



ROMANIAN PRESENCE IN COLONIAL CONGO

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Abstract: Congo, one of the largest and richest countries of Africa and of the world is, paradoxically, among the countries with the lowest living standards, a place where war, violence, rape, atrocities and death are common words and daily routine. Many analysts claim that horror started a long time ago when journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley got most of the native chiefs to sign a number of 'official papers' giving Leopold II king of Belgium the total right of property upon their lands. The territories thus appropriated were officially assigned to Leopold II by general international consent mostly during the Berlin Conference of 1885. That year the Congo Free State was born, a state which became a forced labour camp, in total contradiction with its name, as it is estimated that almost ten million people died because of the atrocious treatment they received from their masters. Some Romanians also witnessed different episodes of that reality and shared from their colonial Congolese experience, thus adding to the international testimonies provided by writers such as Conrad and Gide, by official employees, Catholic representatives and many others, in their attempt to unveil and prevent the endless horrors.

Keywords: Congo, Stanley, Leopold II, Conrad, Romanians

Congo, or The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) as it is called today, also known as Zaire for thirty-two years when Mobutu, the well known kleptocratic president of the country chose to rename it (1971) as part of his program of 'national authenticity'¹, represents one of the greatest humanitarian crises of the century. This seems quite astonishing given its huge natural resources, or perhaps this is why awful things still happen, as the Congolese have repeatedly argued², trying to counteract reiterated accusations implying that they are the only responsible for their disastrous situation.

Europeans discovered the huge land with numerous resources, populated by uneducated indigenes who seemed easy going in mercantile issues, an aspect fully exploited by many European

powers who found various methods to take advantage of the situation and make important fortunes.

The big amount of very important raw materials was but supposed when the new territories were discovered by the first audacious explorers; at the beginning the attraction and the profit came from exotic products, as well as from whatever African game could offer; a lot of money was made out of ivory, which meant thousands of elephants killed with no mercy as some of the explorers and also consecrated writers such as Joseph Conrad³ and later Emily Hahn⁴ wrote in their travel and adventure books very much demanded by the Victorian public.

The real story of 'the Congo Free State' was brought to light by Adam Hochschild's book, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*; among many other unspeakable details, the readers could find out that Congo was the only colony detained by a single owner, King Leopold II of Belgium (1865-1908); it was a place where the most horrifying atrocities

¹ Congo was declared independent on June 30th 1960, when Patrice Lumumba was elected Prime Minister by the first free popular vote; he soon fell victim of the cold war forces, who considered him a threat because of his communist bent and annihilated him in 1961, when Mobutu Sese Seko took the lead of the country due to a well-orchestrated international support (cf. M. Pedrero, *Corupția marilor puteri. Strategii și minciuni în politica mondială*, Litera International, București, 2008, p. 107).

² Kambale Musavuli, Congolese campaigner for helping the Congo, 2012: "we are poor because we are rich". www.friendsofthecongo.org, accessed 2014.

³ Polish-born English famous writer, who spent three years in Leopold's Congo as a captain of a steamer on the Congo River, witnessing horrors which not only affected his health for life, but also changed his views related to colonialism and to human behaviour and relationships, strongly influencing his decision to become a writer.

⁴ Emily Hahn, *Congo Solo*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston, (1933), 2011.



took place for some decades. The publication of the book triggered various reactions: most of the people worldwide simply could not understand “why [those] deaths were not mentioned in the standard litany of our century’s horrors” and mainly how it was possible that such mass slaughtering stayed hidden for so long⁵.

Hochschild claims that he wrote about a story which moved Victorian Britain “so strongly and so vehemently” as no other external issue had done in thirty years⁶, mainly in order to help people remember or simply find out facts kept hidden for almost a century. In spite of the “mass killings” that took place for too long (starting with the slave trade), the world has almost forgotten what happened in Africa, incriminating the Africans for their political and economic instability, for the deep poverty in which they live today. Hochschild’s historical account is a well informed ‘remember’ for all people involved in this true story. Edmund Denis Morel, an “impassioned, eloquent” person, “a trusted employee of a Liverpool shipping line [in the 1890s]...insisted to President Theodore Roosevelt that the United States had a special responsibility to do something about the Congo”. He spent great energy for more than a decade mainly to “put the horrors taking place in King Leopold’s Congo on the world’s front pages” so that people were informed, bishops and members of Parliament reacted and speeches about Congo were held “as far as Australia”⁷. As a supervisor of the merchandise going to and coming from Africa, Morel had noticed that the ships for Congo were carrying “mostly army officers, firearms, and ammunition” and brought back loads of rubber and ivory, thus realizing that the only explanation for the situation was slave labour; he was the initiator of “the first great international human rights movement of the twentieth century”⁸.

There had been other witnesses from abroad scandalized by what they saw with their own eyes going on in Congo, who had initiated an informing campaign before Morel, who had even interviewed

Africans about their sad stories, such as the black American journalist and historian George Washington Williams, he visited Congo in 1890 and saw many of the atrocities Morel only supposed that existed. He wrote an Open Letter addressed to king Leopold II which expressed clear feelings of horror caused by what he had seen, but also the great sadness and disapproval for “how thoroughly [he had] been disenchanted, disappointed and disheartened after all the praiseful things [he had] spoken and written of the Congo country, State and Sovereign”. Williams claims that all charges he is bringing in the mentioned letter against the king’s government in Congo were carefully investigated, while a “faithfully prepared” list of “competent and veracious witnesses, documents, letters, official records and data” is waiting to be used⁹. The letter was a long list of pertinent accusations invoking for the first time the gross encroachment of human rights and also representing “the first comprehensive, systematic indictment of Leopold’s colonial regime written by anyone”¹⁰. Very soon Williams sent “A Report upon the Congo-State and Country to the President of the Republic of the United States of America”, where besides the same charges mentioned in the Open Letter he emphasized the “special responsibility” that President Harrison had toward the Congo, because it had ‘introduced [that] African Government into the sisterhood of States’. The printing of the Open Letter as a pamphlet in 1890 when Williams was still in Africa triggered many different reactions, which would have certainly increased if the ardent and tenacious black American had not prematurely died, thus offering Leopold and his supporters some relief and also some time to counteract¹¹.

It is worth mentioning here that “by the time [Williams] went to the Congo in 1890, close to a thousand Europeans and Americans had visited the territory or worked there, [but] Williams was the only one to speak out fully and passionately and repeatedly about what others denied or ignored”¹².

In the same year 1890, William Sheppard, another black American who was sent as the first black missionary to Congo, also witnessed scenes of colonial brutality, which he recorded in letters,

⁵ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost’s*, A Mariner Book, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York, 1999, p. 10.

⁶ Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary quoted in Hochschild, *Op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

⁷ A. Hochschild, *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 85-6.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 89.



magazine articles and even in books he wrote in the twenty years he spent in Leopold's colony. The hazard made that almost at the same time Joseph Conrad was spending some miserable moments sick with malaria, in the same American mission station outside Matadi, where Sheppard's white religious companion, Reverend Samuel Lapsley was sheltered. The Reverend wrote in a letter sent home about "a gentlemanly fellow [who was] sick in a room at the other end of the court"¹³, thus giving some of the first information about Conrad's traumatizing experience in the Congo.

Joseph Conrad, the sea captain who was expecting to discover "the exotic Africa of his childhood dreams [found] instead what he would call 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience'"¹⁴; his experience in colonial Congo put a heavy mark on his moral and physical state and pushed him to choose a writer's career, thus, having the possibility to reveal facts he had not fancied before. Mr. Kurtz, the central character of his famous novella *Heart of Darkness*, perfectly embodies specific behaviour and practices of the colonial agents, who were engaging in dehumanizing competitions aiming at illicit gains, supremacy and fame among the Europeans, at the same time making use of all kinds of rules and practices in order to pass for impressive personalities in front of the colonized people. The metaphoric style Conrad chose to paint Congo cruel reality misled many people for quite a while, in spite of the clear message it carries, appearing almost like a manifesto meant to wake up millions of white contemporaries who, like he used to, had a completely different picture of 'the civilizing' process taking place in faraway territories placed under the 'colonial care' umbrella.

Although there were many other Europeans involved in the colonizing process, who witnessed similar acts and procedures with the ones that deeply affected Conrad, there were only a few who tried to inform other people by official or less official means. That is why we can proudly mention in this article the remarkable contribution of some Romanians who disseminated information to Romania related to what was going on in Leopold's Congo or in different other places of Africa. Two

of them are particularly significant as they were pushed towards the African adventure by their self expressed will to give a hand to the proclaimed civilizing process carried on by a very civilized nation. Their true merit is represented by their trenchant attitude manifested in letters, articles, conferences or other types of writings, meant to properly describe the realities, which were far from what they had been told by the Belgian employers.

The first, a brave Romanian representative in the colonial Belgian Army between 1898-1901, lieutenant, explorer and cartographer **Sever Pleniceanu**, was born in Plenita, district of Dolj; he attended the military school of Ypres, Belgium and knew about the great African project of Leopold II the whole Europe was praising, in spite of some people who had had attempts to make public the plain truth related to colonial practices applied in Congo, as I have just exemplified above. He was the one who decided to let his Romanian appointment behind and leave for Congo.

In his African experience he crossed more than 3000 km of central Africa, in the area where Congo and Sudan lie today. After he returned to Romania he published the results of his researches in a brochure specifying the place of his endeavours, entitled "On the Independent State of Congo"¹⁵. This paper is not only a source of biological, geographical and climatic data, but also of very interesting and valuable information about the indigenous cultural habits and tribal organisation even for the almost unknown tribes of pigmies and cannibals. More informal data are revealed in some letters sent to a friend, where Pleniceanu approached different issues, all of them absolutely new for the Romanian public. In one of the letters he complained of the unpleasant Europeans' behaviour. He clearly stated that if he could, he would have chosen only the natives' company, for he hardly stood the whites' hypocrisy, selfishness and permanent inclination to cheat and make profits by any means; the Romanian military was indignant at their brutality and condescendence, their lack of understanding manifested in almost all circumstances in their

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹⁵ The paper "Asupra Statului Independent Congo"/"On the Independent State of Congo" was published in Târgu-Jiu by Nicu D. Miloşescu Printing Press in 1902 (cf. Elisabeta Gina Saliu on <http://ecouriistorice.weebly.com/ecouri-istorice/personalitati-plenita-sever-pleniceanu>).



relationships with the indigenous people¹⁶. The Romanian writer M. Angheliescu spotlights the resemblance of Pleniceanu's observations to those that André Gide was to write forty years later in his diary when he travelled to Congo, concerning the colonial relationships between the white and the black people: "the less intelligent the white, the more stupid the black seems to him" [my translation]¹⁷.

It cannot be implied that Pleniceanu went to Congo to make acts of justice for the black people, but the content of his letters reveals a humane attitude and an honest judgement of various situations and approaches of the Congolese. Making a fortune out of the Belgian contract of work in Congo does not seem to be part of his plans; he had various other preoccupations, which helped him become a member of the *Romanian Geographical Society* as soon as he came back to Romania¹⁸. That was a good opportunity for captain Pleniceanu to organize a conference and share his rich experience to an intellectual public, who was able to appreciate the geographical coordinates, meteorological and climatic parameters, details about the hydrographic network and ways of communication. The information also provided demographic, anthropological and sociological data, as well as other specific details about traditional settlements, judicial customs and popular traditions, the economic system and many other things which helped the Romanian public understand more about some colonial realities.

One of his first letters provides information about the diversity of people he had as companionship on the "Leopoldville" steamer he travelled with: there were many officers for the *Force Publique*, the armed forces meant to keep order and 'provide protection' for the local people, coming from different countries and speaking different languages, as well as other colonial employees, agents, accountants, agronomists and farmers, lawyers and magistrates¹⁹. Another letter approaches the issue

of a so called commercial exchange or barter, which had nothing of fairness in it, for the Europeans knew how to take advantage of the effect some particular merchandise had on the black people; the natives were so very charmed by coloured beads, bells, various fabrics with attractive patterns, that they were giving much more valuable items in exchange, such as palm butter, ivory, rubber and other exotic products, which they could have sold at better prices in more honest circumstances²⁰. In the same letter Pleniceanu describes the duties he had to accomplish in Tumba, an European little town for the 59 white people living in it; his work seemed to be almost the same with what he used to do in Slobozia, Romania, the place where he had worked before leaving for Africa. He had to supervise the workers involved in building the infrastructure of the place as well as for its embellishment and also to train the natives, everything during a well-established schedule starting at 6.30am and ending at 5.30pm with three hours of mid-day rest.

He admits that the indigenes were not easy to deal with especially because they were reacting at the very bad treatment the whites were applying too often; he writes about a situation when the chief of a post hardly escaped death by fleeing to a protestant monastery, because the local people could not stand his bad behaviour anymore. It was about the chief of Lukungu whom he had been called to replace, thus finding out about the white man's bad habits of chasing black women and being harsh and cruel with the men²¹.

At about the same time (1900-1902), another Romanian, **Aurel Varlam**, a law graduate from a Paris university, tempted his luck as a magistrate in Leopold's Congo. Some information about general aspects of his life in Leopoldville was published in a letter he had sent to his father, while carrying out a two-year contract working for the Congolese law court²². Most of his African impressions, personal judgements, real judicial cases, depiction of imperialist practices were shared some years after

¹⁶ Letter of October 6th 1898 to Rădulescu-Niger in Mircea Angheliescu, *Călători români în Africa*, Bucharest, Sport-turism Publishing House, 1983, p. 51.

¹⁷ "Moins le blanc est intelligent, plus le noir lui parraît bête" in M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁸ M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 320.

¹⁹ Letter of June 18/30th 1898 in M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 153.

²⁰ Letter of June 2nd 1898 in M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 155.

²¹ M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, pp. 162-3.

²² "Scrisoarea unui magistrat român din Congo" în *Ziarul călătoriilor*/"Letter of a Romanian Magistrate in Congo" in *Journal of Travels*, IV (1900), nr. 184 of 22 Nov., pp. 1455-1456 quoted in M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, note 51, p. 53.



his coming back to Romania, in guise of installments published in *Epoca* newspaper of Bucharest. As in the case of Pleniceanu, the data provided and the harsh critical tone are very impressive, also because of their stunning similarity to what Conrad and other contemporary witnesses wrote in books and newspapers of their time. The author insists on the truthfulness of the provided information, which was meant to depict reality as it was with no exaggeration or deformation of what he had seen with his own eyes.

One of the first scenes that deeply impressed Varlam, revealing something totally different from what he had been told, was that of four black men being kept together by chains attached to their necks, who were supposed to carry his luggage. He supposed that the black people might have been prisoners or criminals, but anyhow, in his opinion, that public way of advertisement was not a good mark for the Belgian colonizers. Varlam carries on his reflection trying to read the poor natives' minds; their sad eyes seemed to say: "Who brought you here? We were living freely and happily, but you came on our land without asking our permission and you put us in chains" [my translation]²³.

The Romanian magistrate also unveiled the mockery hidden in almost each and every act of justice that the magistrates were supposed to accomplish; he gave examples of cases the natives had the hope to get solved by the high representatives of the European court of law, which were approached with feigned seriousness in front of large crowds of people observing, however, the general rules of morality and the local habits and customs. An important detail he provides is related to the frequent use of the *chicotte*²⁴, the most feared tool of punishment all over Africa, whenever the black people were creating disorder, or did not behave according to the whites' demands²⁵.

The Romanian magistrate's critical judgements related to colonialism, include himself in the arrogant group of white people who came against the black people of Africa in order to carry on the sad procession of colonial expansion under the anonymity of finance operations, which were but hiding their greed and desperate race for profit²⁶.

²³ M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 209.

²⁴ Whip made of hippopotamus hide frequently and excessively used to punish the indigenes on colonised territories.

²⁵ M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, pp. 214-216.

²⁶ M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

Varlam also delivered public lectures for the Romanian public, according to a letter from his family archive²⁷ and received warm encouragement from the great Mihail Sadoveanu to put everything in a book, which unfortunately did not occur²⁸.

Both Pleniceanu and Varlam did their best to learn some of the local dialects in order to have a better communication with the indigenous people for whom they generally manifested feelings of regret and compassion. There were different instances when they would have liked to give a hand in the process of restoration of truth and justice, but they understood they were only some insignificant colonial agents who could behave in a fair and moral way themselves; there was little hope for most of their peers to change their approach of those poor people. The difficult conditions of Congo left traces on the health of the two Romanians; Varlam describes the meeting he had with Pleniceanu some time before the latter was supposed to leave for Romania; he noticed that the tall and slim officer was pale because of malaria, his eyes were deep set, but still burning of an unbent energy²⁹. None of the two manifested any intention of contract renewal; they came back to Romania with a totally different view upon colonialism, justice, racism and human relationships, very similarly to what Conrad and some other remarkable personalities claimed to feel at that moment, reasons which pushed some of them to write about their experience and try to trigger some national and international reaction.

The main concern of this article is to spotlight the merit of some Romanians who succeeded in sharing their Congolese experience with their co-nationals, who likewise a great part of the European public knew so little about what was going on in Leopold II's private colony. It thus happened that their African adventure took place at a time when Edmund Morel and some other personalities were carrying on a sound international campaign meant to trigger public reaction, hopefully to prevent the horrors taking place in Congo for several years. We can imply that Pleniceanu and Varlam acted in

²⁷ Letter of thanks and gratitude "for the great and instructive conference" Varlam held in Iași on March 24th, 1902, signed by Elena Mârzescu, President of the Romanian Women's Committee of Iași in M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

²⁸ M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 53.

²⁹ M. Angheliescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 225.



the same vein with what was to be assessed as the first international human rights movement of the twentieth century.

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