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Hiding the Colonial Past? A Comparison of European Archival Policies

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Abstract: This paper seeks to compare how European countries are currently dealing with their colonial archives. The aim of this chapter is not to give a thorough explanation of the archival policies of each former colonial power; instead, this chapter will argue that many European countries such as the United Kingdom have consistently tried to hide their colonial past. Moreover, this colonial past is still haunting the political debates of some European countries such as Belgium or France while it is nearly totally absent from others such as Germany or Italy.

Displaced archives are a common legacy of colonialism. The recent scandal of the 'migrated archives' in the United Kingdom is another reminder to the populations of the former colonial world that a part of their past is still hidden in Europe. The former colonising powers hid – and are sometimes still hiding – parts of their colonial past. Based on my historical research in the British, French and German archives, this chapter will examine the similarities and differences between the 'migrated archives' and their European counterparts (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain). This chapter does not provide an exhaustive summary of the archival policies of each European country, but rather seeks to examine and contrast some of these policies and the political questions these policies continue to raise. I will argue that Europeans have consistently tried to hide their colonial past and that this colonial past is still haunting the political debates in some of those countries while it is noticeably absent from others.

Two fundamental issues must be addressed; sources and definitions. There is a lack of historical literature that directly tackles the question of displaced colonial archives. Historians and journalists have often overlooked this phenomenon or, conversely, have imagined providential documents that could answer all of their questions. The difficulty in gathering evidence about archival policies at the time of decolonisation frequently comes from the fact that only a few introductory lines are devoted to the question of displaced or hidden records in most imperial histories. The following

chapter is therefore largely informed by conversations with journalists, professional historians and archivists.

A taxonomic issue is raised by the term 'colonial archives' as this term covers a range of records and archival materials. Even if they are not treated as such in this chapter, a range of alternative documents can be judged as being part of the 'colonial archives'. These could include private files created by the local elite ruling with the colonisers, or documents dealing with the colonies but produced in the metropole. The most commonly used definition and the one adopted in this chapter is that colonial archives are official documents produced in a colonial territory by the European powers. This restrictive definition allows this chapter to focus on the question of displacement in a more systematic manner.

The official focus is also fundamental to understanding the lack of research on the way in which colonial archives have been understood. Scholarship dealing with the question of archival policies generally focus on one country in particular. After all, the 'national' archives in each former colonial power is the primary place where primary sources deriving from government in that country are gathered. This chapter will argue that this national focus obscures the way in which colonial records have been systematically displaced, hidden and occasionally destroyed by a number of colonial powers around the world. One of the key themes of this chapter is thus the location of archives and the importance of their being in their rightful place - in the nations that were formerly colonies. The similar histories of displaced colonial archives demonstrate the extent to which cultures of secrecy pervade the governments of Europe. Strikingly, displaced archives have become more a symbol of the lack of accountability of democratic governments than sources for the study of the late colonial period.

Displacing Archives: A European Habit?

The chapter written by Mandy Banton in this collection analyses in depth the migration of archives from the British Empire to Britain. The British were not the only colonisers to displace records at the end of colonial rule. The French, for

example, found a legal rationale for the migration of their archives from Indochina. In 1950, they decided that their 'sovereign' archives would be sent to Paris whereas the 'administrative archives' would stay in Indochina.¹ They were labeled 'sovereign' because the documents were generally produced by the highest French authorities in the colonies. As a result, they were supposed to belong to the French state. These files typically related to military operations or political figures who had played a major role during decolonisation. The logic was that these documents should not be left in the hands of the future leaders of the soon-to-be independent nations and that they would prove useful in exerting pressure or as leverage against certain parties. The 'administrative archives' were the remaining files, which were supposed to deal with the day-to-day management of the colonised territories. The documents could be about schools, roads, or land tenure, for example, and became the basis of many archive collections in the newly independent countries. This legal distinction set a precedent for the whole of the French colonial empire and gave the illusion of transparency when it came to the migration of colonial documents. Thus, in 1954, the French Indian cities sent their sovereign archives to Paris and so did the colonies from French Equatorial Africa and Madagascar from 1958 to 1960.

However, this process was not applied universally. The sovereign archives of the federation of French West Africa remained in Dakar, where they still are, while records created in Algeria were removed. When the last French settlers left Algeria in 1962, they took nearly all the archives with them. Four years later, the Centre for Overseas Archives (CAOM) was created at Aix-en-Provence. The chapter by Todd Sheppard in this book describes how, until the present day, the Algerian government still claim that the French should have left all of their colonial archives to the newly independent nation. Conversely, some documents left in Brazzaville² or Antananarivo³ could have been considered 'sovereign' and were left behind by the French authorities. Clearly, the French legal framework cannot obscure a certain level of improvisation and a lack of resources during decolonisation.

¹ Martine Cornède, 'Politique d'ouverture des fonds coloniaux', *Afrique & histoire*, vol. 7 (2010), 313–20, Ousmane Mbaye, 'Le CAOM: un centre d'archives partagées?', *Afrique & histoire*, vol. 7 (2010), 291–99 and Jean-Pierre Bat, 'Les archives de l'AEF', *Afrique & histoire*, vol. 7 (2010), 301–11.

² Field trip in January 2015, see the website: Jean-Pierre Bat & Vincent Hiribarren, <https://archivescolonialesbrazzaville.wordpress.com/> [accessed 12 October 2015].

³ Field trip in September 2015 and communication with the director of the National Archives of Madagascar, Sylvie Sahondra Andriamihamina.

The Belgians also sent some of their colonial archives to the metropole and, as in the French case, separated their documents between 'sovereign' and 'administrative' archives. As distinct from the records of other European countries, Belgian colonial records became, at a very early date, a part of the story of Belgian colonialism. When, in 1908, King Leopold II handed over his African possessions to the Belgian State, he chose to have all his archives burnt.⁴ Even if it is today possible to find documents for the beginning of the twentieth century in the Democratic Republic of Congo, research on the early colonial period proves to be challenging. Unveiling the history for the rest of the colonial period (1908-1960) might prove to be easier, though, since the Belgian State chose to keep its colonial records. In 1960-61, the Belgian administration carefully planned the displacement of their Congolese colonial documents. This operation, called '*Opération archives*,' aimed at relocating the Congolese records to Brussels. This transfer raised important questions about the documents that should remain in Congo and those that should be sent to Brussels and it was eventually decided that all the Congolese documents should be sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Because of the size of Congo and the political situation in 1960, only the records concerning the provinces of Léopoldville, Équateur, and the Upper-Congo found their way to Brussels. For practical reasons that had nothing to do with the archival policies of Belgium, many records concerning Kasai and Katanga remained *in situ*, while others were sent to Brussels, thus showing the unequal results of Belgian archival policies.

The documents concerning Ruanda-Urundi (now Rwanda and Burundi) were treated rather differently. They were divided into two sections and, as in the French case, the 'sovereign' archives were sent to the metropole whereas the 'administrative' archives were left in the territory. This operation, named 'Neven's Mission' after the Congo's archivist, took place between March and June 1961.⁵ As the transfer was not as improvised as in Congo, and the size of the territory was smaller, the files to be found in Brussels are arguably more coherent than the Congolese records. Yet, despite their differences, '*Opération archives*' and 'Neven's Mission' were responsible for the

⁴ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999), pp. 294-5.

⁵ This section is based on an article by Bérengère Piret, 'Reviving the Remains of Colonization – The Belgian Colonial Archives in Brussels', *History in Africa*, 42 (2015), pp. 419-435.

transfer of a large quantity of colonial documents to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels. These files were not made available to the public before 1997-1998, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs moved to a new location.

Arguably, the Netherlands is the country where the colonial records are the most open today. The national archives at Prins Willem-Alexanderhof in The Hague gives access to thousands of documents produced by the Dutch East Indies Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, 1602-1799) which were available for researchers as early as 1856, whereas the archives of the Ministry of Colonies (1814-1959) were progressively transferred to the national archives and opened in the 1960s and 1970s. The Dutch East Indies records have been widely studied by researchers.⁶ One notable scholar who has examined the historical and political significance of these records is the American anthropologist Ann Stoler, who devoted her book *Along the Archival Grain* to the practical and theoretical meaning of the archives.⁷ Significantly, the Dutch East Indies Company kept many of its archives in Indonesia. In order to preserve these documents, the Dutch colonial authorities created the *Landsarchief* in Jakarta in 1892. As a result, most of the documents produced in Indonesia during the nineteenth and twentieth century are still available in that country. The *Landsarchief* has subsequently become more than a simple storage room and has attracted a range of researchers since the 1930s.⁸ The fragmentation of the records of the Dutch East Indies Company between different continents has led to the creation of a project partly funded by the UNESCO, the Netherlands and Indonesia to create a database of the Dutch East Indies records.⁹

This does not mean that the Dutch archives are completely open and transparent. A number of sensitive colonial period records have been transferred to The Hague.¹⁰ In December 1948, during the Indonesian war of independence (1945-1949), Dutch

⁶ Charles Jeurgens, 'The Untamed Archive History-Writing in the Netherlands East Indies and the Use of Archives', *History of the Human Sciences*, 26 (2013), 84–106.

⁷ Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁸ Intan Lidwina, 'Het Landsarchief. De Plaats Waar de Herinnering Aan Het Verleden Ligt. The History of the Landsarchief in Indonesia (1892-1942)' (unpublished Master thesis, Leiden University, 2012) <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/19788> [accessed 15 October 2015].

⁹ See the structure of the records in particular: <http://www.tanap.net/content/about/heritage.cfm> [accessed 15 October 2015].

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of Indonesia records in The Hague, see Karabinos' chapter in this volume.

troops captured the city of Yogyakarta and seized documents that were transferred to the Dutch national archives. Among the stolen documents, the Pringgogidgo Archive contained information on the elaboration of the Indonesian constitution of 1945. Some other documents directly dealt with the organisation of the young Indonesian republic and concern some important political figures. The Indonesian government managed to obtain the repatriation of the Pringgogidgo Archive between 1975 and 1987 but it is unclear to what extent some of the Indonesian archives are still to be found in the documents kept by the Dutch military intelligence agency.¹¹ Similarly, displaced archives from the former colony of Surinam can still be found in the Netherlands. Pretexting the fact that they could not be accessed in Surinam, many documents were sent to The Hague throughout the colonial period.¹² As in the Indonesian case, the archives were digitised at the beginning of the twenty-first century and were sent back to Paramaribo.¹³

The European powers routinely displaced archives during the decolonisation years. With or without a legal framework, France, Belgium and the Netherlands did not hesitate to transfer documents from their former colonies to the metropole. The question of the true scale of the transfers remains, though.

From Dictatorship to Democracy

The relationship between democracy and the openness of the archive has been stressed by a number of theorists and philosophers.¹⁴ Jacques Derrida succinctly evoked this correlation: ‘Effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution

¹¹ Michael Karabinos, ‘Displaced Archives, Displaced History: Recovering the Seized Archives of Indonesia’, *Bijdragen Tot de Taal, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 2013, 279–94 and Jeurgens, Karel Johannes Pieter Franciscus Maria, A. C. M Kappelhof, and Michael Karabinos, eds., *Colonial Legacy in South East Asia: The Dutch Archives* (’s-Gravenhage: Stichting Archiefpublicaties, 2012).

¹² *Archief van de Gouverneur-Generaal der Nederlandse West-Indische Bezittingen (1828-1845)*, *Gouvernementssecretaris der Nederlandse West-Indische Bezittingen (1830-1847)*; *Archief van de Hoge Raad der Nederlandse West-Indische Bezittingen (1828-1832)*.

¹³ Personal communication with Charles Jeurgens, University of Leiden, 26 August 2015.

¹⁴ Combe, Sonia, *Archives interdites: les peurs françaises face à l’histoire contemporaine* (Paris: A. Michel, 1994).

and its interpretation'.¹⁵ This section suggests that it is in fact the former dictatorships of Europe that are now more likely to open their colonial archives than those with an unbroken democratic tradition. This is due to the fact that newly democratic governments are often eager to stress the difference between themselves and their predecessors.

The best example is the German case, where the archives have been open since the end of the Second World War. The German colonial period was relatively short-lived, as the 1919 Treaty of Versailles divided German colonial possessions in Africa, China, South-East Asia and Oceania between the Allied powers. In addition, in some cases, as in Northern Cameroon, where the Germans were only present for fifteen years, many of the traces of the German colonial past have more or less disappeared. Nonetheless, even in remote parts of their colonial empire, the German colonial administration produced detailed records that were regularly transferred to Berlin, a phenomenon that explains why the records housed in the Bundesarchiv in Berlin-Lichterfelde are relatively rich on the German colonial period.¹⁶

The German willingness to open the archives is very much tied to the legacy of Nazi rule. Both East and West German historians have attempted to shed new light on the atrocities of the first half of the twentieth century, and even if colonial history has often been overshadowed by the study of Nazism, post-World War Two historians from Germany have revised the assumptions about the 'progressive role' played by the Germans in their colonial empire. Among the historians of the German colonial period were those who wanted to find the roots of the Shoah in the first genocide of the twentieth century, in Namibia. The connections between the colonial and the Nazi past have been explored by a number of scholars since the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹⁷ The renewal of the study of German colonialism is a phenomenon of the beginning of the twenty-first century,¹⁸ and has helped to drive the opening of

¹⁵ Derrida, Jacques, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 4, footnote 1.

¹⁶ Hollmann, Michael, Findbücher zu Beständen, des Bundesarchivs, Reichskolonialamt, Bestand R 1001 (Konstanz, 2003) Teilband 1, introduction.

¹⁷ Dietmar Schenk, 'Wem gehören die Archive? Archiv-Gemeinschaften und Gemeinschafts-Archive', in *'Aufheben, was nicht vergessen werden darf': Archive vom alten Europa bis zur digitalen Welt* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013), pp. 164-172.

¹⁸ Bradley Naranch & Geoff Eley, eds., *German Colonialism in a Global Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), introduction.

government archives. The federal government was remarkably efficient at answering the demand from researchers and the consequence is that the German colonial archives are now accessible to journalists and researchers.

Italy is another country where the colonial archives are relatively open at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Once again, the democratic regime has opened its records relatively easily, since the colonial era is associated with the fascist period, though Italy had acquired colonies before the fascist years. In this early period, record-keeping did not seem to be a central preoccupation of the different administrations in charge of the colonies. Indeed, the 'administration was scarcely aware [...] of its own culture and memory'¹⁹ and the archives did not seem to become important until after the colonial period. Officially, Italy lost its African colonies with the signature of the Treaty of Paris on 10 February 1947. Italy was no longer fascist; yet, its colonial archives were still controlled by the bureaucrats who had been responsible for colonial rule in Africa. The Ministry of Italian Africa was closed on 29 April 1953 but some of its former employees carried on working either for the *Ministero degli Affari Esteri* (MAE) or for the *Amministrazione fiduciaria italiana sulla Somalia*.²⁰ Indeed, a state decree of 11 January 1952 created the Committee for Research on the activities of Italy in Africa (*Comitato per la documentazione dell'opera dell'Italia in Africa*). The Committee's apologetic aims were very clear as its members were supposed to 'publish, as the other European colonizing powers did before, the most significant Italian documents pertaining to our colonies [...] proving the civilising activities carried out by Italy on the African continent'.²¹ Some politicians dealing with African affairs in the 1950s tried to build a positive image of the Italian colonial presence in Africa. In one of the first meetings of the Committee, Giuseppe Brusasca, a former resistance fighter who was one of the leading Italian MPs and the Honorary President of the Committee, declared: 'The depth and humanity of our actions are clearly attested by the words of admiration and the

¹⁹ Vincenzo Pellegrini & Anna Bertinelli, *Per La Storia Dell'amministrazione Coloniale Italiana*, Quaderni ISAP., Saggi, 31 (Milan: Giuffrè, 1994), p.3.

²⁰ Legge n. 430 del 29 aprile 1953 as quoted by Antonio Morone, 'I Custodi della Memoria. Il Comitato per la Documentazione dell'opera dell'Italia in Africa', *Zapruder. Rivista di storia della conflittualità sociale*, 23 (2010), 27.

²¹ Ascm, Giuseppe Brusasca, b. 71, s.f., copia dell'interrogazione parlamentare del 27 novembre 1951 dell'on. Raffaele Ciasca. Il deputato divenne poi membro di rilievo del Comitato. As quoted by Morone, Antonio M., 'I Custodi della Memoria. Il Comitato per la Documentazione dell'opera dell'Italia in Africa', *Zapruder. Rivista di storia della conflittualità sociale*, 23 (2010), 27-28.

invitations to cooperate addressed to us by the Negus and his ministers. We can even hear it more from the feelings expressed by the indigenous people who bow to the ground to salute the representative of Italy.²²

When the Committee was finally dissolved on 13 March 1984, its members had published relatively little; they had just compiled a selection of colonial documents without any coherence or scientific rigour. Overall, they published 41 books including one study translated into English. Their apologetic endeavour was clear from the start but the most striking feature of their actions is how they managed to gain a quasi-monopoly over the MAE archives. Historian Nicola Labanca refers to this period as a ‘private management’ of state archives sanctioned by the law. Indeed, the Committee ensured that the colonial archives were placed in a different room than the other MAE documents and they even created a new reference number (‘Africa III’), which altered the original classification of the documents. Their control over the archives was ideological, intellectual but also physical. An American historian who managed to obtain access to these archives published a book on Somalia in 1966. At the beginning of his book, he did not talk about the MAE archives but about the ‘Committee’s historical archives’. The Italian colonial archives are now located at the MAE, Piazzale della Farnesina, in Rome and are available to researchers.

What has been said of Germany and Italy can also be said of Portugal. The end of António de Oliveira Salazar's regime in 1974 triggered the end of the colonial period for Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe. The colonial archives, since they were associated with Salazar's regime, were opened to the public. The archives of the secret police, known as the PIDE, were open in 1994, and despite problems linked with their organisation, researchers have access to the colonial archives in Lisbon. These documents are mainly divided between the *Instituto Português de Apoio ao Desenvolvimento*, the *Arquivo Histórico Diplomático*, the *Direcção-Geral do Tesouro e Finança*, the *Direcção-Geral da Administração e do Emprego* and the *Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino*.²³

²² Ascm, Giuseppe Brusasca, b. 50, f. 305, verbale n. 2 del Comitato, 24 gennaio 1952 as quoted by Antonio Morone, ‘I Custodi della Memoria. Il Comitato per la Documentazione dell’opera dell’Italia in Africa’, *Zapruder. Rivista di storia della conflittualità sociale*, 23 (2010), 30.

²³ <http://arquivos.ministerioultramar.holos.pt/source/presentation/pag.php?pag=0> [accessed on 3 August 2015].

Former dictatorships are more inclined to open their colonial archives because of the clear break between the current political regimes and their colonising predecessors.²⁴ Indeed, stressing the similarities between these countries could lead to the creation of a pan-European history of displaced colonial archives. The European dimension of this question is undeniable and writing a European history of colonial archives would show the similarities between the approaches to displacement adopted by the colonising powers. However, the relative openness of the colonial archives in Germany, Italy and Portugal should not obscure the fact that each former colonising power has its own unique archival history. It is only in the unique national contexts that we can understand the debates surrounding access to those displaced archives today.

Nation-making or nation-destroying archives?

The argument correlating the advent of democracy with the opening of colonial archives seems to be misleading in the Spanish case. Spain has been a democracy since Francisco Franco's death in 1975 and, yet, historians of the twentieth-century Spanish colonial empire face many problems obtaining access to the colonial archives. Personal communication with historians of the late colonial period reveals that they cannot read material that has been classified as 'reserved'. The word 'complicated' often comes up in their description of how they navigate these archives. There is a lack of political will to open Spain's colonial records, one that appears not to concern Spain's relations with its former colonies. A recent event clearly shows the relationship between modern-day Spain and its former colonies: when Adolfo Suárez, the first democratically-elected prime minister of the Spanish Government, died in 2014, only one foreign head of state attended his funeral; it was Teodoro Obiang, the president of Equatorial Guinea.²⁵ The current relationship between Spain and its former colonies in Africa cannot explain the current archival blackout. Instead, the question of the colonial archives is a question about the Spanish state in general. It is

²⁴ Marie Cornu and Jérôme Fromageau, eds., *Archives des dictatures: enjeux juridiques, archivistiques et institutionnels* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015).

²⁵ http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/03/31/actualidad/1396294853_515099.html [accessed on 23 May 2014].

worth noting that the 1920s Rif War in Morocco and the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Riveira were intrinsically linked. Moreover, General Franco seized power in Spain with the African Army in 1936. Whereas in the United Kingdom only a section of the FCO archives are hidden, in Spain everything that deals with the state can be hidden: historians and journalists tend to see it as a pattern in Spanish history. Opening the archives on the recent colonial period (as opposed to the American empire) would open the doors to archives dealing with the Spanish Civil War, those of the democratic transition or those of the relationship of the state with Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, the Basque separatist organisation. The question of the archives in Spain is therefore not only colonial but also national. As a consequence, the history of the relationship between Spain and its twentieth-century colonial empire still remains to be written.

The question of national sensitivities does not concern Spain only. The opening of the archives was responsible for the renewal of scholarship on the Belgian colonial period as well, with ramifications for the official narrative of Belgian history. One book in particular was responsible for a debate on Belgian colonial history. The publication of *The Assassination of Lumumba* by Ludo de Witte in 1999 (Dutch version) clearly showed the responsibility of the Belgian government in the assassination of the Congolese Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba.²⁶ De Witte principally based his study on the archives of the Belgian Foreign Ministry, the United Nations, Frederic Vandevallée, the head of the intelligence services of the colony (*Musée Royal de l'Afrique centrale*) and the Minister of Belgian Congo until 1960, August E. de Schryver.²⁷ After the publication of *The Assassination of Lumumba*, the Belgian government asked for a commission of enquiry, the proceedings of which are now available on the website of the Belgian Parliament.²⁸ For the commission of enquiry, the Royal Palace Archives opened for the first time in history. The government even issued an apology in a speech to the Belgian Parliament on 5 February 2002. The commission's report did not mention all the actions undertaken by the Belgian secret

²⁶ Ludo de Witte, *De moord op Lumumba* (Leuven: Van Halewyck, 1999).

²⁷ Ludo de Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (London; New York: Verso, 2001), p. 206.

²⁸ <http://www.lachambre.be/doc/flwb/pdf/50/0312/50k0312007.pdf> [accessed on 23 May 2013].

services in Congo but made some precise recommendations in terms of guaranteeing access to Belgian colonial documents.²⁹

The national aspect of the debate has also been important in France. The publication of a PhD thesis in the 2000s on the question of torture in colonial Algeria was the first one to use military files.³⁰ The archives of the prefecture of Paris also revealed the degree of violence used by Maurice Papon, a former French colonial officer who became prefect of the French capital. The question, once again, is about colonial memory interfering with French domestic politics. Indeed, it was revealed that Papon ‘actively collaborated’ with the Nazis during the Second World War. The question of the colonial past was thus intrinsically linked to another national debate, that of the Second World War.

Oral history and other types of sources have already revealed the chronology of events in the colonial period. Displaced archives will rarely revolutionise our understanding of the colonial period. They will, instead, provide us with some precise details and a clearer understanding that can shed light on important episodes of the colonial past. What the colonial archives reveal is the way colonial history is interpreted and understood throughout Europe. When they can potentially undermine a certain national narrative, they are physically hidden away in various archive centres throughout Europe. When they can harm some relatively young democracies, such as Spain, they remain closed and the late colonial past is glossed over. Displaced colonial archives directly challenge the national narratives in countries such as Spain, Belgium and France. The colonial archives can thus interrogate European history but they also have a direct political impact on European democracies.

Towards More Democratic Accountability?

As colonial archives have become a political problem more than a historical problem, this chapter finally argues that in most European countries, journalists (and not

²⁹ Ludo de Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (London; New York: Verso, 2001), p. 187.

³⁰ In its published version: Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la Guerre d'Algérie: 1954-1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

historians) are leading the charge in opening the archives. Most European countries do not have a press as willing to criticise the government as the British press. It might come from a lack of interest or a fear of political power, but the fact is that newspapers such as *Libération* in France or *El País* in Spain do not publish many articles dealing with obscure colonial pasts. However, some journalists still try to denounce the silence of the political class. One of the earliest examples comes from Netherlands, where a journalist interviewed, in 1969, a soldier who had fought in Indonesia. The broadcast triggered many publications on colonial Indonesia.³¹ The interest in the colonial past has waned since then. However, after a 2011 judgment of a court in The Hague required the Netherlands to pay reparations, the press has become more willing to evoke the war in Indonesia. The 2012 publication of photographs of Dutch soldiers killing Indonesian civilians showed to what extent this interest still relies on the ebb and flow of media attention.³²

Belgian colonial history has been the subject of many publications in the last twenty years. King Leopold II's rule over Congo (1885-1908) has particularly attracted the attention of historians and the public. For example, a 2003 BBC documentary on the colonisation of Congo revealed the inhumane exploitation of rubber farm labourers in Leopold's personal colony.³³ In 2010 (Dutch version), the Belgian author David Van Reybrouck proved there was a genuine interest in a past that has not yet been fully explored when his book on colonial Congo became a best-seller.³⁴ French journalists have also tried to explore the colonial past by using the recently opened archives of de Gaulle's secretary for African and Malagasy Affairs, Jacques Foccart.³⁵ In Spain, *El País* entitled one of its articles 'Secrets of State are forever'. One journalist even directed a documentary based on interviews denouncing the Spanish exactions in Equatorial Guinea.³⁶ There are other examples of the journalistic interest in the late colonial period throughout Europe and quite strikingly they tend to show that there is

³¹ P.M. Doolan, 'The Hueting Interview and Dutch atrocities in Indonesia' <<http://www.pauldoolan.com/2013/04/the-hueting-interview-and-dutch.html?spref=tw>> [accessed 15 October 2015].

³² P.M. Doolan, 'Dutch Imperial Past Returns to Haunt the Netherlands', *Imperial & Global Forum* <<http://imperialglobalexeter.com/2014/04/06/dutch-imperial-past-returns-to-haunt-the-netherlands/>> [accessed 15 October 2015].

³³ Peter Bate, *White King, Red Rubber, Black Death*, 2003.

³⁴ David Van Reybrouck, *Congo: The Epic History of a People* (New York: Ecco, 2014).

³⁵ Joël Calmette, *Histoires secrètes du Biafra. Foccart s'en va en guerre*, 2002.

³⁶ Xavier Montanyà, *Memoria Negra*, 2006.

a genuine interest among the public. This interest partly originates from the fact that the archives that serve as the evidence for those stories were painstakingly hidden.

In the British context, the scandal of the migrated archives was partly revealed because of Freedom of Information requests. The last European country where such a law was enacted was Spain (10 December 2013) and throughout Europe a legal framework aiming at more transparency is gradually taking shape. Displaced archives do not only highlight fault lines within national debates, they also speak to government accountability. Their content might not be totally original or even important. After all, many of these documents were technical files and did not have any strategic value. Displaced archives have nonetheless become the symbol of a lack of accountability of European governments and of a certain culture of secrecy. Their very existence not only challenges national narratives but also undermines democratic governments' transparency and accountability.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show the similarities between the European policies concerning displaced archives. Most European countries share a culture of secrecy that is more likely to be pronounced if the current political regimes are the direct heirs of those who were in power during the decolonisation years. In other words, former dictatorships (with the notable exception of Spain) are more likely to disclose information from their colonial archives.

The question of displaced archives has been heavily politicised in Europe and journalists have tended to be at the forefront of a fight to unveil the late colonial period. There is a genuine public interest in questions that deal with secrecy and the media have seized this opportunity to sell more newspapers, radio shows or historical documentaries. Interestingly, the interest in the displaced colonial archives does not seem to originate from a specific interest in the history of the former colonial world. The displaced archives are a physical expression of the culture of secrecy of most European governments and their existence challenges the legitimate rights of European citizens to a certain type of democratic accountability.

This very culture of secrecy might find an unlikely ally in the recent economic crises. In Portugal, the lack of public funding had direct consequences on the budget of government agencies in charge of the archives, with implications for the staff and resources available for arranging, describing and providing access to the records. In Belgium, it has been suggested that a plan to transfer the colonial records from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the *Archives Générales du Royaume* might make some documents inaccessible for a long period of time given the Archives' limited resources for describing and providing access to the documents. If 'culture of secrecy' is too strong a phrase in these cases, one could certainly talk about a general European 'culture of neglect'. In both cases, petitions signed by archivists and researchers have shown that the question of the colonial archives fuels speculations on the real transparency of European archival policies.³⁷ In addition to the more evident arguments for their repatriation or accessibility, displaced archives ought to be associated with European democratic rights and should simultaneously be studied for their archival, historical and political values.

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³⁷ For the Portuguese petition: Carta aberta: o Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, a democracia e o conhecimento, 21 March 2014, <<http://www.publico.pt/culturaipsilon/noticia/carta-aberta-o-arquivo-historico-ultramarino-a-democracia-e-o-conhecimento-1629251?page=2#>> [accessed 15 October 2015]. For the Belgian petition: Les Archives coloniales belges en danger, 22 November 2014, <<http://ldh-toulon.net/les-Archives-coloniales-belges-en.html>> [accessed 15 October 2015].

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