

RUTH SLADE

THE
BELGIAN
CONGO

*SOME RECENT
CHANGES*

INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS

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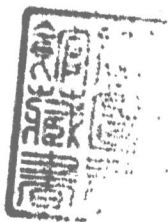
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THE BELGIAN CONGO

SOME RECENT CHANGES

RUTH SLADE



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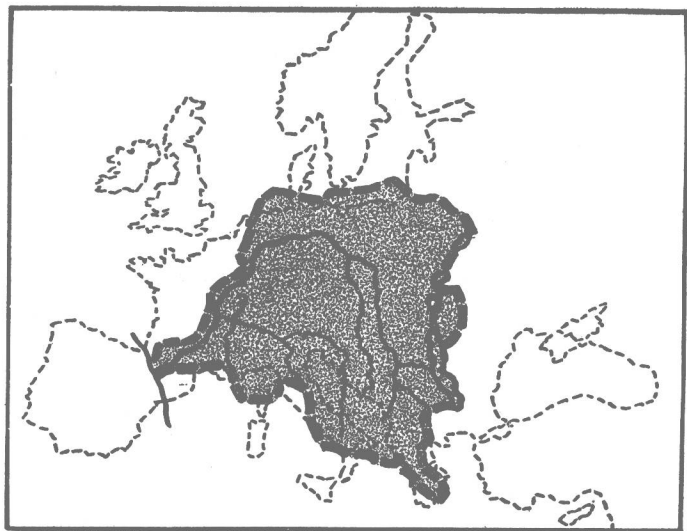
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MAP 1. The Congo superimposed on Europe



MAP 2. The Congo as part of Africa



MAP 3. The Belgian Congo.

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I. PATERNALISM

The Isolation of the Congo from the Rest of Africa

FOR long the Congo appeared to be a peaceful island untouched by African anti-colonialism. Even the maps produced in Belgium seem designed to convey this impression of an isolated island fortress; often they give only the sharp outline of that immense square of Central Africa, with its two tapering additions, the one pushing West to provide an outlet to the Atlantic, and the other South-eastward down into the Copperbelt. Then on the Eastern border they show the Belgian trusteeship territory of Ruanda-Urundi adjoining the Congo like an afterthought. Apart from this, however, there is little indication that it is not water which surrounds the Congo, but other African territories. From the maps they see in the schoolroom most Belgian children would be able to draw a passable outline sketch of their country's colony, but there would probably be few who could set it in its African surroundings.

Until recently, of course, the need to place the Congo in relation to its African context was not particularly apparent; only now has this become inescapable. Theoretically the evolution of the Congo was to have taken place in a logical succession of slow and easy stages; mass education was to provide a literate population before the education of an *élite* was considered, and a long apprenticeship in consultative councils was to prepare the way for democratic institutions at some remote date. At the same time a system of social welfare and the gradual creation of an African middle class provided satisfaction for the immediate future, and it was thought that a calm and peaceful discussion of economic and political emancipation could safely be relegated to some distant period. Theoretically the plan was perfect; and if the

isolation of the Congo from the rest of the continent could have continued indefinitely it might have met with an outstanding success.

For thirty years international opinion was indifferent, and African opinion within the Congo a negligible factor, uninfluenced by native opinion elsewhere. Undisturbed by either, Belgian empiricism prudently followed the path of economic development and increasing social prosperity. In 1939 the threefold foundation of Belgian authority in the Congo—the State, the companies, and the Church—was unassailed and apparently unassailable. The State official, the capitalist, and the missionary worked hand in hand to lead the Congo—eighty times the size of Belgium—forward along the highroad of civilization and progress. As Governor-General Ryckmans said: 'Rule in order to serve. . . This is the sole excuse for colonial conquest; it is also its complete justification. To serve Africa—that means to civilize her.'¹ The civilization of her African colony—seen largely in terms of technical progress, native welfare, and the introduction of Christianity—had been put forward as the conscious aim and ideal of Belgium ever since she took over the Congo Independent State from Leopold II in 1908. In contrast to the earlier period of outright exploitation there were, between annexation and the outbreak of war in 1939, three decades of benevolent paternalism.

A Civilizing Mission

The Europeans had come to the conclusion that their exploitation of the natural resources and the labour which made up the wealth of the Congo basin ought to be justified by evidence of the benefits which Africans were receiving from contacts with them—benefits in terms of a settled life, reasonable housing conditions, enough to eat, and access to the spiritual resources of Christendom. It was evident that her African colony was bringing wealth to Belgium; in return, the Belgian task was to transmit Western civilization

¹ P. Ryckmans, *Dominer pour servir*, Brussels, 1931.

to the Congo. It was the latter aspect that was stressed during this period. The economic reason for Belgium's interest in the Congo was barely mentioned; the whites had become the 'tutors' of the Africans, they were keenly aware of a civilizing mission which it was their duty to fulfil and they loudly proclaimed their consciousness of 'the white man's burden'. In the phrase of M. Pierre Ryckmans, '*dominer pour servir*'.

The Africans had not been asked to express their opinions on the subject of the introduction of Western civilization; it was assumed that they would be glad enough of the change once they discovered that they were to be compensated for the inconveniences—such as forced labour—by an improvement in their material conditions of life. There was no idea, during these years, of 'equality' between black and white; it seemed abundantly evident that the relationship between European and African could only be that of benefactor and recipient. The 'Prospero complex' had developed easily enough among the Europeans.¹ 'You are my father and my mother', a phrase often used by Africans in addressing a European administrator or missionary, expressed very well their sense of dependence upon the invaders who were changing the old patterns of tribal society with frightening speed. As in the old society a man was dependent upon his ancestors and their spokesman, his chief, so now he had transferred his dependence to the new powers in the land, the whites to whom even the hereditary chiefs owed obedience. And in fact for long the father-son relationship seemed satisfactory enough. Relations between black and white continued simple and uniform. Few could have predicted the development of a complex situation such as that of the present day, in which Europeans are in contact not only with rural Africans still more or less supported by their traditional institutions, but also with the students of the two universities, and with those at every stage between the two

¹ O. Mannoni, *Psychologie de la colonisation*, Paris, 1950, translated as *Prospero and Caliban*, Methuen, London, 1956.

extremes, for some of whom 'paternalism' has come to be the most irritating aspect of the colonial system.

Paternalism, the Traditional Policy

In the pre-war Congo paternalism had paid, and had produced practical results remarkable in Africa. When the great concessionary companies—*Union Minière du Haut-Katanga*, *Forminière*, *Huilleries du Congo Belge* among the most important—found it necessary to concentrate thousands of men around the mines, tearing them away from their traditional tribal backgrounds, it was good business to provide accommodation for their families, to give them food, clothing, medical care and social amenities, the pastoral solicitude of a Catholic mission, and an educational system for their children. To look after the workers and their families from the cradle to the grave was the best way to keep the labour supply healthy and contented, to avoid industrial disputes, and to encourage labour stability. This thorough-going and intelligent paternalism of the companies had produced impressive material results. What it had *not* done, however, was to leave anything to the initiative of the Africans. The danger was that this businesslike attitude risked treating the African workers as something less than men. 'See how well we look after our cattle,' remarked a paternalist of the Katanga as he proudly displayed the schools, the hospital, the maternity centre, and the sports ground of one of his camps.¹

After the War, a few warning voices began to be raised:

'The social question, in Congo as in Belgium, is something other than the multiplication of clinics and of swimming pools or a distribution of alms. If tomorrow all the squalid huts that remain in the workers' quarters could be removed, water and electricity laid on, family allowances and social insurance extended, and wages and living stan-

¹ A. A. J. Van Bilsen, 'Un plan de trente ans pour l'émancipation politique de l'Afrique belge', in *Les dossiers de l'Action Sociale Catholique*, Brussels, 1950.

dards raised, the European companies would have done their duty, but the industrialized native would be very little happier. The object of paternalist policy is to make him someone who is assisted, insured and pensioned, instead of making him a free man; the person is sacrificed to the individual. Each native is provided with his standardized house, mass-produced furniture, pre-determined scale of food, his free time regulated to the last detail and without a trace of imagination; on top of which, to stop him making an unwise use of his money, a part of his wages is replaced by payment in kind. Man is turned into a sort of vegetable, in an anticipation of the mechanical earthly paradise of Bernanos. But at all times, men have found freedom in misery preferable to a comfortable slavery. A certain paternalism vis-à-vis the African in the Congo will doubtless be inevitable for a considerable time to come, but we must remember that liberty which has once been taken away is difficult to give back. We must begin at once with the task of deproletarianizing the native worker and giving him his freedom by progressively causing him to participate himself in the improvement of his conditions of life and in the administration of the work camps, in preparation for the day, inevitably still long distant, when he will be able to take part in the direction of the concern itself. The function of the camp leader is not, as most people still imagine, to be the brain of the native worker, but rather to teach the latter to be able to do without him. The object which we seek, after all, is the native's own happiness, and a man can only receive his true happiness at his own hands.' ¹

The paternalism of the Government had been as practical as that of the capitalists. It had concentrated on the material well-being of the masses and the provision of primary education, with the idea that this policy would be more likely to ensure a contented population than would the granting of political rights and the formation of an *élite*. Secondary

¹ G. Malengreau, *La Revue Nouvelle*, V, no. 2, February 1947, p. 101.

education (apart from the training of African priests) had been adapted to the immediate needs of the country, to the production of clerks, nurses, and so on, while Africans had not been admitted to the liberal professions nor to university education. Hospitals and clinics, social centres and housing schemes, the inspection of working conditions and the regulation of wages, had together provided a background of social welfare in the Congo. There had emerged what might loosely be termed an African middle class, composed of clerks, railway employees, medical assistants, mechanics, chauffeurs, and the like. These men had good, regular jobs, comparatively well paid (although not in relation to the salaries of Europeans), and were for the present satisfied with their lot. The classic exchange between an African of Brazzaville and an African of Leopoldville puts it very well: 'I am a French citizen; you are merely a subject.' 'But I am a rich man; you are poor.'

The Limitations of Paternalism

Good economic conditions for the emerging middle class, a comprehensive social legislation, and an educational system for the masses were not everything. As against the positive achievements in the social and economic fields, there were large gaps in other directions. The Africans had been given no political responsibilities, no *élite* capable of leadership had been formed, no Congolese had been sent to study abroad, any potential politico-religious agitators had been transported far from home, a strict censorship of the Press prevented the free expression of opinion, and no Africans had been admitted to the higher government positions. There was, moreover, a very real racial discrimination; in the fields of education, medical services, and housing Africans and Europeans were treated as two totally separated communities—a distinction said to be justified on social and cultural grounds. So far as votes were concerned, however, the Europeans were in no better position than the Africans. The Belgian Congo had been developed as a black country,

supervised by a restricted group of whites who received their instructions in detail from Brussels. As far as possible, the emergence of 'poor whites' had been discouraged, and Europeans, like the Africans, had enjoyed no political rights. The basic assumption of this policy in the Congo had been as follows: that given a fair degree of material prosperity, and as little evidence as possible of discrimination—as in the matter of votes, for example—and given religious training (at this period most atheist or agnostic Socialists appear to have thought the existence of the missions necessary and useful) and protection from Brussels against the Europeans on the spot, the Africans would be content for the colonial régime to continue indefinitely. This attitude remained unchanged after the War. When Governor-General Ryckmans left the Colony to represent Belgium on the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations he said to his former colleagues in the administration:

'If I had to leave you a last message, I would say that the function of the State is to create and guarantee man's happiness, and that the prosperity of a country is that of the great mass of its inhabitants, and that Belgium will have succeeded in her colonial task when our natives live happily under our flag.'

II. AFRICAN DISCONTENT

The Breakdown of Isolation

WHAT the Belgians had not taken into account was the fact that the Congo was not going to be left in isolation to proceed tranquilly along this path of material prosperity in strict subordination to Brussels. This policy had been a positive and workable one while the Congo had existed as a world on its own, and as long as the Europeans, as well as the Africans, had been denied political rights. The Second World War broke abruptly into this neatly designed pattern. The horizons of the Congolese were rapidly widened as a result of African troops serving abroad in Egypt, the Middle East, and Burma. Sometimes their relationships with Europeans were suddenly reversed; in the dignity of military uniform some had guarded poorly-clad white soldiers and fired on them if they tried to escape. Others had slept with white prostitutes; 'this,' said one, 'was *the* great crisis of my life, and I can never think of Europeans in the same way again'. In the Congo itself, the Africans had observed American Negroes being treated as the equals of white troops. Propaganda against Nazi racial doctrines had been used in order to stimulate the war effort in the Congo and to speed up the collection of rubber and the production of vital minerals. At the same time, to many Congolese Hitler became a kind of mythical figure, whom they imagined coming to the Congo in the shape of a liberator who would drive out the Belgians.

The Post-war Situation

As a result of the War, not only did European prestige in the Congo decline but there was less personal contact between Europeans and Africans than there had been

before. The officials of the administration had been obliged to give their attention to the problems of the war-time production of rubber and minerals, and thus had tended to neglect native policy. The Europeans in general had been exhausted by their prolonged stay in the tropics and by the efforts demanded of them during the War. Moreover, they tended to have their wives and families with them and, unlike the bachelor colonists of earlier years, stayed at home in the evenings instead of seeking African society. At the end of the War many Congolese were complaining somewhat bitterly that 'the whites don't like us any more'.¹

Not only was there a decline in personal contacts between white and black, but the Europeans on their side were beginning to agitate for greater autonomy for the Congo. They had lived through a period of isolation from metropolitan Belgium and, so far as they were concerned, they saw no reason why the links with Brussels should ever be so close again. It was not so much that they wanted to send their votes home, as they had seen the American soldiers doing; they were less interested in metropolitan politics than in the shaping of policy in the Congo itself. From their point of view, the Central Government showed too great a partiality for the Africans. 'We can deal with the blacks; we know them. Brussels can only theorize,' was their attitude.

The social dislocation resulting from the rush to the towns made the situation in the Congo at the end of the War all the more uneasy. The economic effort of the war years had been intense. The Africans of the interior had been hard pressed by the compulsory labour demanded of them, and there had been a considerable movement towards the cities. The population of Leopoldville, 40,000 in 1939, had grown to nearly 100,000 by 1945. In 1938 8.3 per cent. of the total population lived in the *centres extra-coutumiers* (urban or mining centres outside the traditional areas); by 1946 the

¹ G. Malengreau, 'Recent Developments in Belgian Africa', in *Africa Today*, ed. C. Grove Haines, Baltimore, 1955, p. 340.