

## CONGO : ASHAMED OR PROUD TO BE BELGIAN ?

Yes, we can be proud, absolutely and without complexes, of all those Belgians who, together with the Congolese, created and developed this immense country eighty times the size of Belgium!

It all started with Leopold II, King-Sovereign of the Independent State of the Congo, an extraordinary personality, who is its founding father, as the Congolese themselves readily admit. He obviously did not fail to exploit its wealth, like other colonial powers. Unlike others, however, he wanted to add a humanitarian dimension to his enterprise by putting an end to the tribal wars and the raids of the slave-hunters who emptied the country of its lifeblood.

It was also under his impetus that the first schools and first hospitals were set up and programs for the eradication of yellow fever, sleeping sickness and malaria were launched. At the same time, he enforced the rule of law with an independent judicial organization. He made special efforts to provide the country with the infrastructure necessary for its economic development and built the first railway providing access to the Atlantic coast, without which "the Congo was not worth a penny".

Whilst denouncing certain abuses and other undeniable shortcomings, the Independent International Commission – set up in 1904, at the initiative of Leopold II, in order to conduct on-the-spot verification of the accusations of maltreatment levelled against his regime –, nevertheless recognized its achievements in the following particularly laudatory terms :

*"When, while traveling in the Congo, one compares the previous situation, well known by the narratives and descriptions of the explorers, with the present state of affairs, the impression (felt) is one of **admiration and wonder** ... Today, security reigns everywhere in this immense territory ... One wonders by what magic power or what mighty will, backed by heroic efforts, one could transform, in just a few years, the face of the earth in such a manner ...»*

Despite the damning conclusions of this report, Leopold II did not hesitate to have it published - in full - in the Official Journal of the Congo Free State. He ensured that the perpetrators of the abuses were prosecuted and, above all, he took a series of radical measures to put an end to the abuses by enacting no fewer than 24 Decrees to this end. The results were not long in coming and were in keeping with the measures taken.

To illustrate the above we share this delightful statement, made in 1907 by the Chief Manangame of Avakubi to a Swedish officer of the Public Force : *"In the time when the Arabs were the chiefs, they took our women and children and sold them as slaves. Without pity they plundered the country and burnt the villages; the white man never burns villages, and when we visit him at home with chickens and bananas he always pays us correctly for everything. He also pays well for the Mupira (rubber). The white man has eliminated the slave trade, but we black men still want the whites to leave because they force us to keep the roads in order and we can no longer launch war against the neighbours and we can even no longer eat the prisoners because if we eat them, we are hanged! ... "*

We can also be proud of the Belgians who worked in the Congo as of its takeover by Belgium in 1908 until its independence proclaimed on June 30, 1960. During these 52 years, the Belgian Congo has seen a spectacular progression of the well-being of its indigenous population. The overall upholding of the “Belgian Peace” (*Pax Belgica*), the fact that free schooling was the norm almost everywhere at the primary school level and widespread at secondary level, the creation of two universities, free medical care dispensed to even the most remote parts of the colony, the development of agriculture with the introduction of cash crops, the industrial exploitation of mining products, a surplus trade balance, monetary stability, etc. are all grounds for pride in what our fellow countrymen achieved in such a short time and with so little human and financial means!

And all this was accomplished through the daily efforts of those who devoted themselves, body and soul, notwithstanding the severe economic crisis of the 1930s and the two world wars that marked this era. Let us note with pride that the two very first victories won by the Allies during these conflicts were those of the valiant officers and soldiers of the Belgian Congo Public Force, in Tabora (Tanganyika) in 1916 and in Saio (Abyssinia) in 1941.

But no, we are not proud of the way our politicians played the fate of the Congo during the Round Table Conference, naively betting on how the new decision-makers were going to carry out their task when their incompetence was notorious and made so abundantly clear by the far-fetched and unrealistic promises made to their electorate.

The very strong international anticolonial pressure fuelled by the Bandung and Accra conferences and the combined negative influences of the US and the USSR, the two rival superpowers at the time, left very little leeway to the Belgians facing the representatives of the Congolese people keen on immediate independence, though not all of them were as intransigent.

Our politicians should have provided for appropriate measures, as did the French and the British, to deal with the worst case scenario and prevent the total collapse of the state structures. Instead, it was a total and unconditional "let go"!

*"Provided they do not spoil it, my Congo!"* sighed Leopold II, at the moment when he yielded his sovereignty to Belgium. Alas, sire, *"they"* did spoil it!

And yes, we can also be very proud of the Belgians who still continue to work in the Congo, like those missionaries who have chosen to stay there, against all odds. Whether as teachers, doctors, advisers, agronomists, technicians in public or private enterprises, as military personnel in charge of the formation of an elite battalion within the FARDC, or as “coopérants” in NGO’s that are efficient and truly concerned when it comes to improving the living conditions of the inhabitants of this magnificent country; they all help to maintain the ties that have united us for so many years, Belgians and Congolese!