register.[89]

For Flanders and Wallonia, the regional datasets were obtained in a unified format through the federal BeSt (Belgian Streets and Addresses) open data initiative of FOD

[89] FOD BOSA, 'BeST: Adressen Met Hun Geografische Coördinaten', 31 December 2024, https://opendata.bosa.be/download/best/archive/best-full-20241231.zip.

BOSA, which publishes consolidated XML files of all Belgian addresses.[90] The dataset they offer for Wallonia, however, is not as detailed. Therefore, this thesis directly uses data from the ICAR database. The data used is also from the last week of December 2024, which ensures that all the data is from the same time period. [91]

To integrate and compare data across regions, the study relied on the national municipality identification code (the Statbel NIS/REFNIS code). Each street record in the address data is linked to a municipality via this code, enabling cross-referencing with other datasets. A 2019 reference file of municipality codes and names from Statbel (Belgian Statistics) was used to retrieve official municipality names in French and Dutch for reporting.[92] In addition, population statistics were gathered from Statbel's 2024 population dataset by place of residence, nationality, marital status, age and sex.[93]

To identify which street names have colonial connotations, three other datasets were used to compile a list of colonial-related names: (1) an inventory of colonial street names assembled in 2020 by *Digital Flanders* in collaboration with the *Royal Museum for Central Africa* (RMCA, Tervuren), (2) the 2023 digital appendix to Matthew G. Stanard's *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium*, and (3) the *Inventory of Colonial Traces* by Urban.Brussels.[94] By merging these three sources, it is possible to assemble a broad set of "colonial reference names" covering prominent colonial administrators, military figures, missionaries in colonial territories, as well as relevant place names (e.g., Congo, Kasai, Katanga). This composite list (with entries in Dutch and French) forms the basis for the tagging of street names.

To verify the colonial significance of possible colonial street names, several historical and biographical sources are consulted. The *Belgian Colonial Biography*, a multi-volume reference published by the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, is essentially a

[90] FOD BOSA, 'BeST: Adressen Met Hun Geografische Coördinaten'.
[91] ICAR, 'Wallonia Street Name', 27 December 2024, https://metawal.wallonie.be/geonetwork/srv/api/records/cbd93a53-87d1-4f1a-8a7a-751bfc982325.
[92] Statbel, 'REFNIS Code', 2019, https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/open-data/refnis-code.
[93] Statbel, 'Population by Place of Residence, Nationality, Marital Status, Age and Sex | Statbel', 2024, Belgian Statistical Office, https://statbel.fgov.be/en/open-data/population-place-residence-nationality-marital-status-age-and-sex-12.
[94] Stanard, 'Appendix-The_Leopard_the_Lion_and_the_Cock'; Digitaal Vlaanderen and Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 'Koloniale Straatnamen Met Gewest En Crab Info - Final 1', 2020, 1; Urban.Brussels, 'Inventaire des traces coloniales (DPC-DCE 2024-2025)', Inventaire du patrimoine architectural, accessed 4 May 2025, https://monument.heritage.brussels/fr/inventories/47.

comprehensive encyclopedia of individuals involved in Belgian colonial ventures. It includes colonial administrators, military personnel, missionaries, and other figures active in the Congo Free State (1885–1908), Belgian Congo (1908–1960), or Ruanda-Urundi (1922–1962). If a street appears to be named after a person, that person's presence in the colonial biography would confirm their colonial role and the timeframe of their activities.[95] Another resource was the KADOC mission heritage database (at KU Leuven), which contains archives and documentation on Catholic missionaries; this is particularly useful for verifying whether individuals (especially "fathers") served in the Belgian colonies or elsewhere. [96] In addition, for Brussels-region streets, the Urban.Brussels colonial traces inventory is an important reference. If a Brussels street was flagged in that inventory, it corroborated the tagging.[97] Finally, various scholarly works and local history sources were consulted on a case-by-case basis for contextual details (for example, municipal archives or press releases about recent street renamings).

3.2 Data Processing

The raw street name data from each region is downloaded in XML format via the BeSt Address open data service, or the ICAR project. Using Python 3 in a Jupyter Notebook environment, custom scripts are written to parse these XML and CVS files. The next step is to identify which street names in these datasets potentially referenced colonial figures or places. A list of colonial reference tokens is compiled from the two source lists (2020 and Stanard 2023). This results in a list of over 100 name tokens, including full surnames, partial name fragments, and relevant toponyms. Examples of tokens are names like Lippens, Dhanis, Ryckmans, Leopold II, as well as terms like Congo, Afrika/Afrique, Kasai, etc., which might appear in street names. [98]

[95] Institut Royal Colonial Belge / Koninklijk Belgisch Koloniaal Instituut, *Biographie Coloniale Belge / Belgische Koloniale Biografie* (Librairie FALK Fils / Boekhandel FALK Zoon, Georges Van Campenhout, 1948), https://www.kaowarsom.be/nl/biographical-collections/notes-search.
[96] KADOC. Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum voor Religie, Cultuur en Samenleving, 'Missionarissen in Het Straatbeeld · Religie, Cultuur En Samenleving - Erfgoed Online', KADOC Erfgoed, accessed 4 May 2025, https://www.kadocheritage.be/collections/show/26.
[97] Urban.Brussels, 'Inventaire des traces coloniales (DPC-DCE 2024-2025)'.
[98] Stanard, 'Appendix-The_Leopard_the_Lion_and_the_Cock'; Digitaal Vlaanderen and Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 'Koloniale Straatnamen Met Gewest En Crab Info - Final 1', 1.

A Python function scans each street name to check if any tokens appear as substrings. When a match occurs, the function tags the street as a colonial candidate and records the matched token. For example, the street "Rue de Congo" is flagged because "Congo" belongs to the colonial list. This produces a list of candidate colonial streets for each region. While the automated tagging ensures consistency and completeness when scanning thousands of streets, it intentionally prioritizes inclusion (accepting some false positives) to avoid missing genuine colonial street names.

Each candidate street name flagged by the algorithm was manually verified, using historical sources (colonial biographies, heritage databases, etc.). The verification step strictly enforces inclusion criteria: only names tied to Congo or Ruanda-Urundi remain. Missionaries linked to other African regions are excluded, even if initially flagged (e.g., Pater Dom, a missionary in South Africa, is removed).[99] This process led to a curated list of *confirmed* colonial street names, each of which was classified according to its current status: *in use*, *retired*, or *proposed*.

Once confirmed, the data is organized spatially. Lists are aggregated at the municipal, regional, and national levels to produce a structured overview of colonial street name distribution across Belgium. To show patterns visually, the online tool Datawrapper.de is used, creating a map with showing the amount of colonial street names per municipality.

To assess how Belgium's street-level commemorative landscape has evolved, the study conducts a status analysis. For this purpose, street names are categorized as "unchanged" (still officially in use), or "retired" (no longer active) with counts calculated per region. These classifications enable a comparative examination of renaming patterns across regions. For example, Brussels (with its active debates on decolonizing public space) might show a higher proportion of renamings compared to Flanders. These figures are crucial for understanding how public memory is being re-negotiated: a low renaming rate would suggest that colonial street names remain largely embedded, whereas a higher rate indicates a significant shift in commemorative landscape. The study also documents renamed streets as illustrative examples. For instance, the renaming of

[99] LH, 'Geschenkenbeurs "Mensen met een groot hart steunen in alle kontinenten Affligemse missionarissen"', *De Voorpost* (Aalst), 16 December 1988.

Koning Leopold II-laan to *Rosa Laperrelaan* in Kortrijk exemplifies policy-driven change at the municipal level. By cataloguing such cases, the analysis bridges quantitative trends with real-world political action, situates renaming efforts within their local contexts, and highlights timelines of change.

Further, a typology of commemorative references is developed. Tags (e.g. *Leopold*, *Stanley*, *Kasai*) are grouped thematically and linguistically (e.g. *père*, *pater*, *father*) to reveal which kinds of colonial figures are most commemorated. Frequency counts are generated per region, offering insight into regional variations in the symbolic representation of colonial memory.

In addition, proportion analysis is conducted to calculate what share of total street names in each region bore confirmed colonial references. These figures, derived by dividing the number of confirmed colonial street names by the total street name count (from XML and CSV address datasets), provide a sense of how prevalent colonial commemorations remain in the street-name landscape.

Finally, the study pursues several correlation analyses. These include tests to see whether municipalities with higher numbers of colonial street names also had larger populations, or higher percentages of foreign residents. These patterns are then visualized using scatterplots (generated for each region and for Belgium as a whole) that include trendlines to indicate the strength and direction of associations.

3.3 LIMITATIONS

Every methodological choice in this study comes with limitations that must be acknowledged. First, there are temporal limitations in the street name data. For example, the Flemish address register begins in 2002, omitting earlier post-colonial renamings (e.g., 1960s–1980s) and potentially undercounting retired colonial street names. While manual cross-checks mitigate this for high-profile cases (e.g., *Koning Leopold II-laan* in Kortrijk, renamed in 2021 but absent from 2024 data), reliance on administrative sources risks underreporting due to update lags. Future research could address this by consulting older maps or city council archives, but that was beyond the scope of this research.

Second, token-based identification assumes colonial references match predefined surnames or place names. While comprehensive reference lists and partial matching (e.g., “de Deken” capturing “Victor De Dekenstraat”) minimize false negatives, lesser-known colonial figures outside these lists may escape detection. Conversely, the broad matching produced some false positives, names that match a colonial term but actually honor someone or something else. This is addressed through manual verification, but human error in verification is also a factor. In rare ambiguous cases, a street could conceivably be named after two people with the same surname (one colonial, one not). This research does not count street names, unless evidence supported the colonial link. This conservative approach may exclude a few borderline cases.

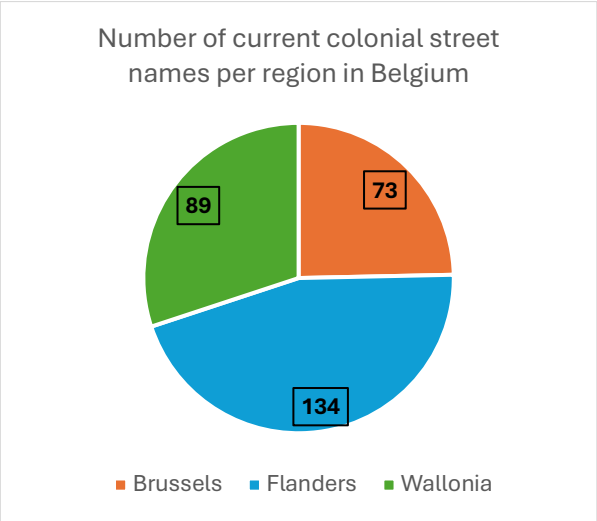
Third, scope constraints narrow “colonial street names” to Belgian colonial actors in Central Africa (Congo, Ruanda-Urundi). Commemorations of non-Belgian colonial figures, broader colonial themes, or Congolese/Rwandan individuals fall outside the analysis. While this focus ensures relevance to Belgian public memory, it excludes comparative dimensions of colonial toponymy.

Despite these limitations, the methodology’s integration of automated identification and manual verification ensures analytical rigor. Explicit acknowledgment of historical data gaps, administrative inconsistencies, and scope boundaries clarifies interpretive parameters: results reflect reliable trends where evidence aligns, while flagged constraints guide cautious extrapolation. These limitations highlight avenues for future work, such as archival map analysis or expanded commemoration typologies. Ultimately, the approach succeeds in its dual aim of mapping colonial memory in a literal sense (documenting colonial street names inscribed on Belgian streets) and critically evaluating how this symbolic landscape has, or has not, shifted in tandem with postcolonial discourse.

4 Analysis of colonial Street Names

4.1 Identification of current and abolished colonial street names

As of 2024, there are 296 confirmed colonial street names in Belgium. Of these, 134 are located in Flanders, 73 in Brussels, and 89 in Wallonia. However, since regions differ vastly in numbers of streets, absolute numbers can be misleading. Therefore, it is essential to contextualize these figures relative to the total number of street names in each region.



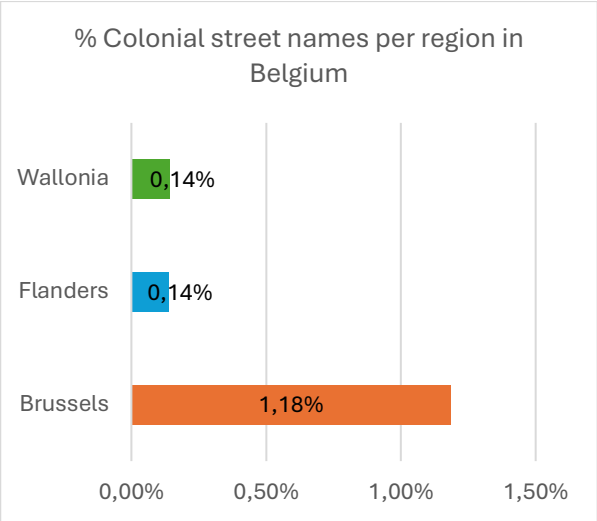


Figure 1: Number of current colonial street names per region in Belgium

Figure 2: % Colonial street names per region in Belgium

This is calculated by comparing the number of colonial street names with the total number of street names, based on official datasets. In Flanders, there are 134 colonial street names out of a total of 95,674 street names, representing approximately 0,14%. In Brussels, 73 out of 6,164 street names are colonial, which is a notably higher proportion of 1,18%. In Wallonia, 89 colonial street names were identified from a total of 62,852, amounting to 0,14%. Looking at the national level, there are 296 colonial street names out of 164,690 nationwide, representing about 0.18%.

These figures reveal a stark contrast between absolute and proportional presence. Although Flanders has the highest number of colonial street names, their proportion is

the same as in Wallonia. In contrast, Brussels with the lowest amount of colonial street names, exhibits the highest density, with colonial street names making up 1,18% of the entire street name landscape.

According to the available datasets, only four colonial street names in Belgium have been officially changed to remove their colonial references, but this is not a correct representation of reality. For example, in Kortrijk, the street formerly known as Koning *Leopold II-laan* was renamed *Rosalaperelalaan* on 1 May 2021, following a town council decision on 8 February 2021. However, this change is not reflected in the Flemish street name database, even though the new name does appear in municipal records. The same is the case for Mechelen where the *Van Kerckhovenstraat* was renamed *Stephensonstraat* in 2023. This discrepancy highlights the limitations of relying only on centralized datasets and underscores the importance of cross-referencing official records with other sources. A similar issue arises in Balen, where the dataset shows that the street name *Nieuwe Congostraat* has retired, yet the name is still in existence. This possibly indicates that only a segment of the street was renamed. Nevertheless, even with these inconsistencies, it is noteworthy that all four found changes to colonial street names have occurred within Flanders.

In sum, most colonial street names in Belgium remain unchanged, even amid increasing public and political attention. The findings highlight Brussels as the region with the most visible colonial legacy relative to its street network, while Flanders is the only region where actual renamings have occurred, though even there, changes are minimal and inconsistently recorded. This illustrates the persistence of colonial memory in public space and the institutional inertia.

4.2 Spatial Distribution of Colonial Street Names

To gain a more precise understanding of where colonial street names are found, this thesis maps their geographical distribution across Belgian municipalities. This reveals both regional clusters and local anomalies, showing that while all three regions contain such names, their prevalence and concentration differ markedly, leading to several conclusions.

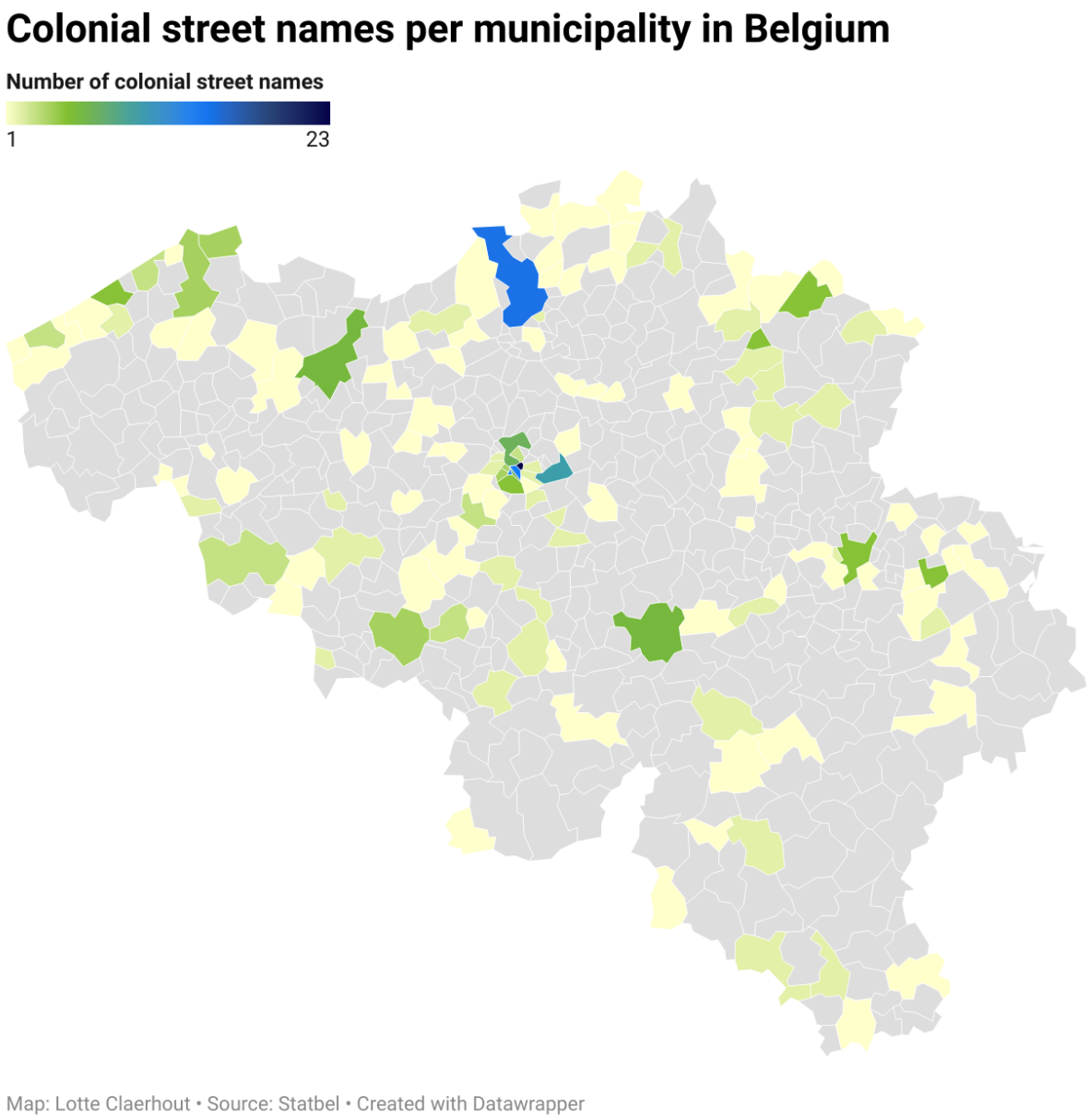


FIGURE 3: COLONIAL STREET NAMES PER MUNICIPALITY IN BELGIUM

Most colonial street names can be found in Flanders, mainly in larger cities and historical administrative centers such as Antwerp (15), Tervuren (10), and Ghent (6). Notably, all coastal municipalities, except Bredene, contain at least one colonial street name. Beyond these clusters, the overall distribution remains relatively diffuse, with colonial street names scattered across the region, including in smaller towns and rural areas. The presence of the high number of colonial street names in Tervuren can be explained through its historical role as the location of the Royal Museum for Central

Africa, which was originally established by King Leopold II to showcase Belgian colonial achievements.[100]

In Brussels, the 73 found colonial street names are highly concentrated in a few municipalities, particularly in Etterbeek (23), Ixelles (14) and Brussels City (7). Ten out of the sixteen municipalities in the Brussels-Capital Region contain at least one colonial street name, with over half of them located in Etterbeek alone. Although Brussels has fewer municipalities than Flanders or Wallonia, the relative density of colonial street names is the highest nationally.

In Wallonia, the pattern is more dispersed. Most colonial street names are found in mid-sized municipalities such as Namur (6), Verviers (5), Liège (5), and Mons (4) often with no more than one or two examples per town. In many municipalities, colonial street names are entirely absent.

Another notable pattern is the urban–rural divide. Colonial street names seem disproportionately concentrated in provincial capitals, major cities, and municipalities with historical or infrastructural significance. To confirm if this assumption is valid this thesis will later do a correlation analysis between the presence of colonial street names and the population size of a municipality

By combining these observations with the earlier proportion analysis, this distribution confirms a central premise of this thesis: that the colonial past is remembered unevenly across Belgium, not just in terms of political discourse, but also in the toponymic fabric of everyday life. Some cities have concentrated memoryscapes of empire, while in others colonial street names are completely absent. This variation sets the stage for a closer look at what kinds of colonial references are most common, which follows in the typological breakdown in the next section.

[100] Hélène Bocard, 'Trois musées face à leur passé colonial : Bruxelles, Amsterdam et Paris', *Hommes & migrations. Revue française de référence sur les dynamiques migratoires*, no. 1326 (July 2019): 174–75, 1326, https://doi.org/10.4000/hommesmigrations.9877.

4.3 Typology of Colonial Street Names

Beyond how many and where colonial street names appear, it is equally important to ask what kinds of references these names contain. The toponymic landscape of Belgian colonial memory is not monolithic: some names honour monarchs or military officers, others commemorate colonial locations, missionaries, or refer to broader imperial narratives. This thesis categorizes these names by tag to understand which historical figures, events, or places are most commemorated, and how these differ between regions.

To do this, each confirmed colonial street name was assigned a matched tag, based on either the person or concept it refers to (e.g., Leopold II, Congo, Lippens). Similar terms were then grouped semantically or linguistically. For example, streets named Pater Neyens or Père Cambier, were grouped under the label "missionary." A summary of the most frequent tags is presented below:

Tag	Total count	Flanders	Wallonia	Brussels
Congo	47	28	17	2
Leopold II	34	13	18	6
Missionary	21	19	1	1
Colony	17	8	5	4
Jacques de Dixmude	14	1	10	3
Lambermont	14	2	9	3
Henry Stanley	10	4	3	3
Lippens	9	8	0	1
Brialmont	8	5	2	1
Africa	7	5	0	2
Tabora	7	5	1	1

Table 1: Summary most frequent colonial tags

Three key patterns stand out. Firstly, the most frequently commemorated theme is the colonial project of "Congo" itself. 47 street names directly reference Congo, including *Congostraat*, *Rue du Congo*, and *Congolaan*. These are particularly prevalent in Flanders and Wallonia, suggesting a form of symbolic appropriation of territory rather than

personal commemoration. This is further supported by the fact that Africa is also a very common reference in Belgian street names.

King Leopold II remains a powerful symbolic figure. 34 streets are named after him, located across the regions in Belgium.

Religious figures, particularly Catholic missionaries, form a significant third group. The tag "missionary" includes names like Pater Neyens, Père Cambier or more generally Pères Blancs, who were involved in missionary work in Central Africa.[101] Street names referring to missionaries who were active in Belgian colonies are mainly found in Flanders, reflecting both the Catholic imprint on Flemish public culture and the historically strong role of Flemish missionary congregations in the Belgian colonies.

Other individuals, such as military officers and administrators, appear less frequently but still contribute to the symbolic architecture of empire. In many cases, these names reflect local pride in figures who had colonial careers, especially in cities where such individuals were born or politically connected.

Finally, we also encounter names that reference locations tied to colonial military campaigns. Tabora, for instance, refers to a key town in the Belgian Congo and the site of colonial violence during World War I. These examples show how geographic toponymy can function as a subtle layer of imperial commemoration, sometimes even more enduring than references to individuals.

In sum, the typology reveals that Belgium's colonial street names primarily celebrate territorial possession, religious mission, and heroic leadership, three central pillars of imperial narrative. These findings underscore how colonial ideology remains embedded in public space, not necessarily through overt glorification, but through everyday references that perpetuate a selective version of history.

[101] 'Neyens Leo · Religie, Cultuur En Samenleving - Erfgoed Online', accessed 3 May 2025, https://www.kadocheritage.be/items/show/11035; Marcel Storme, *Pater Cambier En De Stichting Van De Kasai-Missie* (Koninklijke academie voor overzeese wetenschappen, 1964); Urban.Brussels, 'Rue des Pères Blancs', Inventaire du patrimoine architectural, accessed 3 May 2025, https://monument.heritage.brussels/fr/0/Rue_des_Peres_Blancs/10401133.

4.4 Correlation analysis

To better understand the dynamics behind the presence of colonial street names in Belgium, this thesis examines whether the total population per municipality and the percentage of foreign residents are statistically associated with the number of colonial street names per municipality. While correlations do not indicate causality, they can offer important clues about the structural conditions under which colonial memory exists in the public space.[102]

Using Pearson correlation coefficients, this thesis tests whether these variables correlate with the number of current colonial street names. The results are broken down per region, as well as calculated for Belgium as a whole. Key correlations are visualized using scatterplots with trendlines. Due to the very limited number of retired colonial street names across Belgium (only four in total), it was not possible to conduct a meaningful national analysis for abolished names.

	Correlation with population	Correlation with % Foreign Residents
All Belgium	r = 0.5284 (p = 0.0000)	r = 0.5303 (p = 0.0000)
Flanders	r = 0.7663 (p = 0.0000)	r = 0.3828 (p = 0.0009)
Wallonia	r = 0.6420 (p = 0.0000)	r = 0.3203 (p = 0.0194)
Brussels	r = 0.0846 (p = 0.7737)	r = 0.6452 (p = 0.0127)

Table 2: Summary of Pearson correlations between current colonial street names and demographic indicators (total population, % foreign residents) per region. Significance threshold: $p < 0.05$.

[102] Alan Agresti, 'Linear Regression and Correlation', in *Statistical Methods for the Social Sciences, Global Edition* (Pearson Education, Limited, 2018).

4.4.1 Population size and colonial street names

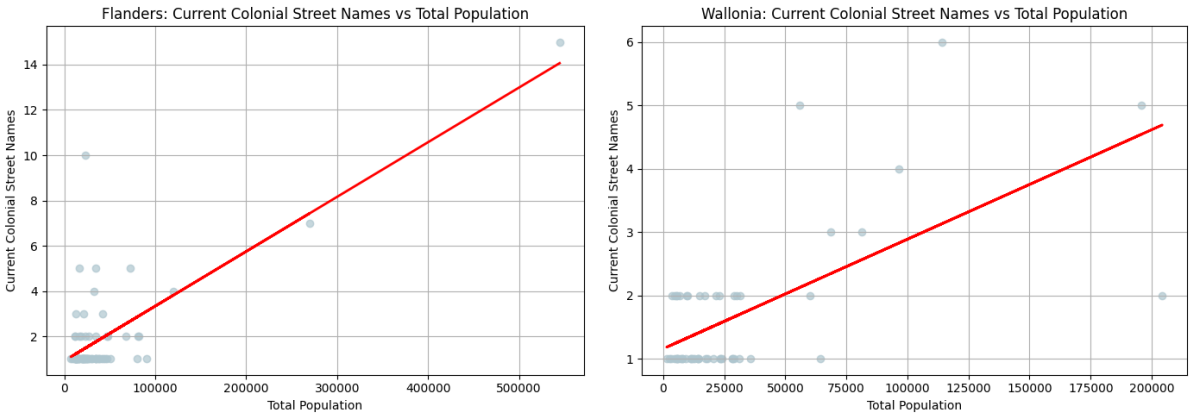


Figure 4: Wallonia - Current colonial street names vs total population per municipality

Figure 5: Flanders - Current colonial street names vs total population per municipality

Across Belgium, there is a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between total population and the number of current colonial street names ($r = 0.5284$, $p = 0.0000$). This relationship is particularly strong in Flanders ($r = 0.7663$, $p = 0.0000$), and to a lesser extent in Wallonia ($r = 0.6420$, $p = 0.0000$). By contrast, in Brussels there is no meaningful correlation ($r = 0.0846$, $p = 0.7737$), likely due to the small number of municipalities and the high concentration of colonial street names in certain communes (e.g., Etterbeek, Brussels City).

These results suggest that larger municipalities in Flanders and Wallonia are more likely to have colonial street names. This may be due to the fact that larger cities were historically more involved in the colonial project and therefore more likely to name streets after colonial figures, events, or territories. It may also indicate that once colonial toponymy is institutionalized, it tends to persist unless actively contested.

4.4.2 Percentage of foreign residents

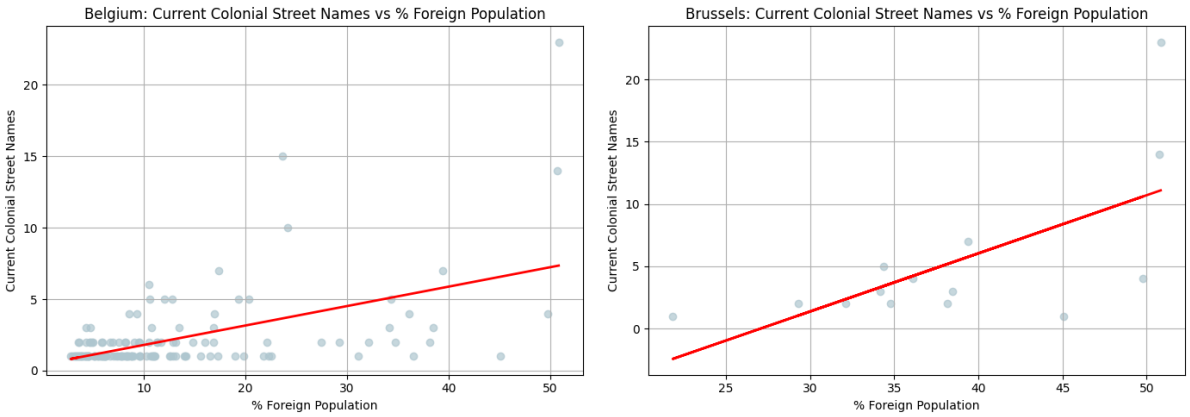


Figure 6: Belgium - current colonial street names vs % of foreign population per municipality

Figure 7: Brussels - current colonial street names vs % of foreign population per municipality

The correlation between the percentage of foreign residents and colonial street names is also notable. At the national level, there is a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between the percentage of foreign residents and the number of current colonial street names ($r = 0.5303$, $p = 0.0000$). This relation is particularly strong in Brussels ($r = 0.6452$, $p = 0.0127$), while also reaching statistical significance in Flanders ($r = 0.3828$, $p = 0.0009$) and Wallonia ($r = 0.3203$, $p = 0.0194$). This indicates that more diverse municipalities are more likely to retain colonial street names.

This is a counterintuitive finding, as one might intuitively expect that municipalities with a more diverse population would be more inclined to challenge colonial commemorations. Yet the data suggest that places with higher foreign populations often continue to host colonial commemorations. One explanation could be that these municipalities tend to be larger urban centers, which, especially in Flanders and Wallonia, correlate with a higher number of colonial street names. Alternatively, the pattern may reflect a disconnect between a civil push for change and institutional memory: diversity at the population level does not necessarily translate into shifts in commemorative policy.

4.4.3 Summary of key findings and interpretive synthesis

These results underline a multilayered pattern of how colonial history is inscribed in the urban landscape. Firstly, the identification and proportional distribution of colonial street names by region (Section 4.1) indicates significant regional disparities. The data show that colonial commemorative names are not evenly spread, for example, Flanders accounts for almost half of all identified colonial-themed street names. Yet it is Brussels that has the highest percentage of colonial street names (1,18%). Such imbalances suggest that certain regions have retained a much stronger colonial imprint in their toponymy than others. This regional pattern underscores that collective memory of the colonial past is spatially selective, with some parts of the country visibly commemorating colonial figures and events while these references are less visible in other parts.

Secondly, the spatial distribution of colonial street names across municipalities (Section 4.2) further emphasizes the unevenness of colonial commemoration. The majority of colonial-named streets are concentrated in a relatively small number of municipalities, primarily major cities and historic administrative centers. By contrast, many smaller towns and rural municipalities host no colonial references at all or only a few. This clustering effect indicates that colonial memory in public space tends to be anchored in specific locales, likely those that were focal points of imperial power or economic activity. The spatial pattern suggests that colonial street names often persist where they were originally endowed with symbolic importance (such as capital cities, former colonial ports, or garrison towns).

Thirdly, the typological categorization of colonial commemorative references (Section 4.3) reveals what aspects of the colonial past are being remembered and highlighted. The analysis identified several distinct categories of colonial street names, with personal names of colonial figures emerging as the dominant type. This typological breakdown indicates that the colonial memory embedded in the urban environment is largely personified: it centers on heroes or agents of empire, reinforcing a narrative of history told through individual “great men.” Herein, it is apparent that public commemorations simplify complex histories by focusing on iconic representatives, shaping collective memory around a selective glorification of the past.

Finally, the correlation analysis linking the presence of colonial street names with contemporary demographic factors (Section 4.4) provides insight into how current social contexts relate to the persistence of colonial commemorations. These results underline that colonial street names are most concentrated in larger, more diverse municipalities. Additionally, the analysis showed that municipalities with large foreign populations still host many colonial street names. This may point to a gap between demographic representation and symbolic inclusion. One might expect that increased diversity would lead to greater scrutiny of public space and its commemorative functions. Yet the data suggest otherwise; currently greater diversity does not necessarily lead to less colonial street names, or their abolishment.

As memory scholars such as Samuel Merrill and Duncan Bell have argued, the power to shape urban memoryscapes is not evenly distributed. Instead, it tends to rest with institutional actors, local governments, heritage commissions, cultural elites. This has been described as mnemonic inequality: while many communities inhabit the city, only some have the ability to inscribe their histories into its symbolic fabric.[103] This way colonial street names remain part of what Jan and Aleida Assmann call cultural memory: durable, institutionalized, and often unexamined unless deliberately challenged.[104]

In sum, this reinforces a central conclusion of this analysis: Belgium's colonial street names persist where they are most entrenched, physically, historically, and institutionally, even as the social context around them transforms. The gap between who lives in the city and whose past is commemorated on its map reveals the limits of symbolic decolonization when not accompanied by political will and inclusive decision-making.

[103] Vikas Kumar Choudhary, 'The Promise of Memory: Politics of Memory and Caste Inequality in Collective Memory Consolidation', *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 5, no. 2 (2024): 213–14.
[104] 'Cultural Identity and Political Imagination', in *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, ed. Jan Assmann (Cambridge University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511996306.007.

5 Renaming colonial street names: Local case studies in Balen, Dendermonde, Ghent, Kortrijk, and Mechelen

While most colonial street names in Belgium remain unchanged, a few municipalities have taken concrete steps to change their commemorative landscape. This section examines four cases where renaming or debates around renaming have taken place. These cases are not representative of Belgium as a whole but provide valuable insight into how local political cultures, activist pressure, and memory frameworks shape responses to colonial toponymy.

From partial renaming to full replacement, and from outright rejection of change to carefully negotiated compromises, they highlight the tensions between historical legacy and contemporary values. In each case, memory was not simply inherited but actively debated, negotiated, or contested. The street thus becomes more than a physical location; it transforms into a *lieu de mémoire*, a site where the past is reinterpreted in the present.

What follows is a brief synthesis of each case, structured around triggers for change, political dynamics, arguments used, and the outcome.

5.1 Balen: The Case of the *Congostraat* (2020)

The municipality of Balen, located in the province of Antwerp, initially drew attention in this study because it was flagged in the dataset as having a retired colonial street name. Upon closer inspection, however, the *Nieuwe Congostraat* still appears on Google Maps, suggesting that only part of the street may have been renamed, or that a name change was proposed but never formalized in full.[105]

Still, the case of Balen is noteworthy, not only for its ambiguous data status but also because of the discussion around another street; the *Congostraat*. In October 2020, following the Black Lives Matter protests, Flemish Minister Bart Somers issued a

[105] Google, 'Nieuwe Congostraat, 2490 Balen, België', 2025, https://g.co/kgs/9fZoGJn.

guideline to all municipalities advising them to reconsider colonial references in public space. This sparked debate in Balen around its *Congostraat* and the annual "Congo Kermis" funfair.

Vlaams Belang (VB), the far-right nationalist party, quickly opposed any form of renaming. VB councilor Bert Deckers framed the ministerial recommendation as "liberal symbolic politics" and argued that *Congostraat* had no colonial connotation. Instead, he claimed it referred to a local nickname predating formal Belgian colonization, or to soot-covered factory workers who had supposedly reminded locals of Congolese imagery, invoking oral folklore to disassociate the name from Belgium's violent imperial history. The name, according to the local Vlaams Belang party, does not commemorate colonial conquest but reflects "local heritage." Renaming it, they claim, would amount to falsifying history.[106]

In Balen, the discussion was not sufficient to trigger such a transformation. The *Congostraat* remained, largely unexamined, its coloniality denied and its commemorative power left intact. As such, Balen illustrates the enduring symbolic inertia of colonial street names in municipalities where local political cultures are resistant to symbolic change.

5.2 Dendermonde: Renaming by reduction - From *Leopold II-laan* to *Leopoldlaan* (2019)

In contrast to Balen's inertia, Dendermonde (East Flanders) took the step of renaming a colonial street. In March 2019, the city council voted to remove the Roman numeral "II" from *Koning Leopold II-laan*, leaving it simply as *Leopoldlaan*. Though the change is minimal in form, it signals a symbolic shift in how the city engages with its colonial past.

Surprisingly, the initial proposal came from the far-right Vlaams Belang. Federal MP and local councilor Barbara Pas argued forcefully that King Leopold II, widely held responsible for mass violence in the Congo Free State, should not be publicly honoured.

[106] Lokaal @ Vlaams Belang, 'Vlaams Belang vraagt bescherming namen "Congostraat" en '…', Vlaams Belang Balen, accessed 5 May 2025, https://balen.vlaamsbelang.org/nl/site/nieuws/vlaams-belang-vraagt-bescherming-namen-congostraat-en-congo-kermis.

In her contestation of the street name, she cited estimates of up to ten million Congolese deaths and explicitly compared Leopold II to figures such as Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, invoking a moral imperative: "no civilized society should commemorate a mass murderer." With the right-wing opposition advocating for removal, the governing majority, composed of CD&V (Christian democratic) and N-VA (Flemish nationalist, conservative), opted for a pragmatic compromise. They agreed to drop the numeral "II," arguing that the street could now ambiguously refer to Leopold I or simply Leopold as a neutral name. The decision was also presented as minimally disruptive: most locals already referred to the street as *Leopoldlaan*, and the change required fewer bureaucratic updates.[107]

In this sense, the renaming in Dendermonde represents a tactic of memory softening rather than erasure. By subtly modifying the name, the city avoided explicit confrontation with colonial memory while still responding to calls for symbolic reform. Yet this case also reveals the political calculus behind memory decisions. Renaming here became a pre-emptive containment strategy: by conceding a minor change, the majority avoided ceding the moral high ground to the far-right, and simultaneously prevented more activist demands from gaining momentum.

From a memory studies perspective, Dendermonde's choice echoes Jan and Aleida Assmann's notion of cultural memory, a form of institutional memory that persists unless actively reshaped. The partial renaming did not replace colonial memory with a new commemorative narrative; rather, it allowed the ambiguous continuity of symbolic infrastructure, avoiding both celebration and full repudiation.

5.3 Ghent: From Leopold II to Floraliën - A Model of Deliberate Decolonization (2019–2022)

The city of Ghent (East Flanders) is an example of pro-active municipal engagement with colonial memory. Unlike Dendermonde or Balen, where change was externally triggered

[107] Tom De Decker, 'Leopold II-laan in Dendermonde wordt Leopoldlaan | VRT NWS: nieuws', *VRTNWS*, 22 March 2019, https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2019/03/22/leopold-ii-laan-in-dendermonde-wordt-leopoldlaan/; 'Leopold II - Laan wordt Leopoldlaan', Vlaams Belang Dendermonde, accessed 5 May 2025, https://dendermonde.vlaamsbelang.org/nl/site/nieuws/leopold-ii-laan-wordt-leopoldlaan/.

or resisted, Ghent renamed the *Koning Leopold II-laan* as part of a broader decolonization agenda, initiated by the city itself. Therefore, the process was shaped not only by top-down political will but also by sustained civil society engagement.[108]

In April 2019, Ghent established a Decolonization Working Group tasked with identifying and advising on colonial-era references in the urban landscape. This predated wave of Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, which underscores the city's early commitment to rethinking public memory. The group, led by alderwoman Tine Heyse (Groen), included activists, historians, and community representatives. One of its recommendations was to rename the street bearing Leopold II's name.[109]

At the same time, *Koning Leopold II-laan* had become a site of public contestation. The nearby bust of Leopold II in Zuidpark had been defaced multiple times with paint and graffiti during protests, especially the rise of BLM in Belgium. The city removed the statue in June 2020, marking an important moment in Ghent's symbolic break with its colonial past. Eventually, in January 2021, the city council approved the street renaming. [110] Resistance was present, particularly from N-VA and Vlaams Belang. However, Ghent's governing coalition, Open VLD, Groen, Vooruit, and CD&V, held a comfortable majority, and the motion passed.[111]

Rather than replacing Leopold II with an anti-colonial figure like Lumumba, an option raised but ultimately postponed, Ghent opted for a locally rooted alternative: *Floraliënlaan*. The new name was announced in September 2021 and implemented in June 2022. The name refers to the city's Floraliën flower festival, which is held in the

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[108] Stad Gent, *Dekoloniseer Mijn Stad: Rapport Met Aanbevelingen* (Gent, 2020), 2, https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/media/documents/Dekoloniseer%20mijn%20stad_Rapport%20met%20aanbevelingen_gemarkeerd.pdf; Stad Gent, *Stad Gent dekoloniseert: Antwoord op het rapport 'Dekoloniseer mijn stad'* (Stad Gent, 2021), 6, https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/media/documents/Stad%20Gent%20dekoloniseert%20-%20Antwoord%20op%20rapport%20met%20aanbevelingen.pdf.

[109] Stad Gent, *Dekoloniseer Mijn Stad: Rapport Met Aanbevelingen*, 2; Stad Gent, *Stad Gent dekoloniseert: Antwoord op het rapport 'Dekoloniseer mijn stad'*, 6; Stad Gent, 'Op weg naar dekolonisering', accessed 5 May 2025, https://stad.gent/nl/mondiaal/op-weg-naar-dekolonisering.

[110] Redactie Knack, 'Gent zal Koning Leopold II-laan nieuwe naam geven', Nieuws, *Knack*, 21 January 2021, https://www.knack.be/nieuws/gent-zal-koning-leopold-ii-laan-nieuwe-naam-geven/; Stad Gent, *Dekoloniseer Mijn Stad: Rapport Met Aanbevelingen*.

[111] Gemeenteraad Gent, *Amendement van Het College van Burgemeester En Schepenen Betreffende Het Voorstel Raadsbesluit van Sonja Welvaert: Naamsverandering Koning Leopold II Laan* (Gemeenteraad Gent, 2019), https://ebesluitvorming.gent.be/zittingen/19.0129.0596.7755/agendapunten/19.0423.4405.1863;jsessionid=F4A477F7F31CB62692571B6282DAC174.

adjacent *Citadelpark*. This decision reflects a strategic act of re-memory: the city moved away from imperial glorification toward a celebratory, inclusive, and non-polarizing local heritage reference.[112] To ensure public support, Ghent implemented several support measures: residents received financial compensation (e.g., €50 per household), a mobile service helped update ID cards, and the name change was linked to the reopening of the flower exhibition.[113]

Ghent's approach embodies what memory studies scholars describe as a purposeful reframing of the urban memoryscape. The renaming not only removed a controversial figure but also reaffirmed local cultural identity. In Nora's terms, the street transitioned from a contested lieu de mémoire to a more consensual site of memory. The process also reflects Assmann's concept of cultural memory re-institutionalized: the city actively replaced a symbol of colonial violence with one of civic pride.

Ghent thus offers a model of deliberate, participatory memory politics, where street renaming becomes not a reaction to crisis, but an instrument of public reckoning and inclusive urban storytelling.

5.4 Kortrijk: From Leopold II to Rosa Lapere - negotiating Memory in a Divided City (2019–2021)

Kortrijk, a mid-sized city in West Flanders, offers a case of renaming through political will despite local resistance. As part of a broader effort to confront problematic historical legacies, the city council, led by Mayor Vincent Van Quickenborne (Open VLD), approved the removal of the *Leopold II-laan* and *Cyriel Verschaevestraat* (named after a Flemish nationalist priest and Nazi collaborator) in late 2019.[114]

[112] Knack, 'Gent zal Koning Leopold II-laan nieuwe naam geven'; Stad Gent, *Stad Gent dekoloniseert: Antwoord op het rapport 'Dekoloniseer mijn stad'*.
[113] Knack, 'Gent zal Koning Leopold II-laan nieuwe naam geven'.
[114] Veerle Deblauwe, 'Kortrijk schaft Cyriel Verschaeve-straat en Leopold II-laan af | VRT NWS: nieuws', VRTNWS, 19 November 2019, https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2019/11/19/kortrijk-schaft-cyriel-verschaevestraat-en-leopold-ii-laan-af/.

This top-down decision exposed tensions between institutional reform and community attachment to inherited names. During the 2020 public inquiry, residents of Heule voiced objections, citing administrative burdens and historical continuity. Yet the council held its ground and in February 2021, it confirmed the change by an overwhelming majority; only Vlaams Belang opposed, framing the move as "woke politics."[115]

The replacement name, *Rosa Laperelaan*, was significant in several ways. Rosa Lapere, a woman from Heule, was the founder of the local *Tinekesfeesten*, a well-known folk festival. Choosing her as the new namesake not only honoured local cultural heritage, but also addressed gender imbalance in street naming.[116] Kortrijk thus paired the removal of a colonial figure with the elevation of a local woman, transforming the site from a monument to imperial conquest into a celebration of community identity.

In contrast to Ghent's broadly supported reframing, Kortrijk's process was more negotiated and contested, yet ultimately led to a similar outcome: replacing colonial commemoration with local meaning. In memory studies terms, the street became a contested *lieu de mémoire*, forcing a shift from unquestioned presence to articulated remembrance. This case illustrates how postcolonial memory is shaped not only by political composition but also by the degree to which local identity is mobilized in favor, or against, change.

[115] Gemeenteraad Kortrijk, '14/2021_GR_00029: Straatnaamgeving - Wijziging Straatnaam Koning Leopold II-Laan Naar Rosa Laperelaan - Definitief Goedkeuren.'
[116] Deblauwe, 'Kortrijk schaft Cyriel Verschaeve-straat en Leopold II-laan af | VRT NWS'.

5.5 MECHELEN: FROM *VAN KERCKHOVENSTRAAT* TO *STEPHENSONSTRAAT* (2022-2023) - COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACH

De *Van Kerckhovenstraat* is not mentioned in the Flemish datasets under retired street names. Yet, media research picked up on this case.[117] The change from *Van Kerckhovestraat* to *Stephensonstraat* in Mechelen is an example of a community-driven street name change. The street was named after Guillaume (Willem-Frans) Van Kerckhoven (1853–1892), a colonial officer from Mechelen who was known for his extreme violence in King Leopold II's Congo campaign.[118]

On 27 March 2022, the grassroots group *Mechelen Dekoloniseert* (Mechelen Decolonizes) organized a public think-day. This session addressed both the *Van Kerckhovenstraat* and the colonial monument Pioneers of Civilization on the *Schuttersvest*, linking them to Congo's colonial injustice. During this session, participants reached a consensus to replace "*Van Kerckhovenstraat*" with *Zusterkens der Armenstraat* (Little Sisters of the Poor Street). This name honored the religious sisters who had operated a home for the poor on that street until around 1970.[119]

This choice, celebrating local social heritage, received positive advice from the city's cultural council and the city archive. On June 27, 2022, the municipal council approved the principle of changing the street name to *Zusterkens der Armenstraat*. However, during the mandatory public inquiry period from July 20 to August 20, 2022, thirty-one street residents and property owners submitted rejections. The main concerns centered

[117] 'Mechelse Van Kerckhovenstraat krijgt dan toch een nieuwe naam: bewoners kiezen voor Stephensonstraat', *Nieuwsblad*, 18 November 2022, https://www.nieuwsblad.be/regio/antwerpen/rivierenland/mechelen/mechelse-van-kerckhovenstraat-krijgt-dan-toch-een-nieuwe-naam-bewoners-kiezen-voor-stephensonstraat/26063600.html.
[118] Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, 129–30; Institut Royal Colonial Belge / Koninklijk Belgisch Koloniaal Instituut, *Biographie Coloniale Belge / Belgische Koloniale Biografie*, 566–67.
[119] 'Gemeenteraad – Proces-Verbaal Vergadering van 27 juni 2022', Gemeenteraad Mechelen, 27 June 2022, 91–92; 'Gespreksdag "Mechelen dekoloniseert?" in Mechelen', UiTinVlaanderen, 27 March 2022, https://www.uitinvlaanderen.be/agenda/e/gespreksdag-mechelen-dekoloniseert/fce0077c-c501-4365-9dac-f3261040ea15.

on administrative burden, costs, and opposition to what some perceived as historical revisionism.[120]

A follow-up neighborhood discussion on 17 November 2022, further consulted residents.[121] City officials "listened to opinions" and ended the evening "with a concrete proposal for the college and council" to change the name to *Stephensonstraat*, which refers to the historic railway connection between Brussels and Mechelen. On January 23, 2023, the municipal council approved the principle of changing the street name to *Stephensonstraat* with 33 votes in favor and 4 against.[122] After a second public inquiry period and final approval on April 24, 2023, the new name became official, with the city providing administrative support to residents during the transition.[123]

Mechelen's case illustrates how memory politics, civic participation and municipal authority intersect. Through multiple participatory tools (think-day, culture advisory boards, public inquiry), Mechelen's officials and citizens together transformed a contested *lieu de mémoire* not by replacing it with a counter-narrative, but by redirecting it toward a more consensual local identity marker. The street became a symbol of Mechelen's pioneering role in European railway history rather than a site of colonial commemoration or anti-colonial resistance. This local case thus exemplifies how Belgian cities are actively rewriting their commemorative maps in a postcolonial context, by dialogue, debate and democratic decision-making, much like what happened in Ghent.

[120] 'Jaarverslag 2022', Stadsarchief Mechelen, 2023, 11–12, https://stadsarchief.mechelen.be/sam_jaarverslag_2022.
[121] 'Mechelen dekoloniseert', UiTinVlaanderen, 17 November 2022, https://www.uitinvlaanderen.be/agenda/e/mechelen-dekoloniseert/a1ec60fb-6c9e-492c-9468-746ff1324053.
[122] 'Gemeenteraad – Proces-Verbaal Vergadering van 23 januari 2023', Gemeenteraad Mechelen, 23 January 2023, 14–16.
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5.6 Comparative Reflection: Patterns in Renaming and the Politics of Colonial Memory

Across the four case studies, Balen, Dendermonde, Ghent, and Kortrijk, a number of striking patterns emerge regarding how Belgian municipalities have engaged with colonial street names.

First, almost all confirmed renamings have targeted King Leopold II specifically. Leaving aside other colonial references, such as missionaries, or place names like Congo. This selective pattern suggests that Leopold II functions as a uniquely delegitimized figure, likely due to his central role in the Congo Free State and the extensive documentation of his atrocities. Influential works such as King Leopold's Ghost (Hochschild) have made him a symbol of colonial horror in both academic and popular memory. This could indicate that Belgians compartmentalize colonial violence as a personal failure of the king, rather than recognizing it as a structural responsibility of the Belgian state.

The only exception is found in Mechelen, where a street referring to a colonial officer was renamed. Notably, however, this officer had been active during Leopold II's Congo campaign and died before the colony was transferred to the Belgian state. In this sense, even this renaming thus reinforces the notion that Belgian collective memory situates colonial violence primarily within the reign of Leopold II.

Second, all changes occurred in Flanders, despite confirmed colonial street names being present across all regions. This geographic concentration may reflect political and institutional dynamics: Flanders issued formal decolonization guidelines in 2020, and several of its cities, Ghent and Kortrijk especially, were governed by coalitions with liberal, socialist, or green parties open to symbolic reform.

Third, while political party dynamics vary, one trend is clear: Vlaams Belang is inconsistent. In Dendermonde, it initiated the removal of Leopold II, aligning with anti-Belgian sentiment; in Balen and Kortrijk, it staunchly opposed renaming, positioning itself as a defender of heritage and tradition. This reveals that colonial memory is instrumentalized differently depending on local context and strategic political identity. Centrist parties (CD&V, Open VLD, Vooruit) appear more pragmatic: willing to act if

consensus and public support exist, but often opting for compromise solutions or careful framing (e.g. *Leopoldlaan* instead of a full renaming).

Finally, the nature of resistance is revealing. In cities like Ghent, symbolic change was pre-emptively paired with logistical support. In Kortrijk and Balen, however, even modest interventions met public pushback framed in terms of erasing history, cost, or overreach. This suggests that memory inertia remains strong in smaller or suburban contexts, particularly where colonial street names have long been depoliticised.

Together, these cases underscore that progress remains selective and uneven. What is remembered, and what is renamed, is still shaped by local politics, symbolic economies, and public pressure, rather than a coherent national reckoning.

6 CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to answer a central question: how have street names and street renaming practices in Belgium served to preserve or challenge the memory of its colonial past during the early twenty-first century? The analysis shows that it is also what remains unremarked, colonial names that persist without controversy, that silently influence how colonial history is framed in everyday life.

The data analysis confirmed that colonial street names are unevenly distributed across Belgium. Flanders holds the majority in absolute numbers (134), but Brussels shows the highest proportional density (1.18%). Beyond numbers, the study shows a broader geography link to memory: colonial street names cluster in cities, often historically tied to colonial administration or missionary enterprise. Across the country, colonial toponymy concentrates in larger cities and historically significant locales, suggesting that once embedded, such names endure unless actively contested.

Renamings remain rare and regionally concentrated. To date, only four confirmed street name changes have occurred, all in Flanders: three targeting King Leopold II and one targeting a colonial officer active during his Congo campaign. This pattern suggests that the period of Leopold II's rule has become a metonym for Belgian colonial violence, serving as the focal point around which critique converges. It indicates that in Belgian collective memory, colonial violence is primarily linked to the reign of Leopold II, rather than seen a structural responsibility of the Belgian state. By doing so, broader structural reckoning with the systems and institutions that enabled colonial violence can be avoided. It permits a form of "manageable memory," whereby symbolic gestures stand in for deeper decolonial transformation.

The typology of street names further supports this reading. The most common commemorative references include Congo, Leopold II, Catholic missionaries, and figures like Jacques de Dixmude and Henry Stanley. These uphold the traditional imperial narrative built around civilizing mission, national prestige, and masculine heroism. Crucially, they remain predominantly uncontested. No streets named after missionaries or colonial locations have been renamed. Additionally, this thesis found that demographic diversity does not automatically translate into symbolic inclusivity.

The case studies reinforced the argument that change usually occurs not through national consensus but through local contestation, political opportunity, and activist pressure. Ghent's proactive decolonization working group, Kortrijk's mayoral initiative, Dendermonde's symbolic compromise and Mechelen's community-driven approach contrast sharply with Balen's denial of colonial significance. Together, these cases show a fragmented landscape, where memory is negotiated in piecemeal fashion, shaped by local actors rather than by a coordinated vision.

Finally, this thesis contributes to broader debates in postcolonial and memory studies by illustrating how colonial memory operates not only through visible conflict but also through silence, omission, and administrative routine. What emerges, therefore, is a double dynamic. On one hand, colonial street names persist as durable elements of cultural memory, resilient to change despite shifting social attitudes. On the other hand, they have become flashpoints for contestation, where competing visions of the past and future collide.

This thesis concludes that symbolic decolonization in Belgium remains partial, selective, and dependent on political will. Its findings reaffirm the idea that colonial memory is not a static inheritance but a dynamic field of struggle, shaped by who gets to remember, how, and where. Renaming a street is not just about removing a name; it is about rewriting the map of collective memory. And while this map remains uneven, its contours are no longer uncontested: the memory of empire, once unquestioned, is now a subject of public dialogue, political debate, and, increasingly, transformative action.

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