

Report of the British Consul, Roger Casement, on the Administration of the Congo Free State

Note : Mes commentaires apparaissent en italiques

The colonial regime of the Belgian King Leopold II--the Congo Free State-- became one of the more infamous international scandals of the turn of the century. Leopold had acquired the vast Congo region through considerable investment of his own fortune in setting up his administration there and by cajoling the great powers at the Berlin Conference of 1884-5 to award his International Congo Association title to what was to become the Congo Free State.

La, conférence de Berlin est, sans aucun doute possible, nécessaire, non pas pour répondre à une « cajolerie » de LII, mais pour régler, entre grandes puissances coloniales un problème d'influence et de frontières. L'Etat Indépendant du Congo est le résultat d'un traité entre ces grandes puissances dont L II est le bénéficiaire « par défaut ». C'est parce qu'elles se neutralisent mutuellement que le projet de LII de doter la Belgique d'une colonie voit le jour. Les termes « cajoling » et « award » indiquent bien la partialité de l'auteur ; LII a flatté, séduit et trompé les grandes puissances. Pour mémoire, aucune des grandes puissances coloniales ne s'est encombrée d'une conférence internationale ou d'accords avec ses voisins pour développer son empire colonial. Le fait colonial belge est une exception, on laisse à un petit pays un territoire qui ne semble pas prometteur ; c'est une région malsaine peuplée de « sauvages » dont on connaît les difficultés d'accès et les énormes problèmes de structure et de pacification puisque les arabes dominant tout l'est où ils exploitent « l'ébène » et l'ivoire.

By the mid-1890s the Congo Basin and its products became a source of great wealth to Leopold who used his riches to beautify his Belgian capital Brussels while using his agents in Africa to establish a brutal exploitative regime for the extraction of rubber in the interior forest regions of the Free State [Note: the term 'Free' signified the free trade that the Berlin Act obliged Leopold to establish for the benefit of all nations who wished to trade there; a condition that the King managed to flout through awarding territorial concessions for rubber extraction to a number of private companies, some of which were mere disguises for Leopold's own aggrandizement].

On se demande comment on peut écrire autant de contrevérités en aussi peu de lignes:

- 1. Le premier exercice en boni de l'EIC se situe en 1896, jusque là, L II a consacré à son projet colonial toute sa fortune personnelle, en 1890, il a obtenu un prêt de 25 millions de francs or du Gouvernement belge. Où va-t-il trouver les « riches » pour ces fameux travaux d'embellissement ?*
- 2. « Free state » et « Free trade » belle confusion volontaire. Il est exact que l'article 1 du traité de Berlin garanti la liberté de commerce dans l'état indépendant. LII respectera ses engagements et l'ABIR société à 95% anglaise sera le principal exploitant du caoutchouc.*
- 3. Le régime brutal est une expression manipulatoire, elle transforme l'exception c'est-à-dire des abus en règle.*

Leopold's ability to administer the Congo government coupled with his gift for self-promotion and dissimulation, kept knowledge of what was taking place there to a minimum. Inevitably the truth leaked out as it became known through missionary reports and the like that the natives were being wilfully exploited and brutally treated in the interests of amassing revenue for the King and his agents.

Foremost in the campaign to expose the regime--based on forced labour and various forms of terror--was E.D. Morel whose ceaseless pursuit of Leopold's regime resulted in questions being raised in the British House of Commons, for Britain, after all, had been a signatory to the [Berlin Act](#) which bound the Congo Government "to bind themselves to watch over the preservation of the native tribes and to care for their moral and material welfare." The Report (below) of the British consul sent to investigate the accumulating reports of torture, murder and virtual enslavement was published to the world in 1904 and from that point on the pressure for reform mounted until, finally, Leopold was forced to yield up his private African preserve to the Belgian government which formally took over the 'Belgian Congo' by an act of annexation in August 1908.

Leopold II has not fared well by historians.

As one English historian has bitterly commented: "Leopold was an Attila in modern dress; it would have been better for the world if he had never been born."

I have the honour to submit my Report on my recent journey on the Upper Congo.

. . . the region visited was one of the most central in the Congo State . . . Moreover, I was enabled, by visiting this district, to contrast its present state with the condition in which I had known it some sixteen years ago and I was thus able to institute a comparison between a state of affairs I had myself seen when the natives loved their own savage lives in anarchic and disorderly communities, uncontrolled by Europeans, and that created by more than a decade of very energetic European intervention by Belgian officials in introducing their methods of rule over one of the most savage regions of Africa.

. . . a fleet of steamers . . . navigate the main river and its principal affluents at fixed intervals. Regular means of communication are thus afforded to some of the most inaccessible parts of Central Africa.

A railway, excellently constructed in view of the difficulties to be encountered, now connects the ocean ports with Stanley Pool, over a tract of difficult country, which formerly offered to the weary traveller on foot many obstacles to be overcome and many days of great bodily fatigue. . . The cataract region, through which the railway passes . . . is . . . the home, or birthplace of the sleeping sickness--a terrible disease, which is, all too rapidly, eating its way into the heart of Africa . . . The population of the Lower Congo has been gradually reduced by the unchecked ravages of this, as yet undiagnosed and incurable disease, and as one cause of the seemingly wholesale diminution of human life which I everywhere observed in the regions revisited, a prominent place must be assigned to this malady . . . Communities I had formerly known as large and flourishing centres of population are to-day entirely gone . . .

On the whole the Government workmen (Congolese natives) . . . struck me as being well cared for . . . The chief difficulty in dealing with so large a staff [3,000 in number] arises from the want of a sufficiency of food supply in the surrounding country. . . . The natives of the

districts are forced to provide a fixed quantity each week . . . which is levied by requisitions on all the surrounding villages . . . This, however necessary, is not a welcome task to the native suppliers who complain that their numbers are yearly decreasing, while the demands made upon them remain fixed, or tend even to increase. . . . The (official in charge) is forced to exercise continuous pressure on the local population, and within recent times that pressure has not always taken the form of mere requisition. Armed expeditions have been necessary and a more forcible method of levying supplies [e.g., goats, fowl, etc.] adopted than the law either contemplated or justifies.

The result of an expedition, which took place towards the end of 1900, was that in fourteen small villages traversed seventeen persons disappeared. Sixteen of these whose names were given to me were killed by the soldiers, and their bodies recovered by their friends. Ten persons were tied up and taken away as prisoners, but were released on payment of sixteen goats by their friends . . .

Où et quand ? Qui est en charge ? Qui témoigne ? Quelle crédibilité ? Y a-t-il exagération ?

A hospital for Europeans and an establishment designed as a native hospital are in charge of a European doctor. . . When I visited the three mud huts which serve (as the native hospital), all of them dilapidated . . I found seventeen sleeping sickness patients, male and female, lying about in the utmost dirt. The structures I had visited . . had endured for many years as the only form of hospital accommodation for the numerous native staff of the district.

Où et quand ? Le fait que l'hôpital soit sommaire et que 17 patients souffrant de la maladie du sommeil, dorment par terre n'est pas étonnant ; c'était encore le cas en brousse en 1947. La brousse ce n'est pas l'Europe et il devait le savoir.

. . . The people have not easily accommodated themselves to the altered condition of life brought about by European government in their midst. Where formerly they were accustomed to take long voyages down to Stanley Pool to sell slaves, ivory, dried fish, or other local products . . they find themselves today debarred from all such activity . . . The open selling of slaves and the canoe convoys, which navigated the Upper Congo (River), have everywhere disappeared. . . . (but) much that was not reprehensible in native life has disappeared along with it. The trade in ivory has today entirely passed from the hands of the natives of the Upper Congo .

Ce passage est étonnant. Casement cite le " Gouvernement européen " et pas la Belgique ? Pourquoi ? Le fait que la cessation du commerce d'esclave modifie l'économie est évident mais qui en sont les bénéficiaires ? Le fait que l'ivoire soit vendu aux représentant d'intérêts belges ne modifie en rien la relation commerciale avec les indigènes qui continuent à chasser l'éléphant. Que l'exportateur soit belge ou anglais, comme le trafiquant Stokes, ne change rien.

Complaints as to the manner of exacting service are . . frequent . . . If the local official has to go on a sudden journey men are summoned on the instant to paddle his canoe, and a refusal entails imprisonment or a beating. If the Government plantation or the kitchen garden require weeding, a soldier will be sent to call in the women from some of the neighbouring towns. . . ; to the women suddenly forced to leave their household tasks and to tramp off, hoe in hand,

baby on back, with possibly a hungry and angry husband at home, the task is not a welcome one.

Ces commentaires vagues ne peuvent en aucun cas être considérés comme des témoignages dignes de foi ; ils mélangent des « on dits » avec des hypothèses toutes personnelles « with possibly a hungry and angry husband at home »

I visited two large villages in the interior . . . wherein I found that fully half the population now consisted of refugees . . . I saw and questioned several groups of these people . . . They went on to declare, when asked why they had fled (their district), that they had endured such ill-treatment at the hands of the government soldiers in their own (district) that life had become intolerable; that nothing had remained for them at home but to be killed for failure to bring in a certain amount of rubber or to die from starvation or exposure in their attempts to satisfy the demands made upon them. . . . I subsequently found other (members of the tribe) who confirmed the truth of the statements made to me.

Où et quand? Tout cela est vague. Quant à la confirmation de la vérité par d'autres membres de la tribu, c'est possible, mais cela ne transforme pas des témoignages de deuxième main en vérités.

. . . on the 25th of July (1903) we reached Lukolela, where I spent two days. This district had, when I visited it in 1887, numbered fully 5,000 people; today the population is given, after a careful enumeration, at less than 600. The reasons given me for their decline in numbers were similar to those furnished elsewhere, namely, sleeping-sickness, general ill-health, insufficiency of food, and the methods employed to obtain labour from them by local officials and the exactions levied on them.

Ce témoignage est plus précis et il donne un chiffre atterrant, près de 90% de la population a disparu. Les raisons, écrit Casement, sont “similar to those furnished elsewhere, namely, sleeping-sickness, general ill-health, insufficiency of food”. La suite , c'est à dire les mauvais traitements et les exactions viennent en dernière position.

At other villages which I visited, I found the tax to consist of baskets, which the inhabitants had to make and deliver weekly as well as, always, a certain amount of foodstuffs. (The natives) were frequently flogged for delay or inability to complete the tally of these baskets, or the weekly supply of food. Several men, including a Chief of one town, showed broad weals across their buttocks, which were evidently recent. One, a lad of 15 or so, removing his cloth, showed several scars across his thighs, which he and others around him said had formed part of a weekly payment for a recent shortage in their supply of food.

Les informations suivant lesquelles les habitants sont obligés d'apporter de la nourriture, est exacte. Cette forme d'impôt en nature est organisée et réglementée, elle est discutable, certes, mais les indigènes étaient rémunérés, le montant de cette rémunération est fixé par la loi. La fourniture du bois pour les locomotives et les bateaux faisait également l'objet de règlements et de travail « obligatoire ». En effet, les indigènes n'avaient pas l'habitude de couper du bois pour ces usages typiquement européens.

Quant aux diverses séquelles des punitions constatées, soi disant pour manquements aux quotas, le Consul, au fait de la législation de l'EIC, ne fait qu'enregistrer sa constatation sans réaction. Tout fonctionnaire, digne de ses responsabilités, aurait du immédiatement en avvertir, par écrit, les autorités compétentes et annexer sa lettre à son rapport.

. . . A careful investigation of the conditions of native life around (Lake Mantumba) confirmed the truth of the statements made to me--that the great decrease in population, the dirty and ill-kept towns, and the complete absence of goats, sheep, or fowls--once very plentiful in this country--were to be attributed above all else to the continued effort made during many years to compel the natives to work india-rubber. Large bodies of native troops had formerly been quartered in the district, and the punitive measures undertaken to his end had endured for a considerable period. During the course of these operations there had been much loss of life, accompanied, I fear, by a somewhat general mutilation of the dead, as proof that the soldiers had done their duty.

Casement se contredit dans ce volet de son enquête. C'est la récolte du caoutchouc qui est la cause essentielle des pertes en vie humaine et de la diminution du cheptel. Les troupes casernées dans le district du lac Mantumba auraient entrepris des actions punitives contre les récoltants pendant « une période de temps considérable », causant morts et mutilations. Ici plus questions de maladies pourtant, elles sévissent aussi.

. . . Two cases (of mutilation) came to my actual notice while I was in the lake district. One, a young man, both of whose hands had been beaten off with the butt ends of rifles against a tree; the other a young lad of 11 or 12 years of age, whose right hand was cut off at the wrist. . . I both these cases the Government soldiers had been accompanied by white officers whose names were given to me. Of six natives (one a girl, three little boys, one youth, and one old woman) who had been mutilated in this way during the rubber regime, all except one were dead at the date of my visit.

Ces deux cas mettent en cause des officiers dont les noms ont été donnés à Casement mais il n'en fait pas état, pourquoi? Pourquoi ne prévient-il pas l'Etat major de la FP à Boma, où il réside ?

[A sentry in the employ of one of the concessionary private companies] said he had caught and was detaining as prisoners (eleven women) to compel their husbands to bring in the right amount of rubber required of them on the next market day. . . . When I asked what would become of these women if their husbands failed to bring in the right quantity of rubber . . . he said at once that then they would be kept there until their husbands had redeemed them.

Signed) R. Casement

The full Report runs for forty pages of the Parliamentary Papers to which is appended another twenty pages of individual statements gathered by the Consul, including several detailing the grim tales of killings, mutilation, kidnapping and cruel beatings of men, women and children by soldiers of Bula Matari (i.e., the name used by the natives for the Congo Administration of King Leopold).

Copies of the Report and enclosures were transmitted by the British government to the Belgian government as well as to governments (Germany, France, Russia, et al.) who were signatories to the Berlin Act in 1885.

The Congo administration was thus forced to initiate an investigation into the atrocities detailed in the Report which led to the arrest and punishment of white officials who had been responsible for cold-blooded killings during a rubber-collecting expedition in 1903 (including one Belgian national who was given five years' penal servitude for causing the shooting of at least 122 Congolese natives [Ref.: British *Parliamentary Papers*, 1904, LXII, Cd. 1933])

Si cela est exact, cela prouve de manière incontestable que mis au courant de faits précis et d'accusations incontestables que les autorités judiciaires de l'EIC ont condamnés les coupables. Cette condamnation doit être considérée comme la démonstration du bon fonctionnement de la justice et non pas comme la preuve de la validité de tous les témoignages et accusations contenus dans le rapport Casement.