

THE CONGO NATIVE AND BELGIAN ADMINISTRATION

By HENRI ANET

THE Report of the Commission for the Protection of the Congo Natives (*Rapport au Roi de la Commission instituée pour la Protection des Indigènes*) published last year in Brussels is worth studying for its frank recognition of the critical situation of the Congo natives on many points, for its practical suggestions as to the removal of the evils and for the high spirit of humanitarianism by which it is permeated. Reports of official commissions may not be worth the paper on which they are printed if they aim only at covering up abuses with the cloak of pharisaism; their real value depends upon the willingness of the Government to act according to the suggestions of the commissioners. Governments can hardly act if they are not backed up by public opinion in the home-country.

There was a time when high-sounding phrases on humanitarian principles were never applied in reality in the Congo. Belgian public opinion, misled by a servile press, honestly believed that rumours of ill-administration in the Congo were forged by political enemies of Belgium and her king. The Congo Free State was an absolute monarchy of a pre-medieval type over which the Belgian parliament and the Belgian people had no control whatever. It is perfectly unwarrantable to make the Belgian nation responsible for ill-treatment of the Congo natives before the annexation in 1908. As soon, however, as the Congo Free State was changed into a Belgian colony, reforms were applied with a more and more sincere thoroughness under the high inspiration of King Albert. Now we know from

personal dealings with the King and his councillors that they mean to deal honestly and humanely with the native population of their immense colony.

Public opinion has awakened in Belgium to the moral aspects of colonization. No better commentary on the Report could be given than the first Congrès colonial national which met in Brussels in December 1920. We shall study the Report in the light of that representative assembly composed of leading men from government circles, parliament, universities, missions, industry and commerce.

King Albert declared at the opening of the Congress: 'The Belgian nation herself now is empowered with complete sovereignty on the Congo and assumes before the whole world the responsibility for the development of that colony. Colonization is one of the highest functions of societies arrived at an advanced stage of civilization. But there are no functions without duties, and the first of all is the mission of the motherland to emancipate the primitive races. One cannot deny that those races were often sacrificed at the beginning of modern colonization. Then those at the centre had exclusively in view their own selfish interest. For the honour of humanity, I am glad to state that the progress of moral and political ideas, a truer apprehension of the real interests of both parties concerned, have modified the theory and the practical methods of colonization.' The King then rendered a glowing homage to the 'striking effort' of the missionaries 'who with untiring self-sacrifice devote themselves to their religious and civilizing work.' After him the new colonial minister, M. Louis Franck, who has just come back from an extensive tour in Central Africa, said: 'Belgium has in Africa heavy responsibilities and she must accept them. In the Congo we want not so much laws and regulations as *men* of the highest type. Each man we send there is entrusted with a mission.'

The Commission for the Protection of the Congo Natives was established by the organic law of the new Belgian

Colony on October 18, 1908. Article 6 of that law reads as follow : ' A permanent commission of seven members is charged to watch in all the territory of the colony over the protection of the natives and the betterment of their moral and material conditions.' The chairman is the Procureur Général, highest magistrate of the colony. The members are designated by the King from among persons living in the colony who seem especially fitted to fulfil that protective mission. There is a session every year, and a collective report, *which is published*, is submitted to the King. The members of the commission are empowered even individually to denounce to the magistrates any abuse or illegality of which the natives may be the victims.

Seven years had elapsed since their last meeting, when the commission was convened at Léopoldville (Stanley pool) in December 1919. The chairman was one of the highest magistrates of the colony ; he was assisted by an official known for his interest in the natives, a doctor of wide tropical experience, two Roman Catholic bishops and two Protestant missionaries, namely the Rev. A. F. Hensey (Disciples of Christ Congo Mission) and the Rev. H. Ross Phillips (Baptist Missionary Society, London). There were thus four Belgians, one Frenchman (Mgr Gabriel Grison, of The Falls), one American and one Englishman.

The Report is divided into two parts : one dealing with the moral, the other with the material conditions of the existence of the natives. But both parts are dominated by moral conceptions. In all the discussions of the Colonial Congress (on railroad policy, finances, native administration, etc.) the same preoccupation was the general background. Summing up the debates, the Secretary of the Congress said : ' The deep unity of all our deliberations was our desire to develop the native races physically, intellectually and morally, without which there is no normal and permanent economical development. We cannot insist too much on the necessity of social and moral effort. We must trust the natives, we must love the

natives; we can have no success whatever without that faith and that love.'

The first part of the Report, on moral conditions, deals chiefly with the 'constitution and stability of the native family.' The need to fight polygamy is urged, especially in order to stop the traffic of young girls betrothed in childhood to men, often old men, and resold by them for a higher dowry. The relations that these very young girls have with their intended husband is believed to be one of the chief causes of the sterility of many Congo women. The commission recommends that to every minor girl a 'legal domicile,' namely the home of her parents, be assigned, and that the parents be punished for the sojourn of these girls outside the domicile without an administrative authorization by the confiscation of the dower paid for the girl. The confiscated dower is to benefit a fund which favours monogamic marriages by helping monogamic couples to get better lodgings, plots of ground, better education for their children, tools and machinery, etc.

It was also suggested that a maximum be fixed for dowers, the price of purchase of a wife becoming so high in certain districts that many young men cannot get married.

To protect monogamic marriages, the commission unanimously urged the promulgation of a law punishing adultery and a simplification of marriage formalities. The missionaries of both confessions wish the recognition of church marriage as on the same level as civil marriage; the Roman Catholics want this as a matter of principle; the Protestants accept it as only a temporary measure, while the small number of state officials renders civil formalities very difficult for a great many natives. The Roman Catholics seem to be willing to agree that Protestant marriages are as binding as Catholic ones, but they refuse to recognize the possibility of divorce.

Anxious about the demoralized state of natives in the big European centres, the commission recommends measures

against vagrancy. They urge the opening of special homes for vagrants, approved by a decree of 1896. This suggestion has already been partly acted upon by the Government. These homes must be educational establishments where the vagrant is fitted for a life of useful labour and can leave with some prospect of employment and a little stock of money earned by him. Thus work is made attractive. The promiscuous seclusion of vagrants in common prisons with criminals of every description contributes only to the spreading of criminality.

Among the other subjects studied in the first part of the Report we note :

Alcoholism. The Congo native benefited immensely by total prohibition, even under the Congo Free State and still more under Belgian regime. This is the best feature of colonization in the Belgian Congo. But the commission recommends better enforcement of the law : strong measures against native clandestine distilleries, and in certain districts against the excessive consumption of palm wine, causing not so much alcoholism proper as brawls, violences and crimes.

School attendance. 'Whereas school attendance is for the native children the best road to civilization, whereas the school will not only impart useful knowledge but help in the building up of their character, the commission ask the Government to consider means of enforcing a better school attendance, with some pressure on the parents, especially in the European centres, where idleness leads the young people to vagrancy.'

To aid in developing artisans, clerks, teachers and nurses among the natives, the commission suggests that 'young men regularly attending professional and secondary schools be exempt from capitation tax, provided they give at least 150 days of attendance per year for a period not to exceed four years.'

One of the members of the commission has introduced into his district, with the help of Protestant missionaries, a system of compulsory school attendance with the use of

a printed card. This scheme has only moral sanction and ought to be extended to other areas and made official.

The Roman Catholic bishops objected to the part of the resolution which reserves liberty of conscience: 'Whereas the adoption by the confessional schools of a programme of education which secures the freedom of conscience to the populations would enable the Government to impose compulsory school attendance . . .' The Protestant missionaries feel that they could accept in their schools any programme adopted by the state, and, if their religious teaching did not accord with such programme, they could have all the children they wished for a little time after the regular school for special religious teaching.

Fetichism. Noting with satisfaction that the Government is purposed to issue stronger decrees against the poison ordeal and practices of sorcery, the commission wishes that 'all recourse to the witch-doctor in order to discover a culprit be punishable by law, and also all those who take an active part in such an ordeal.'

The second great section of the Report deals chiefly with the grave question of depopulation, the problem of native labour and the organization of native administration.

The danger of depopulation overshadows the whole document and was the chief anxiety of the Colonial Congress. The Report is very pessimistic; some say much too pessimistic; at any rate it looks facts squarely in the face.

No accurate statistics are yet available for the whole Congo. The official census indicates a total population on the tax books of almost exactly six millions. On the other hand, the fantastic figures quoted by Stanley for the Congo Free State had no connexion with facts. Shall we believe that the population of the Congo amounted to 40 millions and ask severely: 'Who killed the other 34 millions?' The commission states that 'since the beginning of European occupation the population has decreased steadily, so that without exaggeration it may be

said that the Congo population has been reduced by half.' The causes indicated are the heavy death-rate due to diseases, but chiefly to sleeping-sickness; and the low birth-rate due to the same diseases and also to immorality, together with a very high percentage of child mortality due to lack of hygiene.

The first necessity is the fight against sleeping-sickness. Civilization is responsible for the spreading of that plague. This was frankly recognized by the commission as well as by the Colonial Congress. Accurate statistics available for different districts are absolutely appalling. 'Whether we are responsible consciously or unconsciously,' said the Congress secretary, 'at any rate we have the duty of making reparation.'

The guilt of the European powers in Africa in that respect is more unconscious than conscious. Better means of communication assured by railways, roads and steamers, and the possibility of intercourse between tribes granted by the *Pax Belgica*, have favoured the spreading of diseases which existed before the occupation sporadically in restricted areas. The war and the unavoidable circulation of soldiers and carriers has helped in the diffusion of new diseases brought from outside. For example, influenza in some regions killed fifteen per cent of the population.

Having ascertained the danger of the complete annihilation of the native population, the commission 'adjures the Government to take without delay measures to stop the progress of diseases and to apply methods of social hygiene.' The Colonial Minister announced that the budget of public health was to be trebled. He is calling for new state doctors who will enter their task 'not as a profession, but as an honour and a mission.' He is organizing in the important centres schools to train native medical assistants, giving them a fair knowledge of diagnosis and treatment of the principal native diseases; they will be sent into the villages with simple medicament and atoxyl to combat sleeping-sickness.

The commission urges the Government to 'continue to help and favour the work of the missionaries who are valuable auxiliaries of the medical service, and to grant them large material succour with the full support of the local administration.'

Both in the Report and in the Congress the question of native labour was intimately linked with the problem of depopulation, and for two reasons: bad conditions of employment and of transportation of workers are an important factor in the heavy death-rate; and as was stated by many speakers (among others by Dr Broden, Director of the Brussels Tropical School of Medicine): 'Native labour is a real wealth; the colony cannot dispense with it. But it is an error to believe that it is inexhaustible. That delicate human material must be handled with the utmost care; everything must be done to better and increase that human stock.'

The heaviest toll on native activity is the one of portage. It was made heavier by the necessities of the campaign in East Africa; we heard one of the leading generals of that expedition speak with deep human emotion of the need to lighten that heavy burden of the Congo natives. The commission and the Congress advised better lodgings for carriers and for workers transported by road, rail or steamer; more adequate food provisions; the strict observance of the maximum weight of twenty-five kilos per load, which several speakers declared excessive. Others (among them Roman Catholic missionaries) stated that natives bear portage easily when they are well treated and well fed.

From the humanitarian as well as from the economic point of view, portage must be done away with as soon as possible. The chief impression left by the King's speech as well as by the discussions of the Congress was the urgency of a strong policy for railways and roads. But here comes in a grave difficulty. Railways can only be laid, roads for automobiles can only be built, navigation on the rivers

can only be improved, by the help of immense quantities of native labour, and this must be taken away from the mines which are being opened everywhere, from the necessary and striking development of agriculture—rice, maize, cotton, palm oil, cocoa, etc. Engineers proposed the re-introduction of forced labour under certain conditions and for a limited time; they stated that free labour would never build rapidly the railways and the roads that would free the natives from the plague of portage and paddling, and ensure their own economical prosperity as well as that of the white men. The argument was insidious. It reminded me of the confession of a converted burglar who before leaving his life of rapine desired to commit a last theft in order to get capital to go abroad to a new country and spend there an honest existence. Vehement protest met that proposal in the Colonial Congress. In his summing up, the secretary of the Congress said: 'We have been unanimous against the re-introduction of forced labour with all its abuses.' Amid general applause, the Colonial Minister declared: 'Forced labour is contrary to justice; it is condemned by our moral conscience. We will remain faithful to the system of free labour. Free labour only can give satisfactory and permanent results. It obliges the employer to better the living conditions of his workers and to develop them.' Several speakers in the Congress were in accord with the commission when they declared: 'Forced labour is not necessary. You will get plenty of labour and good labour if employers treat their workers well, provide for them sufficient food and good housing. Well treated, the workers will go back to their villages happy and satisfied, and they will become the best recruiting agents.'

The commission suggests the obligatory use of an 'engagement book' for each native worker with a note of the labour contract, and controlled regularly and free of charge by the state officials.

A number of other suggestions are merely noted in the

Report and will probably be further studied by the commission, such as a request for the lowering of the capitation tax in certain regions, because of the higher cost of living ; the organization of old-age pensions for native workers, at any rate for those in government employment ; encouragement by the state of the organization of saving banks for the natives ; better regulation of the native chieftaincies (chefferies). The commission protests against the arbitrary displacing of native villages : ' Imperative hygienic reasons only can justify the displacing of villages.'

A strong protest was lodged against the ' corvée,' that is, the obligation to work for public service in road building, etc. At present the native can be forced to work sixty days per year in the chieftaincy. The commission proposes a reduction of the time of public service to thirty days, and the power of redemption from the ' corvée' by a payment in money at the local rate of salaries.

Finally, the commission has wisely drawn the attention of the Government to the danger of too large concessions to trading companies. The Government has allotted vast tracts of land without providing space for the establishment of missions. ' The missionaries,' they say, ' must be able to settle down permanently in the close neighbourhood of the native populations of these concessions and without depending on the good or ill will of the grantees.' Unanimously they voted : ' That the Government ought to reserve in the land concessions ground for philanthropical and religious enterprises and that the Government seek the means to repair the evil already done by taking back from the grantees the land necessary for such institutions.'

The general good-will of the Belgian public is shown clearly by some figures quoted without any opposition by a financial expert before the Colonial Congress. He advised a first loan for the Colony of 300 million francs ; of that sum, 180 million should be used for building roads and railways and 120 million for the physical, professional and moral development of the native population. Is it not a

very significant proportion? Belgium is facing her world responsibility with boldness but without presumption. The sufferings and heroism of the war have developed a new sense of patriotism.

The great question now is to know if Belgium is willing to look upon her world mission from a standpoint of moral idealism and not only in the light of commercialism and political interest. In the outburst of practical materialism produced by a natural reaction after the awful privations of the period of German occupation, there is a great deal of unrestrained rush for money and pleasure with an unprecedented outburst of self-seeking. But great and glorious gleams of idealism are piercing these heavy clouds and foreshadowing in many ways the dawn of a purified national life. Among these we are glad to point out the hopeful new departure in Belgian colonial spirit as emphasized by the Report of the Commission for the Protection of the Natives and by the first and recent National Colonial Congress.

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