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The Colonial Policy of Belgium in the 19th–20th Centuries

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Abstract. The essence of the colonial policy of former European metropolises in Africa are still being debated in the twenty-first century. The opinions of various authors contradict each other. Some argue that the colonizers brought civilization to the African peoples, others believe that as a result of the introduction of a culture alien to the aborigines, their development was delayed in time. The purpose of the study is to prove that colonialism caused colossal damage to the peoples of the Congo, and the former metropolis, first in the person of only King Leopold II, and then the Kingdom of Belgium, used the slave labor of the local population and their resources only for the sole purpose of enrichment. Analyzing the sources and literature on the colonial period of the Congo, including the testimonies of both European and African eyewitnesses of the events, the correspondence of officials with the Belgian king, as well as the works of authoritative domestic authors, it is concluded that although the era of colonialism has sunk into oblivion, its past continues to leave an imprint on the modern development of the DR Congo, one of the poorest countries in Africa. This is the paradox of one of the continent's most resource-rich countries with a however low standard of living. For the first time, the study references unique materials collected by the Congolese scholar Mutamba Makombo, as well as the works of the Congolese historian Isidore Ndaywel.

Keywords: colonialism, Congo, Kingdom of Belgium, Leopold II, rubber

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Колониальная политика Бельгии в XIX–XX вв.

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Аннотация. Колониальная политика бывших европейских метрополий в Африке служит предметом споров и в XXI столетии. Мнения различных авторов противоречивы. Одни утверждают, что колонизаторы принесли цивилизацию африканским народам, другие считают, что в результате насаждения инородной для аборигенов культуры, их развитие задержано во времени. Цель исследования — доказать, что колониализм нанес колоссальный ущерб народам Конго, а бывшая метрополия, сначала в лице одного короля Леопольда II, а затем Королевства Бельгии, использовала рабский труд местного населения и их ресурсы лишь для единственной цели — обогащения. Анализ источников и литературы о колониальном периоде Конго, включая свидетельства как европейских, так и африканских очевидцев событий, переписки чиновников с бельгийским королем, а также труды авторитетных отечественных авторов, подвел к выводу о том, что хотя эпоха колониализма и канула в Лету, ее прошлое продолжает накладывать отпечаток на современное развитие ДР Конго — одной из беднейших стран Африки. В этом и заключается парадокс одной из самых богатых природными ресурсами стран континента и ее низким уровнем жизни ее народов. В исследовании впервые используются уникальные материалы, собранные конголезским ученым Мутамбой Макомбо, а также труды конголезского историка Исидора Ндавелы.

Ключевые слова: колониализм, Конго, Королевство Бельгия, Леопольд II, каучук

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Introduction

Russian and foreign researchers from time to time, discuss the “good or bad” of the legacy left by colonizers. What is important for us is the “inside” view, the opinion of Africans themselves about their historical past. Jean-Marie Mutamba Makombo Kitachima, a Congolese scholar and professor at the University of Kinshasa (DR Congo), is one of those who has collected and summarized unique materials on the history of his country. Another noteworthy Congolese historian Isidore Ndaiwel e Nziem, the author of numerous works on the Congo, the multi-page “History of the Congo” stands out among them. For studying the Congo’s history can be interesting the works of Russian africanist scholars, including V.A. Subbotin, who wrote a lot of interesting

works about the Congo and its peoples, as well as A.S. Orlova, Y.N. Vinokurov and A.Z. Zusmanovich, who fully described the history of the creation of the Independent State of Congo. Thus, the diplomatic struggle of the European powers in the Congo basin is thoroughly shown in A.Z. Zusmanovich's book "Imperialistic divide of the Congo Basin". The picture of the colonial past of this Central African country is complemented by famous journalists of that time. For example, the author of "The Hound of the Baskervilles", the Englishman A. Conan Doyle, as well as his contemporary, the American Adam Hochschild, were deeply indignant at the policy of Belgium towards African peoples and tried to prove the barbaric attitude of the civilized country towards the natives. It cannot be said that A. Conan Doyle treated the colonial peoples as equal to European peoples. He considered them an inferior race, but he was amazed by the rule of the Belgian King Leopold II and the attitude of local administrators to rubber tappers. In 1906 English writer E.D. Morel published a book about Congo "Red Rubber", where red color is associated with the color of blood. The American writer Mark Twain and the French journalist Pierre Mille did not stand aside. They brought history to life and presented readers with ample evidence of slavery and violence in Africa during the reign of King Leopold II of Belgium.

Comparing facts from various sources about the atrocities of the Belgian authorities on the African continent, the author managed to find out the prime cause of the cruel attitude to the local population and the true goals of the colonizers, who allegedly carried out a civilizing mission in Africa.

The conquest of central Africa

The European conquest of Central Africa, namely the present-day territory of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), was primarily about finding new sources of raw materials that were needed for Europe's developing industry. Enrichment from the rich natural resources of the African continent was profitable, and the sale of tropical products, including rubber, cotton, palm oil, ivory, and many others, to European markets promised considerable benefits. The notes of the Major from Cayenne say that "the whole colonial administration was first to guard the primitive peoples, subject to the authority and power of the white man, whose sole aim was production and enrichment. In this connection abuses were inevitable, first in England, then in Belgium" [1. P. 54]. The Belgian system of government, according to the Belgian journalist Pierre Daye, was a combination of "good tyranny" [2. P. 175–177]. It consisted in forcing the natives to trade, costing many of them loss of health and sometimes even life. While the benefit of Europeans was obvious — colonial goods filled European warehouses without much labour and expense. According to Conan Doyle, "Congo became a place of slaughter, one of the bloodiest of our era" [3. P. 16]. Historian Ndaiwel e Nziem states, "the

Congolese realized that their lands were being conquered by foreigners from the European continent too late” [4. P. 267].

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the first Belgian explorers actively began to explore Central Africa. They were military men, engineers, doctors, geographers, priests, who sent their reports to Belgium to analyze the situation and possible operational seizures of so-called free lands [5]. As a rule, the initiator of expeditions to Congo was King Leopold of Belgium himself, who single-handedly, as a result of various machinations, took possession of Congo, and he later named it an independent state. Some of the most famous expeditions are those of H. Stanley, which the pioneer described in detail in his book “In the wilds of Africa” [6], as well as which the pioneer described in his book “In darkest Africa” [6], as well as the campaigns to the Katanga region by his companion Captain Stairs [7. P. 69]. The king ruled the Congo with the help of close advisers, while he himself had never been to the African land. According to A. Hochschild, “he never heard the screams of people, never saw their ruined houses or torn flesh” [8. P. 19].

After Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, on the Congo’s territory became less and less of white spots every year — free from conquest by Europeans. The creation of the Independent State of Congo (ISC) was, in theory, independent of Belgium, but both were supposed to be ruled by the same person — the king of Belgium. However, a problem arose. According to the Belgian constitution (Art. 62), the king could not be the head of two states at the same time without the approval of both houses of parliament. As a result, such approval, though without much enthusiasm, was obtained on April 28, 1885. Henceforth, the King of Belgium could be the sovereign of Congo, but relations between Belgium and the new state in Africa were based solely on the personal interests of the Belgian king [9. P. 13]. The Belgian monarch had a plan of “effective occupation” of the entire territory of the Congo and, moreover, he intended to seize part of the English possessions towards the Nile — in Sudan, in order to “add on” the land to his northern possessions. However, he was stopped by the stubbornness of the English, who had no intention of ceding any “rights” to their territories to anyone. In 1888, in a letter to his agent Strauch, the king pointed out the need to organize expeditions to the areas bordering the Portuguese possessions. In response, Strauch informed the king about the measures taken to establish a military camp of 500–600 men in the territory of the Upper Congo. [10. P. 223]. Leopold expected to occupy Aruvimi, Lomami, Kwango and Ubangi.

At that time, these territories were inhabited by numerous tribes with a distinctive way of life, communities with thousands of years of traditions, and who did not want to accept the laws of white foreigners. Leopold set the task of militarily defeating the resisting tribal leaders in the eastern regions and extending Belgian rule to that part of the Congo Basin. The mission was successfully accomplished, and its commanders were generously rewarded. Thus, in 1889, the monarch granted one of the organizers of the expedition, Lieutenant Werelen Danis, the title of baron and

bestowed on his associates. Baron Danis, inspector of the Uele district, nicknamed “Fimbomngi” (translation from the Lingala language, the one who administers severe punishments), who received instructions from Leopold to reclaim the Lado territory from the British, acted decisively and brutally. Here is the testimony of one of the local prisoners. “We were forced to do hard labour under various pretexts. For the slightest tardiness or smallest fault, we or our wives were put under heavy burdens. We were on the verge, fed only with fodder from the forest. In addition, the inspectors emptied houses to the last chicken, kidnapped wives and children” [11. P. 46].

The Belgian deputy Emile Vandervelde presented his views on the Leopold system, which was lasting from 1891 to 1906 [12]. He believed that there was never any free land in the Congo because every village, every tribe knew well the limits of hunting, fishing or gathering. That is why “free lands” was only a theory. While the king declared the Congo his property, it followed that the natives lost their legal right to exploit the lands of their ancestors. For example, the rubber harvested by the natives did not belong to them, and if they tried to sell it, they were “prosecuted for theft” [12]. The International Commission of Inquiry, which was in Congo, from October 5, 1904 to February 21, 1905, condemned the atrocities committed by the Belgian authorities during that period. “The atrocities and tortures to which the henchmen of Leopold I subjected the long-suffering population of Congo, surpassed all the torments they had ever experienced” [10. P. 201]. R.S. Phillips, a Manchester merchant, also wrote in his letter to Leopold in 1890 about the brutal raids against the natives: “I do not have enough exact words to describe to Your Majesty the cruel actions of your soldiers during the raids. The first to enter the battle are soldiers from the bloodthirsty cannibals of Bangala, who give no mercy to old men or infants. There are facts when they delivered the heads of victims on expeditionary ships to white officers, and also ate the bodies of killed babies” [13. P. 308]. The majority of the ISC soldiers from the “Force Publique” — the Belgian colonial army — were slaves or debtors, for whom the recruitment was the only means to avoid imprisonment [14. P. 23]. According to the testimonies of the local residents, many were killed by “human hunters” [15. P. 27].

The Belgian House of Commons adopted the resolution on the ISC in 1903 that led to public demonstrations by prominent public figures against the Belgian policy. After investigations in Congo, Great Britain urged the Berlin Conference to convene a new conference due to reports of inhuman treatment of Congolese. A circular dispatch was sent, including to Russia. Russian Foreign Minister V.N. Lamsdorf submitted a report to Tsar Nicholas II on December 5, 1903, in which it was noted that Russia had no reason to interfere in the essence of the dispute [16. P. 112]. The Tsar imposed a resolution: “Quite agree” [16. P. 112]. The report to the Tsar also stated that Russia, although it had taken part in the Berlin Conference, had no political or commercial interests in the Congo Basin, and therefore it did not

appoint its consular representatives there. Thus, being unable to verify the justice of Belgium's accusations in Congo, the imperial government decided that "there was no reason to interfere in the essence of the dispute" [16. P. 112]. As a result, Russia took a wait-and-see attitude, leaving the dispatch of the London cabinet without a response.

Rubber harvesting and repressions

The Europeans used African slave labour wherever it was possible, including rubber plantations. The exploitation of rubber plantations enriched the treasury of the ISC more than anything else. Rubber came to dominate the NGC's exports after 1880, when the first phase of state formation was considered conventionally complete. Mark Twain in his denunciatory pamphlet against Leopold, accusing the king of killing 15 million Congolese, wrote in 1905, calling the monarch "greedy, avaricious, cynical and bloodthirsty" [16. P. 96]. Journalist E. Morel, being an official of the British steamship company, often visited the Belgian port of Antwerp and wondered why ships leaving for Congo take on board large shipments of weapons, but return loaded with rubber [16. P. 96]. The answer was known — weapons were necessary for punitive expeditions to catch runaway slaves.

They forced local villagers to work on rubber plantations, and their chiefs, not the mobilized people, were paid for their work. In cases of disobedience of workers, the colonial authorities raided their villages and forcibly took the able-bodied population to the plantations. The norms of "duties" were set arbitrarily. The higher were the norms, the greater was the remuneration of the colonial administrators. The local residents' testimonies say that for disobedience or unfulfilled norms on rubber plantations they were killed, hands and ears were cut off [10. P. 124]. In 1920, the authorities of the ISC adopted a decree on the establishment of occupation regimes in areas where the population had put up a long and stubborn resistance. The essence of the occupation was that local authorities, district commissioners, had the right to act independently, without notification and request of the supreme power. Later, in 1930, another form of repression was introduced — the so-called military walks, which were carried out by well-equipped army detachments [17. P. 164].

Railroad construction

One of the first discoverers of Congo, H. Stanley, was convinced that "without a railroad, the Congo is not worth a single penny" [1. P. 47]. After a long study of the issue in the administration of the king it was decided to build a 388 km long railroad from east to west, which was to connect Leopoldville (modern Kinshasa) and the port of Matadi. Particularly grueling was the laying of the railroad for the first 16 km near Matadi in the mountains. They had to dig trenches in temperature

of 50 degrees Celsius, which undermined the health of the workers and made them more susceptible to tropical diseases. The grueling labor of local workers is evidenced by the notes of eyewitness R.J. Cornet. In one of them he wrote: “The M’pozo Valley is a huge cemetery: hundreds of exhausted people were buried there. The ominous place inspires only horror: disease, hopelessness and as a result — perdition” [18].

R.J. Cornet describes with the accuracy of a good observer the panic of people trying to escape from the “cursed valley” by any means. According to him, people fled at night, “wading through ravines, climbing steep cliffs, gasping for breath, and fell exhausted, left to die like animals, in the impassable thicket of the forest” [18]. The fate of people who fell into the river swarming with crocodiles was also irremediable. And those who did not manage to escape, again rose in the morning on alarm, and again continued the grueling work, which due to natural conditions progressed too slowly. “The irritated black men, shouting and howling, threw at the feet of their overseers the bodies of those who had died during the night. Some shouted curses even threats, others, on their knees, arms crossed, begged for mercy, to be sent to their native lands, offering in return, everything they had, including their earnings.” [18]. The tragedies and misfortunes of the local people were reflected in their folklore. For example, in the song-complaint of King Bombilo there are such words: “The whites have come! They burned our huts. They took away our weapons. They captured our wives, daughters” [12. P. 312].

It was not an easy matter to cut a road through the age-old trees and thickets. One such road was paved by Guards Colonel Tavastierna. He recalled how difficult it was to pave the road in the thicket of the forest: “You bump into ebony tree, and do saw it! It could take half a day to saw through a ten-inch tree. You will laugh, but the chief engineer has decided to go the other way around a wood of one hundred and fifty trees.” [19] He also notes that the harsh tropical climate was particularly detrimental to women. However, the common people of Europe had no idea of Africa or studied it from the movies. They imagined the distant continent differently from the harsh reality. The words of another eyewitness to the events seem fair, who bitterly stated: “When you watch a “tropical” movie and see a blond, eighteen-year-old beauty in a cork helmet with white, gorgeous pants, do not believe it, it is not Africa, it is Hollywood” [19].

Echo of colonialism in modern Congo

How do contemporary Congolese view their colonial past? They do it in different ways. While the historians and writers emphasize historical facts, ordinary people often blame their low standard of living on the white man in general. The author of this article had to observe one curious episode

during his work in the DR Congo. On the morning of February 7, 2005, in the capital Kinshasa, a bronze equestrian statue of Belgian King Albert I appeared on one of the pedestals (from the archives). However, having appeared suddenly, the monument, which weighed 3 tons, mysteriously disappeared. It had been standing for one day. It turned out that it was removed by the decision of the Congolese authorities, who suddenly remembered the colonial times, the cruelty of colonizers and found it inappropriate to erect the monument on Independence Boulevard. The capital's press, in its turn, reminded the Congolese how many people died on rubber plantations under the whips of overseers, and quoted from A. Hochschild's book "King Leopold's Ghosts: A History of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa". The ordinary citizens of Kinshasa took a simpler attitude to the incident, considering the mysterious disappearance of the statue as witchcraft [20. P. 251].

Conclusion

The analysis of Russian and foreign sources and different points of view on the problem of colonialism shows that colonization destroyed African large family communities, various collectives linked by ties of mutual assistance and common cults. Moreover, the forcible introduction of European orders and ways of life suppressed for some time their cultural practices. It distorted their ideas about good, evil and equality of people. But the traditions proved resilient. They have not passed into the past, but only frozen in time. Immediately after independence in 1960, the Congolese not only began to build their democracy, but also began to revitalize their cultural values in various spheres. According to I. Ndawela's, the Congolese began to return "to their roots". For example, the addresses "madam" and "monsieur" were replaced by "mom" and "dad". Local cuisine dishes began to revive. Buffalo, elephant, hippo, crocodile, turtle and snake meat, caterpillars, and certain types of insects, including grasshoppers, winged ants, and termites, were no longer exotic. Their use was attributed to ancestral tribute [2. P. 707]. Although Congo has significantly advanced on the path of democracy — there are legitimate elections of the president and power verticals, the Congolese continue to live by laws ancestors, worship the forces of nature and retain the power of traditional chiefs. And whatever one may say about the civilizing mission of the Europeans, it is obvious that their arrival on African soil was of a purposeful exploitative nature. Africans have their own way of life, their own rich traditions and culture. A series of governmental measures to preserve the Congolese cultural heritage, carried out by Mobutu Sese Seko (reigned for 32 years) and his followers, contributed to the preservation of the Congolese identity and became an important factor in the formation of the Congolese nation.

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