

Belgian Colonial Policy

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Background

- the Congo Free State had been created as a private empire of Leopold, King of the Belgians, in the 1880s. Relying on his own resources and strapped for cash, Leopold had pioneered the technique of using concessions to private companies as a means of getting development and building infrastructure; railways were built by private companies in return for large concessions.

- the invention of vulcanising of rubber led to a boom in the demand for rubber in the 1890s; rubber trees grew wild in the rain forest regions. However, going out to collect it required lots of labour; the concession companies developed horrific methods for 'encouraging' Africans to do this— torture and holding wives and children hostage, for example. Atrocities and abuses were committed by the nationals of every nation engaged in the scramble and conquest of Africa, but the atrocities in the Congo were far beyond anywhere else.

- it was missionaries who finally blew the whistle on what was going on in the Congo and an international campaign was launched to do something about it (American missionaries and American government pressure were especially significant because it had been the Americans who helped Leopold get control of the Congo in 1884 on his claim to be trying to end the slave trade!). The pressure was on the Belgian government to do something about their king and his actions in the Congo (the government had deliberately avoided any involvement in the scramble for Africa); in 1908, it reluctantly took over the Congo Free State from Leopold (he was consoled by a substantial indemnity) and renamed the Belgian Congo.

- the rubber boom collapsed about the same time (plantation rubber from Asia was much cheaper) and this helped to reduce the pressures and incentives for the atrocities. The remaining years before WW1 were used to get control of the situation and to begin to consider policy; thus, it was only after the war that colonial policies were developed and put into place. Also, because of the collapse of the early boom, economic development had to be restarted.

The Trinity

- the Belgian Congo evolved the most extensive and thorough colonial administration in Africa. It was based upon the idea of direct rule (i.e., by Belgians) and paternalism of a very intense kind. The Belgian Congo was characterised by a high degree of

coordination between the 3 sectors of penetration (which came to be called the 'Trinity'): the colonial administration (government), the Church (Roman Catholic) and private companies.

- in all 3 sectors, the scale of the effort and the number of expatriate whites was unmatched outside South Africa.

- Thomas Hodgkin (*Nationalism in Colonial Africa* [1956], p. 52) argued that Belgian colonial policy was based on "'Platonism' because of its resemblance to the argument of the *Republic*. Platonism is implicit in the sharp distinction, social and legal, between Belgian philosopher-kings and the mass of African producers; in the conception of education as primarily concerned with the transmission of certain unquestioned and unquestionable moral values, and intimately related to status and function; in the belief that the thought and behaviour of the mass is plastic, and can be refashioned by a benevolent, wise and highly trained élite; that the prime interest of the mass is in welfare and consumer goods—football and bicycles—not liberty; and in the conviction that it is possible, by expert administration, to arrest social and political change."

1 Administration

- by the 1960s, there were 10,000 Belgian administrators, judicial officials and military officers; higher proportionately than anywhere else.

- in addition to the general administration, there were many specialists in each area: agricultural officers, labour officers, medical officers and even education officers although much of the work in the last 2 areas was handled by the Church.

- agricultural officers (with their African assistants) kept a close eye on the local African population; with the development of large-scale mining and plantation activities, there was a large need for food for the labourers. There was a definite policy of using African peasant production to supply this local domestic market. The agricultural officers supervised and directed African farmers in what crops to produce.

- there was some attempt to stimulate export production (especially cotton) by African peasant production; however, most export crop production was centred on plantations owned by white settlers or European companies (mostly Belgian).

- the regime had required 60 days of labour on compulsory agriculture or public works each year. This was reduced to 45 days in 1955, but had largely been abandoned by 1960 just before independence.

- in the inter war period, the administration had helped to recruit labour for mines &

plantations.

2 The Church

- at independence, there were nearly 6,000 European missionaries.
- Africans were also involved very extensively; there were about 500 African priests & 35-40 new ordinations each year, but this step came mostly after 1945. In addition, there were over 25,000 catechists and 400 brothers and 750 nuns in teaching orders.
- a special concordat with the Vatican in 1906 gave entire responsibility for mission work with Belgian church and orders (however, the latter recruited individuals from elsewhere, from Quebec for example).
 - the agreement provided many economic benefits: the state subsidised schools and the payment of missionaries; 200 hectares of land were granted for each mission station which provided not only food, but could be used to get additional revenue.
- bureaucrats were under orders: "Government servants are not working alone in the task of civilisation. The religious orders are participating in at least equal measure.... Civil servants, whatever their own religious views, are under a strict obligation to aid the Christian missionaries." Cartey & Kilson, *The Africa Reader: Colonial Africa*, p. 90.

3 Companies

- there were a number of large plantations of oil palm and rubber (huge conglomerates—Lever group and Soci t  G n ral). Mining also began in the 1920s and expanded to very large proportions (copper, tin, diamonds and some gold).
- civil servants were ordered to support business, including urging Africans to provide labour. As a government memo stated in 1922: "It is a mistake to believe ... that once taxes are paid and other legal obligations met, the native may remain inactive. Under no circumstances may magistrates express this opinion. In every case, I should consider this to be a lack of discipline violating the recommendations of the government and our most positive duties toward our black subjects." Cartey & Kilson, *The Africa Reader: Colonial Africa*, p. 91.
- these linkages were reinforced by career paths. The colonial civil service was much like the military; after 23 years of service, officials retired with a pension. They were still young (in their late 40s or early 50s) and pensions were fairly small.

- the ex-colonial officials often took jobs with the companies; it should not be surprising that they were often planning ahead before retiring by keeping good relations and contacts in the companies!
- there were also joint government-private company enterprises; government appointees had excellent opportunities to prepare the ground for a second career in private business.

- of course, interests did not always coincide and there were tensions and even conflict:

- a church official complained in the 1920s, “The territory of Ubangi is emptied of every able-bodied man. The majority of the young men, the hope of the future, are taken from their district of origin and transplanted in the country from which they will return, if ever they do, corrupted and contaminated by every kind of subversive idea which they will spread upon returning here.” Cartey & Kilson, *The Africa Reader: Colonial Africa*, p. 93.
- a colonial civil servant, also in the 1920s, protested, “The territorial administrators ... are in a position to know that the exactions are becoming more numerous every day in every realm, and they no longer leave to the populations respite or liberty.... Perhaps one may pardon the functionary who gives way to sentiments of bitterness when he believes himself daily becoming more and more a veritable merchant of men, when his villages empty at his approach, as at the approach of a slave-trader.” Cartey & Kilson, *The Africa Reader: Colonial Africa*, p. 93.

- however, such tensions were not very evident to Africans and the ‘trinity’ of the Belgian Congo was said to appear like a seamless web.

Effects

- Africans in the Belgian Congo were probably affected more intensively than anywhere else; few escaped. Not only were males especially drawn away from home to labour for considerable periods and on a massive scale, but how and what people cultivated was directed in detail.

- government services too were provided on a very substantial scale:

- education, at least at the elementary level, was widely available; limited secondary and higher education only began to be made available slowly after 1945.
- much more extensive medical treatment was available than elsewhere in colonial Africa.

- economic development was both extensive and intensive.

- however, Africans had been educated and trained only for very low levels; slowly after 1945, they began to send Africans abroad for higher education, even for the priesthood, but the numbers were small. The result was that there were very few highly educated and trained Africans at the time of independence.

Theory

- the idea underlying Belgian policies in the Congo was to change and transform the masses rather than to produce an elite. Moreover, it is not too much of a distortion to say that the transformation they had in mind was to a proletariat. It also implies a view of African capabilities as being very limited.

- the Belgians were certainly *not* unique in these attitudes. What was unique was the systematic and exhaustive manner in which they went about implementing them.

- this was more or less the opposite of the *de facto* policy of assimilation pursued in the French African colonies of producing an elite.

- in British colonies, elites emerged very early although this was not usually a result of government policy; various situations (missions, the presence of white settlers or economic development) gave some Africans the resources to pursue education, even abroad. Thus, the development of western educated and assimilated elites was more a private development.