

Monument to Leopold II in Arlon



Age group: 14 to 19 years old



Time: 2 classes of 90 mins



Key question: How is the Belgian colonial history represented in public space?



Materials needed for the lesson: Printed document provided here

Skills and Concepts developed in the lesson plan:

This lesson uses the Monument to Leopold II in Arlon as a case study to help students analyse how colonial history is represented in public space. Through visual analysis (or onsite visit), contextual comparison, and role-play, students develop critical thinking, multiperspectivity, and argumentation skills while engaging with a sensitive and locally relevant topic

Learning Outcomes: By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Understand the role of Leopold II of Belgium and Belgian colonialism
- Recognise how colonial narratives were constructed
- Analyse primary sources critically (primary archaeological and written sources)
- Understand how different perspectives on colonialism and slavery are apprehended and how they change over time
- Develop a well-structured and justified argument using facts and emotion (oral and writing skills)
- Present an argument orally in front of a class
- Analyse maps, localise Congo
- Be open to listening to other points of view and perspectives
- Respectful sharing of ideas about sensitive topics
- Empathy: understand how visuals can be hurtful to others

Pedagogical Recommendations:

- Make sure that each student participates in the discussion during the role play.
- Make sure that everyone respects each other's opinions and sensitivity.

Breakdown of Activities Step-by-step

Step 1

Visual Description and Drawing Activity: **10 minutes**

One student receives a picture of the monument (Sources 1–3) but does not show it to the others.

The student must describe the monument as objectively as possible while the other students draw it based only on the description. The student should:

- ★ explain that the monument consists of three parts;
- ★ describe the central element (the statue of Leopold II);
- ★ describe the left and right bas-reliefs;
- ★ describe at least two people on each side, including:
 - their position;
 - a brief physical description;
 - two visible accessories or objects.

This activity encourages careful observation and precise communication.

If the activity is conducted on-site, the student describing the monument stands facing it, while the other students position themselves with their backs to the monument. This ensures that they rely solely on the verbal description when producing their drawing and encourages careful observation, precise communication, and active listening.

Step 2

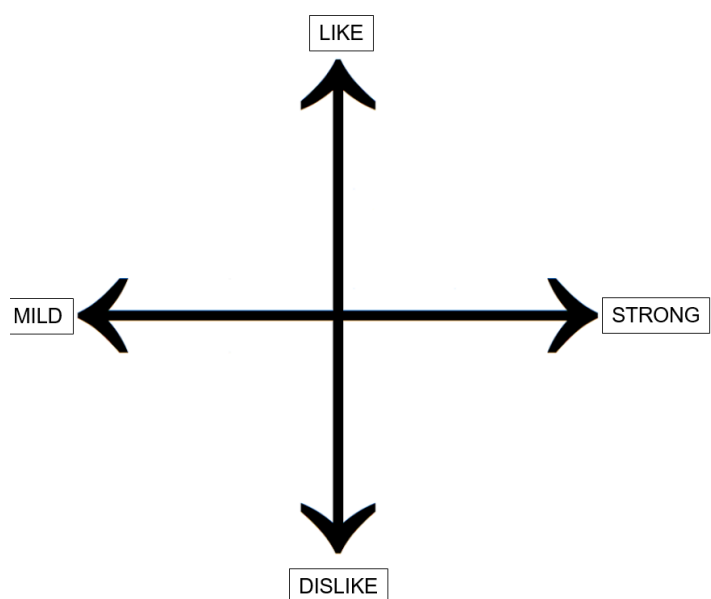
Emotion matrix: **5 minutes**

The real monument is then revealed to the class.

Allow students to observe it silently for two minutes.

Next, project the Emotion Matrix on the board.

Each student writes their name on the matrix according to their personal reaction to the monument.



For example:

- ★ A student who strongly appreciates the monument places their name in the upper-right area;
- ★ A student who strongly dislikes it places their name in the lower-left area.

Ask two or three volunteers to explain their position.

Step 3

Collective Analysis and mini debate about the monument: **10 minutes**

Lead a classroom discussion using some of the following questions:

- ★ What do you see?
- ★ Who is represented?
- ★ How many parts does the monument have?
- ★ What does each part represent?
- ★ Are there any inscriptions?
- ★ Who appears to have power?
- ★ Compare the people represented in the left and right bas-reliefs (posture, clothing, accessories, emotions).
- ★ Which symbols, tools, or objects are visible?
- ★ What message does the monument communicate?
- ★ Who is being honoured?
- ★ What aspects of history are highlighted? What aspects are absent?

Mini debate:

Ask students whether the monument should:

- ★ Option 1: remain unchanged;
- ★ Option 2: be removed;
- ★ Option 3: be contextualised;
- ★ Option 4: be adapted.

No final answer is required at this stage.

Step 4

Historical Contextualization: 20 minutes

To better understand the monument's historical and ideological context, the teacher provides the historical background of Belgium and the Congo:

- colonial exploitation;
- natural resources and rubber extraction
- industrialization;
- the Berlin Conference

Optional sources to read: Depending on the age of students, choose 2 or more sources to analyse.

Source 4. LÉOPOLD II's inaugural speech at the International Conference of Geography of Brussels, September 1876

Open to civilisation the only part of the globe the Congo has not yet penetrated, abolish slavery, it is, if I dare say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress.

Source 5. President Arthur' speech about Leopold II, 1883, used to convince Stanley to explore the Congo for Belgium.

The rich and populous valley of the Kongo is opened by a company called the International African Association, of which the King of the Belgians is the president. Territories have been given to the Association by native chieftains, roads opened, steamboats placed on the river,...under one flag which offers freedom of trade and prohibits slave trade. The aim of the Society is philanthropic. (=charitable)

Source 6. Edmond Picard, Belgian senator, describes a caravan of porters he saw on a route around the rapids in Congo, 1896:

We meet these porters, black, miserable, wearing only a horribly filthy loincloth, frizzy and bare head, carrying barrels, most of them sickly, tired, hungry, walking with thin monkey legs, eyes fixed and trying to keep their balance. They come and go by thousands, requisitioned as slaves by the State, armed with powerful guns.

Source 7. Casement's diary, 1903. Roger Casement was commissioned by the British government to investigate the situation on human rights in the Congo Free State. He wrote a long and detailed report exposing abuses.

...this "Domaine Privé" of King Leopold has been a veritable hell on earth. This district had, when I visited it in 1887, numbered 5,000 people; today the population is given, after a careful enumeration, at less than 600. The reasons given me for this decline were similar to those furnished elsewhere: sleeping sickness, general ill-health, lack of food and the methods employed to obtain labour from them by local officials and the exactions levied upon them.

August 13. Here came 5 people from Bikoro side with hands cut off...

August 29: Bongadaga saw a rubber market, nothing but rubber, all guarded like convicts.

August 30: 16 women, men and children tied up. The men were put to prison; children let go at my intervention, infamous, shameful system.

Source 8. Manuel du voyageur et du résident au Congo, General Donny, Bruxelles, 1900, The Congo Free State. The administration gave to each agent, officer and state post, a copy of this book.

In Afrika, taking prisoners is the only efficient way to reach peace with our enemies. If they hide, they won't go far away from their village and will come back for food in the surrounding gardens. You can be sure to capture people very quickly. When you have captured enough, choose an old person, preferably an old woman. Send her to the local chief to negotiate. The chief, wanting his people set free, will usually decide to send representatives.

The slave is the basis of property. From a humanitarian point of view, the domestic slave is, in general, happy about his situation and unable to feel the humiliating inferiority of his condition. He lives more or less the life of free men, accompanies his master to war. He is more of a servant in life than a slave, and his situation should not alarm us beyond the sensitivity of our philanthropists. Moreover, he would not know what to do with the freedom that would be given to him.

Source 9. The Congo report of Commission of Inquiry, New York 1906. Leopold was embarrassed by complaints made by the British government about human rights abuses in the Congo Free State and dispatched an Inquiry Commission to investigate the situation in the Congo.

Today, security reigns in Congo. Everywhere, the white can journey without escort and weapons. The slave trade has disappeared, cannibalism practically suppressed, or is in hiding, and sacrifices of human beings are rare. Villages are numerous along the river and call to our mind our attractive sea side towns. Leopoldville, the great river port with its activities and warehouses, reminds of the industrial cities of Europe.

Source 10. King Baudouin, Congolese Independence speech by on June 30, 1960

When Leopold II embarked on the great work that is being crowned today, he did not come here as a conqueror but as a bringer of civilization... For 80 years, Belgium has sent the best of its sons to your country, first to liberate the Congo Basin from the horrible slave trade... Congo has been given railways, all kinds of sea and air lines, ...Numerous and remarkably well-equipped hospitals have been built. Agriculture has been improved and modernized... living conditions and hygiene are showing remarkable progress...the expansion of economic activity has been significant; it has increased the prosperity of your population and has given the country the technicians indispensable to its development...basic education has expanded ... an intellectual elite is forming, and your universities will grow rapidly.

An increasing number of qualified workers in agriculture, industry, crafts, commerce, administration, are beginning to introduce into all walks of life the individual emancipation that is the real basis of every civilization. We are pleased that in this way we have given Congo — despite its greatest difficulties — the indispensable resources that lie at the foundation of a country on the road to development...

Source 11. Patrice Lumumba, speech at the ceremony of the proclamation of the Congo's independence, June 30, 1960

Although this independence of the Congo is being proclaimed today by agreement with Belgium, ... no Congolese will ever forget that independence was won in struggle, ... in which we were undaunted by privation or suffering and stinted neither strength nor blood.

We have experienced forced labour in exchange for pay that did not allow us to satisfy our hunger, to clothe ourselves, to have decent lodgings or to bring up our children...we were subjected to jeers, insults and blows because we were "Negroes". Who will ever forget that the black was addressed as "tu", not because he was a friend, but because the polite "vous" was reserved for the white man?

We have not forgotten that in the cities the mansions were for the whites and the tumbledown huts for the blacks; that a black was not admitted to the cinemas, restaurants and shops set aside for "Europeans"; ...Who will ever forget the shootings which killed so many of our brothers, or the cells into which were mercilessly thrown ...

Give students the definition of the following terms or ask them to research them on the internet:

- ✓ Bias
- ✓ Omissions
- ✓ Contradictions
- ✓ Propaganda

Ask students to compare the monument narrative to the historical reality and identify bias, omissions, contradictions and propaganda on the Monument.

Discuss how these terms refer to the Monument.

Students should identify in sources 4-11:

- ★ the perspective of the author;
- ★ the message conveyed;
- ★ similarities and differences between the sources and the monument.

Step 5

Role Play: The Monument on Trial: **10-15 minutes**

Divide the students into groups of four or five.

Each participant receives a role and a related source to read

- A.** A Belgian industrialist (source A)
- B.** A Congolese rubber worker (source B)

- C. The sculptor of the memorial
- D. A judge (source C)
- E. Extra student: mother of a Congolese rubber worker (source B)

Students discuss what should happen to the monument.

Possible options:

- ★ Option 1: Keep the monument unchanged.
- ★ Option 2: Remove the monument.
- ★ Option 3: Add an explanatory panel.
- ★ Option 4: Modify or redesign parts of the monument.
- ★ Option 5: Create a new monument.

Each participant should support their position with two or three evidence-based arguments rather than personal opinion.

Positioning on the Emotion Matrix

After reading their sources, students place their character on the Emotion Matrix. Project the emotion matrix on the board or per group

Suggested positions:

Belgian industrialist

- ★ Benefits from colonisation and economic exploitation.
- ★ Strongly supports the monument.

Congolese rubber worker

- ★ Suffers from forced labour and mistreatment.
- ★ The monument does not represent his sufferings
- ★ Strongly opposes the monument.

Sculptor

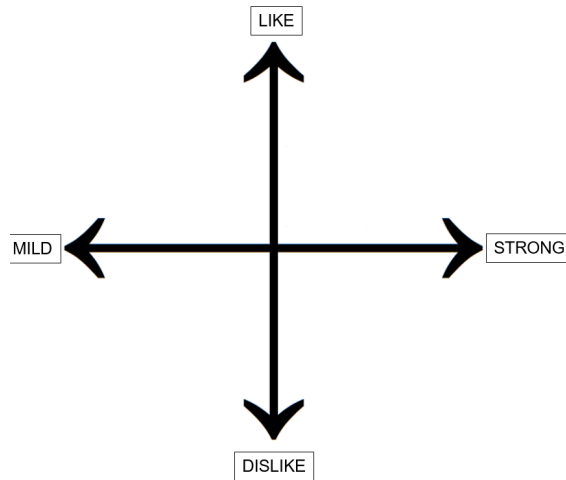
- ★ Supports the monument because he created it and believes in its artistic and commemorative value.

Judge

- ★ Remains neutral and positions themselves near the centre of the matrix.

Congolese mother

- ★ Lost her son as a consequence of colonial exploitation.
- ★ Strongly opposes the monument and the narrative it presents.



Each group should write a convincing speech including 2 or 3 main powerful arguments. That speech will be presented to the class orally.

Verdict: Each group's judge then presents the final verdict to the class.

Step 6

Designing the Future of the Monument: **15 minutes**

Working in groups, students propose a future for the monument.

They may:

- ★ redesign the monument;
- ★ create a new monument;
- ★ write an explanatory panel to contextualise it;
- ★ suggest another solution for dealing with contested Belgian colonisation.

Students present their proposals to the class.

Although the lesson can be implemented onsite, it can easily be adapted to classroom teaching.

Optional: Step 5: Place-Based Learning visit

Visit Arlon or another contested local monument (or in a nearby city)

Optional: Step 6: formative or summative evaluation: Analyse another contested monument (25 min)

Provide students with another contested monument from Belgium or abroad.

Students should:

- ★ locate it on a map;
- ★ identify the historical context;
- ★ analyse its symbols and message;
- ★ discuss why it is contested;
- ★ propose a future for the monument.

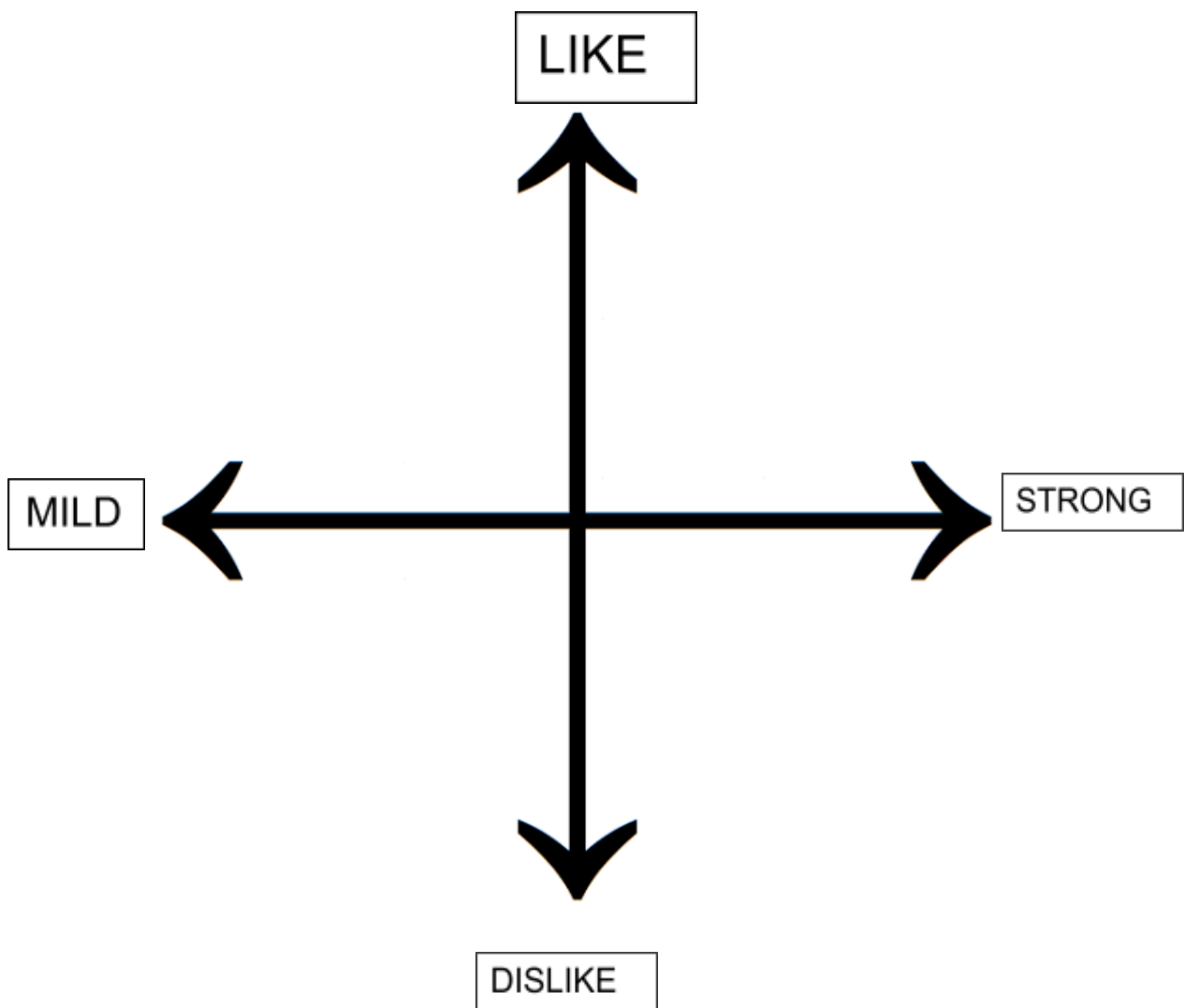
This task allows students to transfer the skills developed during the lesson to a new case study.

At the end of the lesson, invite students to reflect on the following questions:

- ★ Can monuments be neutral?
- ★ Should monuments reflect the values of the time when they were built or the values of today?
- ★ What responsibilities do societies have when dealing with difficult or controversial histories?

Worksheet for the students

Emotional matrix



Timeline:

1482	Portuguese navigator Diogo Cao becomes the first European to visit the Congo; Portuguese set up ties with the king of Kongo.
16th-17th centuries	British, Dutch, Portuguese and French merchants engage in the slave trade through Kongo intermediaries
1870s	Belgian King Leopold II sets up a private venture to colonise Kongo
1874-77	British explorer Henry Stanley navigates the Congo River to the Atlantic Ocean
1879-87	Leopold commissions Stanley to establish the king's authority in the Congo basin
1884-85	European powers at the Conference of Berlin recognise Leopold's claim to the Congo basin. Leopold announces the establishment of the Congo Free State, headed by himself
1908	Congo becomes a <i>colony</i> of Belgium amid protests over killings and atrocities carried out on a mass scale by Leopold's agents.
1960	Congo becomes independent with Patrice Lumumba as prime minister and Joseph Kasavubu as president.

Congolese industrialist (A)

Henri Nicolai, in BELGEO: Belgian Journal of Geography, April 2013, The Congo and palm oil. A century. A cycle? <https://journals.openedition.org/belgeo/11772?lang=en#tocto1n3>

The Belgian Congo was, in 1957, with 150,000 tonnes, the leading exporter of palm oil in Africa and the second in the world, after the Dutch East Indies (Drachoussoff, 1991, p. 678). This was seen as the mark of undeniable success. Since then, these exports have continued to decline. At the beginning of the 20th century, they completely disappeared.

Oil Companies in the Colonized Congo had a network of 20 oil mills distributed in five circles, 2 rubber factories, a coffee factory, a fleet of barges for transporting oil, pumping and storage in Léopoldville (Kinshasa), Coquilhatville (Mbandaka) and Port-Francqui (Ilebo), a shipyard, a workshop for the construction of factory equipment and the manufacture of spare parts, slaughterhouses and cold rooms for the breeding of 12 000 head of livestock (intended to supply the workforce), research and selection services. There was also a medical and health network (12 hospitals and several dozen dispensaries, 16 doctors in 1960, 25 nurse-midwives, more than 400 nurses' assistants), social homes, canteens, stores, housing, 75 primary schools, 3 middle schools, technical schools, agricultural assistants, factory technicians and accountants in Leveville. The staff included 33,000 permanent Congolese workers, 24,500 contracted fruit cutters (of whom 6,000 so-called "imports" had been recruited away from the factory areas and had to be hosted). But worker recruitment and working conditions were harsh.

Henri Nicolai (1929-2019), professor at the ULB, specialist in Central African geography. He wrote and published 14 books and many articles on the topic.

BELGEO is a Belgian national geographical scientific journal which intends to cover the main geographical topics, European and worldwide geographical problems, as well as national ones. Published with the support of the FNRS (National Fund for Scientific Research) and the Fondation Universitaire. The Editorial Board is composed of university professors from all Belgian universities offering studies in geography, such as the ULB, VUB, UCL, KUL, ULiège,... Before publishing, articles go through the editorial board and are then submitted to two referees' judgment.

Congolese rubber worker (B)



Colonial officials amputated and mutilated Congolese people, including children, as punishment, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53017188>

Isidore NDAYWEL E NZIEM, History of Zaire, Louvain-la-Neuve: Duculot, 1997, pp. 341-342.

One could inquire about the origin of the practice of cutting off hands. It may be noted that indigenous justice practiced mutilation to prevent thieves from repeating their exploits. The truth is that mass mutilations were undeniably an innovation of the colonial order. This order imposed these mutilations for accounting purposes, so that the White man, upon returning from expeditions, would have justification for the number of bullets not returned by his warriors." The overzealousness of the sentinels did the rest. They did not only mutilate the dead but also the living, to cheat and keep some cartridges for hunting. The number of hands cut off also served as a war trophy. Their large quantity was a sign of bravery.

Isidore Ndaywel: historian and linguist, university professor in the Democratic Republic of Congo, at the Université Laval in Québec and worked as a researcher at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

Sentinels: Congolese intermediaries between company or state agents and the populations.

The judge D:

As a judge, your role consists of:

- ★ Remain neutral during debates
- ★ Make sure each student presents his/her position regarding the monument.
- ★ Ask questions to participants to justify their opinion; ask for examples and facts.
- ★ Distribute speaking time for debate among participants.
- ★ Manage time: you make sure each participant has an equal speaking time.
- ★ Deliver the verdict: you decide to have the monument unchanged, contextualised, redesigned, or removed according to participants' arguments. Your verdict should be justified using arguments.
- ★ Which team wins the trial?

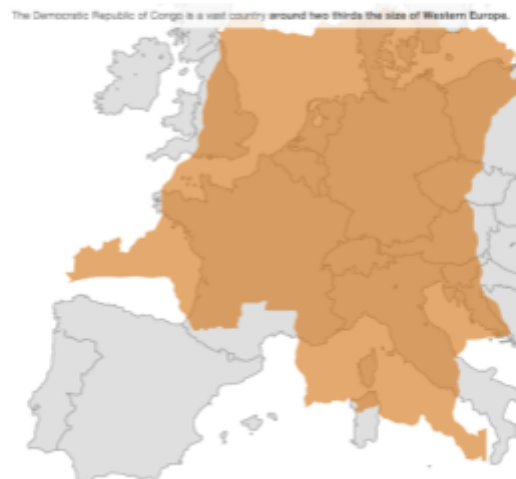
Localisation of Arlon in Belgium:



Localise Congo on the map of Africa.



Compare its size to Europe using, for instance, this map:



Assessment Rubric

A. Engagement and attitude throughout the project	1. Active participation during discussions, debate and mock trial 2. Respectful behaviour towards peers 3. Relevant questioning	5
B. Historical investigation effort (step 4)	1. Active participation during the contextualization step. 2. Engage in discussion and reflection regarding the historical facts and interpretation. 3. Critical use and analysis of historical sources	5
C. Role play and argumentation (step 5)	1. Convincing and persuasive participation during the mock trial. 2. Quality and relevance of arguments presented 3. Effective use of historical evidence and sources to support claims.	5
D. Creativity and heritage interpretation (step 6)	1. Participation in redesigning/contextualization the monument. 2. Creativity and originality of the proposal 3. Clear structure and presentation of ideas 4. Visual quality and overall coherence 5. Ability to connect past events with present-day democratic values	5
E. Civic engagement and empathy	1. Respectful engagement with sensitive historical issues 2. Reflection on democratic values, human rights and resistance to oppression 3. Demonstration of empathy and emotional maturity when considering multiple perspectives.	5
TOTAL		25

Monument information background

Monument Name: Leopold II Statue in Arlon

Representation: Monument

Type: Statue

Date of Inauguration: June 17th 1951

Sponsor: Erected by the "Cercle Colonial Arlonais" (Arlon's colonial Circle)

Person: King Leopold II

Historical Legacies: Colonialism, Racism and Slavery

Authority: Belgian Colonial Empire

Intensity: Tagging, red paint and public debates.

Remedies used to deal with the contestations: Status quo.

Fictional Representation? No.

Sculptor: Victor Demanet and Arthur Dupagne

Architect: J. Ghobert

For more information on the monument, please see:

<https://be-monumen.be/patrimoine-belge/monument-au-roi-leopold-ii-arlon/>

https://www.tvlux.be/actu/info/leopold-ii-une-statue-qui-cree-la-polemique_34888

<https://www.shootlux.be/arlon-la-statue-a-leffigie-de-leopold-ii-de-nouveau-vandalisee/>

Monument Pictures

Photos courtesy of the lesson's author,

