

THE POLITICS OF ATROCITY: THE SCANDAL IN THE FRENCH CONGO (1905)

La política de la atrocidad:
el escándalo en el Congo francés (1905)

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Cómo citar/Citation

Berenson, E. (2018).
The politics of atrocity: The scandal in the French Congo (1905).
Historia y Política, 39, 109-138.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.18042/hp.39.05>

[Reception: 30/05/2017. Review: 24/09/2017. Acceptance: 01/12/2017. Publication: 17/04/2018]

Abstract

On February 15, 1905, the mass-circulation *Petit Parisien* reported that one Georges Toquet, a colonial administrator, had been charged with “assassination and violence against several natives” from the French Congo. The following day all the major Parisian papers and several provincial ones led with a much larger story of what the *Petit Parisien* was already calling France’s “Scandales Coloniaux”. Two colonial administrators “laid their hands on a young black man, whom they bound tightly with rope”. They then inserted “a stick of dynamite... in the African’s anus and blew him up”.

The structure and style of these stories closely resembled the typical *fait divers*, or miscellaneous (crime) story, of the Belle Epoque. Only, unlike most mainland faits divers, the Congo story had potentially serious political consequences. “It was the prelude”, as the *Petit Parisien* declared, “to an enormous scandal in the colonial world”.

Sociologists define scandal as an event that implicates important people and often members of the government. It involves transgressions, or perceived transgressions,

against widely accepted moral standards and as such could call the reputations of key individuals into question. Scandals could change the relations of power in a society, or reaffirm existing values and mores. Although the Congo scandal would ultimately serve to reinforce prevailing ideas about the merits of colonialism in France, government officials could not, at the outset, be confident that such would be the case.

Keywords

Scandal; France; Congo; atrocities; colonialism.

Resumen

El 15 de febrero de 1905 el periódico de gran circulación *Le Petit Parisien* informó de que un administrador colonial, de nombre Georges Toquet, había sido acusado del cargo de «asesinato y violencia contra varios nativos» en el Congo francés. Al día siguiente, los principales periódicos de París, así como muchos otros de provincias, aportaron más detalles sobre un asunto al que *Le Petit parisien* se refería ya como a los «escándalos coloniales» de Francia. Dos administradores coloniales «se abalanzaron sobre un joven negro, a quien ataron fuertemente con una cuerda». A continuación insertaron «un cartucho de dinamita... en el ano del africano y lo hicieron saltar por los aires».

La estructura y estilo de este tipo de historias se asemeja a los típicos *fait divers*, o variopintas historias (de crímenes), típicas de la Belle Époque. Con la gran diferencia, sin embargo, de que en comparación con la mayoría de *faits divers*, la historia del Congo tenía el potencial de acarrear consecuencias políticas profundas. «Fue el preludio», declaró *Le Petit Parisien*, «de un enorme escándalo en el mundo colonial».

Los sociólogos definen el escándalo como un suceso que implica a personajes notorios y a menudo a miembros de Gobierno. Implica un conjunto de transgresiones, o por lo menos lo que es percibido como una transgresión, contra los valores morales predominantes en una sociedad y por ello tienen la capacidad de minar la reputación de los individuos afectados. Los escándalos tienen el potencial de cambiar el poder en una sociedad, pero también de reafirmar los valores y costumbres preponderantes. Aunque el escándalo del Congo finalmente llevaría a reforzar los argumentos preexistentes sobre los méritos del colonialismo en Francia, los miembros del gobierno no podían estar seguros, por lo menos en un principio, de que este sería su desenlace final.

Palabras clave

Escándalo; Francia; Congo; atrocidades; colonialismo.

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I. INTRODUCTION

On February 15, 1905, the *Petit Parisien*, the daily paper boasting the largest circulation in the world (1.5 million), published a short front-page article entitled “*Arrestation Mystérieuse*”. Details were sketchy, but the unsigned piece reported that a magistrate had charged one Georges Toquet with “assassination and violence against several natives” from the French Congo¹.

The following day all the major Parisian papers and several provincial ones led with a much larger story of what the *Petit Parisien* was already calling France’s “Scandales Coloniaux”. *Le Matin*, circulation 900,000, got the full, lurid scoop. In a front-page article entitled “The Black Man’s Executioners”, *Le Matin*’s reporter narrated the details of this awful “colonial crime”. The previous July 14, Toqué (not Toquet) and two subordinates, Fernand-Léopold Gaud and Pierre Proche, decided to add a little drama to what was otherwise a dull celebration of France’s national holiday. “After a copious meal, lubricated by frequent libations, the party-goers, inflamed all the more by the torrid climate, decided to treat themselves to a filthy drunken spectacle”². They laid their hands on a young black man, whom they bound tightly with rope. The drunkards then attached a stick of dynamite between the man’s shoulder blades, but before lighting the fuse, one of the revelers had a better idea. Why not insert the dynamite into the African’s anus and then blow him up? “The Negro screamed. An explosion rang out. Bloody debris, body parts, intestines were projected a great distance”.

Lest readers think that this “horrifying little pleasure, this blood thirsty act of insanity” satisfied Toqué’s macabre lust for violence, he and his friends thought it would be amusing to go one step further³. Their new idea was to ambush another black man and unceremoniously cut off his head. After disposing of the torso, Toqué dunked the head in a boiling caldron of water, the

¹ *Petit Parisien* (hereinafter *PP*), 15 February 1905.

² *Le Matin*, 16 February 1905.

³ *Ibid.*

better to make a delectable soup. The French administrators then invited the decapitated man's friends and family to dinner, after which the sadists carried out the boiled head on a platter. "This new casserole," the journalist concluded, "produced the desired effect"⁴.

The structure and style of this article closely resembles the typical *faits divers*, or miscellaneous (crime) story, of the Belle Époque. Like the plethora of articles with titles such as "Femme coupée en morceaux" ("Woman chopped in pieces"), *Le Matin*'s "The Black Man's Executioners" focused on blood and guts, on the splattered body parts that made the full horror of crime palpable to readers avid for gory details⁵.

As the audience of penny papers grew exponentially between the 1860s and the Great War, so did coverage of crime⁶. Interest in violence and the macabre was nothing new, but only since the 1860s had the technology and know-how existed for such tales to reach a huge newly literate public eager to be informed and entertained. Unlike the fictional literature that most people had read in the past, newspapers were devoted to reality, to actual events occurring in the world. Hence the widespread attention to crime, which satisfied both the public's interest in drama, violence, and gore and the journalists' professional obligation to narrate what was happening now⁷.

In reporting Toqué's "crimes coloniales" the penny papers reproduced all the elements of a mainland crime story, only coverage of the Congo drama had potentially serious political consequences. The day after the Congo story broke, the *Petit Parisien*'s reporter wrote, "The arrest of M. Emile-Eugène-Georges Toqué was just the prelude, it seems, to *an enormous scandal in the*

⁴ *Le Matin*, 16 February 1905. Like most *faits divers*, the Toqué story, as reported, differed significantly from what had actually happened, although a more accurate account does little to exculpate the French colonial agents. The man, Papka, blown up with dynamite was an individual accused of murder — probably falsely — and already in custody. The stick of dynamite was attached to his back, not placed in his anus. As for the individual whose head was boiled into a "soup", he was already dead. The events in question took place in 1903, not 1904. They belonged to no July 14th celebration, and no Europeans other than Toqué and Gaud were involved. It was the latter who did the dirty deed. Toqué, in bed with malarial fever, told Gaud "to do what he wanted" with Papka; he did not order Gaud to blow the man up. See *L'Humanité*, 17 February 1905; Toqué (1996); Challaye (1909), and Fabre (1999).

⁵ On the *faits divers*, see Ambrose-Rendu (2004); Auchair (1982); Perrot (1983), and Barthes (1964).

⁶ Thérenty (2007) and Kalifa (1995).

⁷ Thérenty (2007): 90-152.

*colonial world*⁸. What had begun as a fait divers now quickly earned promotion to the level of scandal, a much weightier category of journalistic interest.

Sociologists define scandal as an event that implicates important people and often members of the government. It involves transgressions, or perceived transgressions, against widely accepted moral standards and as such can call the reputations of key individuals into question⁹. Scandals can change the relations of power in a society, as France's Panama controversy of the early 1890s did, or reaffirm existing values and mores, as in the Caillaux Affair of 1914.

In the Panama case, the press's revelations that more than one hundred French politicians had taken bribes to disguise the impending bankruptcy of the Panama Canal Company produced a scandal whose consequences changed the balance of power in France. It boosted anti-Semitism, weakened the republic, and lent credibility to extremists of the nationalist right, as large numbers of elected officials found themselves accused of violating the public trust. Panama opened the way to the Dreyfus Affair, a scandal that threatened to rock the very foundations of the French Republic. In the Caillaux Affair, a scandal that began with a former prime minister's adultery and ended with accusations of murder against his wife, existing conceptions of masculinity and femininity were reaffirmed. So were prevailing ideas about sexual transgression and the relationship between politics and personal life¹⁰.

II. THE SCANDAL IN THE FRENCH CONGO

Although the Congo scandal would ultimately serve to reinforce prevailing ideas about the merits of colonialism in France, government officials could not, at the outset, be confident that such would be the case. When journalists from the mass-circulation press aired the word "scandal" in 1905, it necessarily worried French leaders, who knew full well that horrible, shameful things had occurred in the Congo on their watch.

If reporters were to represent Toqué's acts as typifying a widespread pattern of abuse, a pattern built into the structure of French colonial rule in Equatorial Africa, the legitimacy of France's colonial project, with its loudly proclaimed "civilizing mission" could be challenged. Such was especially

⁸ *PP*, 16 February 1905, Italics added.

⁹ On scandals as media and political phenomena, see Blic and Lemieux (2005); Thompson (2000); Dampierre (1954), and Lull (1997).

¹⁰ Blic (2005); Blic and Lemieux (2005): 14-16, and Berenson (1992).

true given the contemporaneous international scrutiny of King Leopold's Congo Free State and the reports of atrocities committed there on a very large scale¹¹. If the French Congo resembled Leopold's Congo, how could a liberal republican government justify its colonial rule? How could government leaders and ordinary people continue to ground their support for imperial expansion in the moral and humanitarian comforts of the mission civilisatrice? For French leaders and the public at large, the greatness and superiority of French culture had made France uniquely responsible for nurturing, educating, and improving the lives of those privileged to live under colonial rule. The French took pride in their empire, not as an agent of conquest and economic exploitation but as a means of elevating and enlightening the "savage" masses of the South¹².

In response to the Congo revelations, the French government launched a powerful campaign to play down their significance, a campaign whose outcome remained in doubt for nearly a year. In the competitive market of the penny press, scoops as sensational as this took on a life of their own, often resisting efforts at the highest levels to frame the narrative or change the subject. Toqué's arrest had convinced a wide array of journalists that they had a big story on their hands—a story of "horrible crimes," of crimes so "fantastic and bizarre" that "they seemed to emerge from the pages of Edgar Allen Poe"¹³. The resulting frenzy of attention from the press revealed examples of colonial violence that local administrators normally succeeded in covering up: the kidnapping and rape of Congolese women, the death of prisoners held under inhumane conditions, the harsh punishment of "rebels" and varieties of forced labor, often involving portage. Such revelations, the *Petit Parisien* declared, "inspire a set of general reflections about our entire colonial oeuvre"¹⁴.

To bring the story under control, the colonial ministry and pro-government and pro-colonial newspapers claimed that such atrocities represented the isolated acts of "two crazy men... two lost sheep (*brébis galeuses*)" and not the "colonial crimes" of a system beset with structural flaws. They then

¹¹ Hochschild (1998); Mille (1905); Morel (1903), and Morel (1904).

¹² Girardet (1972), and Conklin (1997). There is a large literature on violence in the French Empire. See, in particular, Brower (2009); Thomas (2012), and Dwyer and Nettelbeck (2018).

¹³ *PP*, 17 February 1905.

¹⁴ *PP*, 19 February 1905. In Central Africa, all goods had to be carried by human porters because pack animals could not survive the diseases born by insects common to the region. There were no roads as yet for automobiles.

proceeded to build a case against Toqué. The pro-government *Le Matin* sent its journalist to the administrator's hometown, Lorient, where former teachers described him as a sickly adolescent, almost deformed, his habits and bearing highly "irregular". The reporter asked one if he believed Toqué "capable of the atrocities he's accused of?" "I don't know and can't say", the instructor responded, "except that he wasn't honest, even if extremely intelligent. Perhaps he gave way in a moment of madness"¹⁵.

If *Le Matin's* interviews put Toqué on trial, the more independent *Petit Parisien* expressed a large measure of doubt over his guilt. It quoted Britain's "native-loving" *West African Mail*, a newspaper highly critical of France's Congolese regime, as calling Toqué "one of France's most humane colonial administrators". Sent to the accused's hometown, the *Petit Parisien's* correspondent presented him in an even more sympathetic light. Toqué was warm and appealing, sympathized with the Congolese, and warned that French policies could "lead to the extermination of the tribes in question, half of whose population has already been lost". These sentiments, the correspondent concluded, "hardly seem compatible with those of a torturer"¹⁶.

In response, *Le Matin* turned its front page over to the pro-colonial deputy René Le Hérisse, who concluded that men like Toqué and Gaud "constitute an exception, an extremely rare exception, among our colonial administrators", the vast majority of whom were "admirable for the zealotness of their devotion and their abnegation". If Toqué and Gaud's "methods resembled those practiced in certain foreign colonies", they were the exceptions that proved France's humanitarian rule. "In France", Le Hérisse declared, "we use a completely different method of colonization".

Writers for the *Petit Parisien* seemed less certain of the difference between France's colonial practices and those all too common in the Congo Free State next door. To investigate the story behind the Toqué-Gaud atrocities, reporters for the paper interviewed several anonymous sources identified only as former colonial officials in Africa. Virtually all of these informants maintained that the crimes attributed to Toqué and Gaud represented the tip of the iceberg of a much deeper structural problem. "What took place in Krebedjé [Toqué's district]", one interviewee maintained, "happens essentially everywhere in the dark continent... where white torturers reign as sovereign masters over immense territories and populations"¹⁷. Knowledge of atrocities, "which occur regularly", rarely seeped out. "My absolute belief", the interviewee said, "is that

¹⁵ *Le Matin*, 21 February 1905.

¹⁶ *PP*, 17 February 1905.

¹⁷ *PP*, 20 February 1905.

if Toqué had not returned to France, we would have known nothing of the accusations against him”.

Although top officials in the colonial ministry presented French colonists in the Congo as “devoted and humane”, they knew perfectly well that a great many were anything but. Since 1893, four successive government inspections of the French Congo had documented the negligence and incompetence of colonial officials posted there, the paucity of resources, and the abuses committed both by government agents and by individuals in the rubber trade¹⁸. Officials also knew of the atrocities attributed to Toqué and Gaud, because the Congo’s *commissaire general*, Emile Gentil, had sent the former colonial minister, Gaston Doumerge, a detailed report about the affair the previous August¹⁹. The report had remained confidential until Toqué’s arrest the following February.

The Entente Cordiale with Britain, enacted the previous year, encouraged the French government all the more to keep the Toqué story under wraps and then to downplay its importance once it broke. The British government was already unhappy over French policy in the Congo because the French companies granted monopolies there prevented British traders from operating in the region. The Berlin Congress of 1885 had explicitly guaranteed free trade in much of what would become the Congo Free State and French Equatorial Africa, and British commercial interests reacted angrily to France and Belgium’s flagrant violations of the Berlin accords. Since the 1860s, two British firms, Hatton-and-Cookson and John Holt, had between them owned about half of the major trading stations in the Congo. Most of these stations stood in regions granted to the different concessionary [monopolistic] companies. When those companies attempted to prevent Holt from doing business and went so far as to confiscate his rubber in 1899, the British trader protested to his government²⁰. The *Times* and other British papers took up the matter, as did the skillful humanitarian advocate E. D. Morel, who often cooperated with British commercial interests in Liverpool²¹. Holt was not without his own humanitarian concerns: he saw how concessionary companies in both Congos deprived Africans of the right to harvest rubber on their own and trade directly with foreign merchants. The Congolese lived at the mercy of monopolistic firms.

Meanwhile, Britain’s Aborigines Protection Society, largely indifferent to Holt’s commercial concerns, joined him and Morel in publicly condemning

¹⁸ Brunschwig (1977): 115-16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁰ Cookey (1966): 263-64.

²¹ On Morel, see Louis and Stengers (1968).

the humanitarian consequences of France's "deplorable imitation" of the Congo Free State and the "manifest danger of further incalculable mischief ensuing"²². Given the growing international outcry against Leopold's Congo, the last thing France's republican government wanted was to share in the opprobrium directed against Belgium. With an international commission due to issue a scathing report on the Free State, the French wanted to mark as much distance between them and Leopold as they could²³. Otherwise, the developing scandal could bring down the French government.

On 26 February 1905, the new minister of colonies, Etienne Clémentel, announced the formation of a commission charged with investigating the Congo situation. By taking the initiative in creating such a commission, the French government hoped to avoid being required to make it an international body, as Leopold had been forced to do. Instead, the government would be free to stack the commission with reliable people who would produce a favorable, exculpatory report. But almost immediately, Clémentel met with an unanticipated problem. The docile bureaucrat Etienne Dubard, asked to head the commission, declined the assignment. While the colonial ministry looked for a replacement, the president of the Republic, who rarely intervened in day-to-day political affairs, publicly advocated the appointment of Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, the famous African explorer and first commissioner of France's Congo colony.

President Loubet had long been friendly with Brazza and his family, and he likely knew the celebrated explorer eagerly sought a role in this affair²⁴. But Brazza was the last person to whom top colonial officials wanted to turn. Many of them had helped engineer Brazza's dismissal in 1898 as the Congo's commissaire general, and they rightly feared he would be disinclined to make them look good²⁵. Worse, the explorer's public stature and the political authority granted this charismatic figure would give him a large measure of independence in pursuing his investigation and writing his report. With Brazza involved, the scandal would be hard to contain. But once the president had put forth his name, the Colonial Ministry had no choice but to accept it. Brazza was a national hero and founding father of France's new African empire; to reject him would raise suspicions that there was something to hide. As it happened, the commission of inquiry, hastily conceived and prematurely announced, nearly proved a disaster for the French imperial project in

²² Quoted in Cookey (1966).

²³ Brunshwig (1977): 117 ff.

²⁴ Martin (2005): 193.

²⁵ Autin (1985): 210-217.

Central Africa. Brazza would develop serious doubts about the justice and morality of French colonialism in Central Africa, and perhaps elsewhere as well.

The popular press lauded Brazza's 1905 appointment as head of the Congo Commission. In an editorial entitled "A Great Frenchman", the *Petit Parisien* recalled the explorer's reputation as a "pacific conqueror", "an apostle of peace", and as the Frenchman who had "acquired among the natives the same moral authority as Livingstone"²⁶. Brazza was the good colonizer, the man who understood that the "basis of all truly lasting colonial activity was to improve the natives' lives, to conciliate their interests with ours". Thanks to his efforts, the Congolese had gained "such a high and pure idea of what the French flag represents that they wanted to take refuge within its folds". Neither this nor any other popular article on the Brazza Commission discussed what steps the explorer—or the government—might take to rectify the situation in the Congo, or even to understand how and why the abuses of the Congolese had been allowed to occur. It was as if Brazza's presence alone would "restore in our African colonies the principles of generosity that belong to the patrimony of France, of which Brazza, throughout his career, has been one of the most eminent representatives". Because Brazza's "name is synonymous with humanity and goodness", declared the *Petit Parisien*, the commission needed no specific objectives. "It was enough to have charged Brazza with leading it", which is why the newspaper could "loudly proclaim our confidence in the mission's success". What exactly "success" would mean remained unsaid. The assumption was, as *La Nature* put it, that Brazza had remained such "a demigod among the Africans that one sign of friendship from him" would remind them of the goodness of French colonialism and make memories of its atrocities go away²⁷.

Although top officials at the Ministry of Colonies publicly endorsed such sentiments—Brazza's mission constituted a "new apostolate", declared Clémentel—in private they expressed horror over his selection²⁸. "The appointment of Brazza", wrote Gustave Binger, director of African affairs at the Ministry, "resulted from the idiotic press campaign in response to the Gaud and Toqué affairs". Particularly worrisome to the Colonial Ministry was Brazza's selection of Félicien Challaye, a young left-leaning philosopher and recent graduate of the elite *Ecole normale supérieure*, as a member of his

²⁶ *PP*, March 13, 1905. For similar comments, see *PP, supplément illustré*, 19 March 1905; *Les hommes du jour*, 1 April 1905.

²⁷ *PP*, 23 September 1905.

²⁸ Interview with Emile Clémentel, minister of colonies, *PP*, 2 March 1905.

commission of inquiry. A talented writer, Challaye had agreed to cover the mission for *Le Temps*, the quasi-official, conservative paper of record²⁹.

To make the best of a bad situation, Clémentel directed Congo commissaire general Gentil not to cooperate with the Brazza inquiry. The minister then limited its duration to six months, including travel to and from Africa. He issued instructions designed to narrow the scope of the investigation and framed questions intended to evoke the kinds of answers the ministry wanted to hear. Brazza was asked, for example, to confirm that abuses were “extremely rare” and “limited to individual acts that cannot be seen as part of an organized system”³⁰. The minister also instructed Brazza not to include anything in his final report that would provoke “a sterile theoretical discussion of the advantages or dangers, in the French Congo, of the concessionary system”. Above all, Clémentel made it clear, the commission of inquiry was to “show the difference between the rules that [France] applies to its possessions in the Congo and the methods used in the [Congo] Free State”. Brazza was to find, in other words, that the damning international criticism of Leopold’s Congo did not apply to France³¹.

These kinds of instructions might have succeeded with a commission appointed by the ministry; with Brazza, they would have only minimal effect. Having spent twenty years in the Congo, Brazza knew what to look for, and he seemed convinced that his stature and prestige, both in France and in Africa, would permit him to root out the violence and injustice he found³². Never a writer, Brazza did not produce a narrative account of his mission, but Challaye’s dispatches allow us to follow most of the inquiry, as do books written after the fact by another member of the commission, Jules Saintoyant, and by Georges Toqué himself³³.

The dozen members of the commission, including Brazza’s wife Thérèse, left Marseille on 4 April 1905³⁴. They reached Libreville (present-day Gabon), a first destination of French ships heading for equatorial Africa, three weeks later. From the Gabon coast, the commission sailed south to the former slave-trading port of Loango, where Challaye reported that the men “dress like us, without appearing too ridiculous”³⁵. Continuing on, they steamed

²⁹ Challaye collected his newspaper articles, plus other material, in Chayalle (1909).

³⁰ Brunschwig (1977): 121-22.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² West (1973): 177.

³³ Saintoyant (1960) and Toqué (1996).

³⁴ Coquery-Vidrovitch (1972): 172 n2, lists the ten members plus Brazza and his wife.

³⁵ Challaye (1909): 13.

into the mouth of the Congo River and then up the vast estuary to Matadi, the last town before the succession of cataracts that made the lower Congo impassable. From there, Brazza and company boarded the narrow-gauge Belgian train that chugged slowly overland to Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), capital of the Congo Free State. The four-hundred-kilometer journey took forty-eight hours, slow by European standards, but immeasurably faster than the slavers' caravan route that travelers had had to take before Leopold completed his railroad in 1898. Once in Leopoldville, the French team took a ferry across the wide expanse of Stanley Pool, landing in Brazzaville on May 16. The commission had been *en voyage* for six weeks, and the inquiry had yet to begin.

During his brief stay in the town he founded, Brazza held tense meetings with Gentil and the longtime Catholic bishop of the region, Monseigneur Augouard. Neither tried to disguise their suspicion of the former commissaire général nor their hostility to his mission of inspection³⁶. Both men had things to hide, and they worried about what Brazza might find. The mission stayed in the capital only two weeks; time was short and Brazza sought to visit as much of the colony as possible. He wanted especially to make it to Chad, where he understood some of the worst atrocities had taken place.

On May 29 the group boarded a steamer for the 750-kilometer trip up the Congo and then the Ubangi River to the town of Bangui, capital of the present-day Central African Republic. From there, the Brazza group continued north, abandoning its steamer for an oar-powered whaling boat that took the party up the Gribingui River to a pair of the most distant outposts in France's central African colony: Fort-Lamy and Fort-Crampel. This leg of the journey took five weeks. Saintoyant's narrative emphasizes just how arduous the trip was for the typical low-level colonial administrator assigned to one of these forts. Petty officials, who benefited from none of the special travel arrangements made for the Brazza commission, spent five months in transit from southern France to Fort-Crampel, a trip that left them ill, exhausted, and numbed by the sheer discomfort of the equatorial climate.

As for the outposts themselves, inexperienced colonial administrators served there with only one or two other European companions and no supervision by any higher authority. The nearest officers were weeks or months away and thus incapable of exercising any effective control, even had they wanted to. The forts were ill equipped and uncomfortable. Colonial agents had to procure much of their own food, since great distances and uncertain

³⁶ Augouard's diaries were edited by Witte (1924). On Gentil's reaction to Brazza, see Autin (1985): 245-46. On Augouard more generally, see Mahieu (2006).

means of travel made it extremely difficult for authorities to supply the outposts with sufficient provisions. There were no books or even newspapers, and little else to relieve the monotony of this grim colonial life. For all these reasons, Saintoyant wrote, the Frenchmen stationed there “live in a state of nervous exhaustion that deprives them of the level-headedness required for good public administration”. Not only did this situation “destroy the cadres’ physical vigor, it extinguishes their ardor to create” a well-functioning colony, making lapses in judgment, even criminal behavior, inevitable³⁷.

Saintoyant did not conclude from this sorry description that colonialism was a bad idea, but rather that building an empire required a huge commitment of resources and that politicians in Paris were remiss in refusing to provide them. Aggravating the problem was the refusal by French investors to sink capital into the region, whose economic potential they doubted. Large investment banks preferred to finance government loans and railroad building in “semicolonies” like Russia and Turkey. They shied away from the actual French Empire and, in particular, from unknown places like the Congo³⁸. So did potential French settlers, repelled by the Congo’s harsh climate and vast distance from France. And few French businesses showed interest in operating there, given the British dominance of African coastal trade. To lure firms to Equatorial Africa, the benefits would have to appear especially good.

For inspiration, French colonialists looked to the Belgian model. France’s Congo could not be an exact replica of the Free State, since the latter had become the private property of the Belgian king. But the French were attracted to Leopold’s method of dividing his colony into several large pieces and granting “concessionary” companies monopoly control over one or more of them. These monopolies had produced huge profits for a handful of Belgian firms and especially for the Belgian king. Perhaps they would do the same for France?

In 1899 the country’s colonial minister established forty “concessions”, each granting a single company the exclusive right to exploit the domain it received for thirty years³⁹. The smallest concession covered 1.200 square kilometers, the largest 140.000. These sizes were approximate at best; no one knew the Congo’s geography well enough to map the different concessions precisely. In fact, no one even knew exactly how big the Congo colony was. Large as these monopolies were, their advocates remained unsatisfied. Pro-colonial journalists argued that too much land had been reserved for the natives,

³⁷ Saintoyant (1960): 60.

³⁸ Coquery-Vidrovitch (1972): 62.

³⁹ Jaugeon (1961): 366. See also Coquery-Vidrovitch (1972): ch. 2.

who might therefore refuse to work for the companies, and that the French government's 15 percent share of the companies' profits was too high. Colonialists worried about the amount of rubber growing in the colony, the declining stocks of ivory, competition from firms in the Free State, and the cost of exploiting what proved to be there⁴⁰.

In fact, business conditions in the French Congo were not very good. To operate profitably in this part of the world, a firm required more than a monopoly over a particular piece of land, even a very large one. Concessionary companies needed sizable state investment in means of transport and paramilitary police, both of which King Leopold provided. Lacking other colonies to administer, the Belgian monarch could focus all of his overseas resources on the Free State. He built a railway from Stanley Pool to the Atlantic and developed a thick apparatus of command and repression that worked in tandem with the different monopolistic firms.

The French government, by contrast, had created essentially no infrastructure, save for building a modest administrative center in Brazzaville and staffing the major towns and a few outposts with a skeleton crew of low-ranking officials. Paris proved unwilling to deploy French soldiers in the Congo, engaging instead a tiny force of African paramilitary policemen charged with overseeing more than a million square miles of land. If these problems alone likely doomed the colony to economic failure, two further obstacles ensured its financial ruin: a pitiful transport system and an inadequate supply of labor. The absence of an unbroken waterway to the Atlantic coast meant that human porters had to carry goods and supplies over long distances to reach one of the region's two rivers, the Ogooué and the Alima, that flowed without obstacle toward an ocean port. Indigenous people shunned the exhausting, unforgiving labor of portage, and neither the colonial administration nor the companies would—or could—pay the large sums needed to recruit porters from other regions of Africa. To solve the manpower problem, officials regularly forced men to work.

Reluctant as the Congolese were to serve as porters, they proved even less interested in harvesting rubber, especially for the minuscule wages Europeans tended to pay. Leopold solved the manpower problem by using his large paramilitary *force publique* to compel indigenous people, en masse, to work. As Adam Hochschild has shown, the *force* did so at a grotesque human cost⁴¹. French officials and agents of the concessionary companies imitated Leopold's methods of compulsion, but they lacked the means to employ them on

⁴⁰ Jaugeon (1961): 365-71.

⁴¹ Hochschild (1998): 165.

such a large scale. As a result, economic extraction in the French Congo depended on the opportunistic, and often creative, use of violence —especially exemplary violence— to squeeze work out of the Congolese at the lowest possible price.

Banking on the prospect of doing just that, groups of investors eagerly bought shares of stock in France's new concessionary companies. Journalists extolled the supposed value of these companies, stirring a speculative interest in the stock. Shares of the Société de l'Ibenga, for example, doubled in value between late 1899 and mid-1900. But this price bubble bore little relation to the earnings potential of these companies, whose stock soon plummeted in value, leading to a great many bankruptcies⁴². By 1904, five years after the French concessions were formed, 25 percent had already ceased to exist. As for the remaining companies' financial performance, together, they lost nearly 10 million francs between 1899 and 1904⁴³.

Such miserable performance added to the French government's troubles once news of the Congo scandal leaked out. Political leaders understood that violence and the threat of violence alone kept the concessionary system from collapsing altogether. But for obvious reasons, they could never admit as much. The government's best hope was to narrowly restrict the flow of information to the Brazza commission, limit the depth and duration of its inquiry, and keep its findings, certain to include some uncomfortable revelations, confidential. Unfortunately for the governing elite, enterprising journalists made extensive use of anonymous sources whose revelations kept the Congo scandal very much alive, even after the commission left for Africa in April 1905.

A retired concessionary company manager told France's fourth-largest-selling paper, *Le Journal*, that his firm routinely forced Africans to deliver ivory and rubber to them by "tying them down and whipping them 50 times with a *chicotte*" —a cruelly ingenious lash made of raw, sun-dried hippopotamus hide, twisted to form hundreds of razor-sharp spokes. "After each blow, the victims screamed in pain, their blood spurting out". The next day, "they returned with ivory and rubber". *Le Journal's* source also claimed to have frequently seen the companies' armed agents "enter into villages, where they forced terrorized blacks to give them their ivory". The Africans received not a sou in payment, a common practice, the former official said⁴⁴. Worse, another popular paper not only confirmed the prevalence of such extortion and theft but also reported, "The administration [of the colony] tolerated such things;

⁴² *Ibid.*, 62-65; Jaugeon (1961): 375-384.

⁴³ Jaugeon (1961): 411.

⁴⁴ *Le Journal*, 28 April 1905.

judicial officials left them unpunished; and successive [colonial] governors hid them from authorities in Paris⁴⁵.

With reports such as these persistently being leaked, the colonial ministry must have been horrified when Challaye's detailed and compelling dispatches began to appear in *Le Temps*. The special correspondent, who doubled as Brazza's personal secretary for the mission, was a socialist openly hostile to the concessionary companies and suspicious from the outset of France's Congolese regime. It is unclear why *Le Temps* hired him, but impressive that it did. His remarkable series of articles, written between April and September 1905, added to the explorer's legend and, most important, confirmed the extent of French abuses in the Congo. Challaye also made a notable contribution to French travel literature, painting perhaps the best portrait to date of equatorial Africa, albeit replete with the era's racial stereotypes. Other members of the Brazza commission wrote about the Congolese mission, but without Challaye's journalistic flair and his front-page access to the mainstream press.

In many ways, Challaye's narrative followed the pattern of the travel writing he knew very well. "Sitting in front of my tent", Challaye tells his readers early on, "I read Stanley's book, *Across the Dark Continent*". He then reproduced many of the most familiar European images of Africa and presented them as "a series of spectacles—the most colorful, animated, amusing spectacles I've ever seen—spectacles that follow one another without any apparent link, just like in a dream"⁴⁶.

For Challaye, as for Joseph Conrad and so many others, Africa's shimmering exotic dream would gradually morph into a gruesome nightmare as he traveled into the "savage" midsection of the continent. Returning to Europe in 1898, Charles Castellani, Challaye's French predecessor in Equatorial Africa, felt as though he had just emerged from a "nightmare", from horrific visions that had taken him to the very "vestibule of death"⁴⁷. In Challaye's socialist-inflected telling, the nightmare had as much to do with the evils of French colonialism as with Africa itself. Even so, the young French philosopher escaped few of the era's standard images of the Dark Continent. His dispatches reproduced Conrad's portrait of Africa as a trip not just into uncharted recesses of space but into the distant mists of time⁴⁸. "On the banks of the Congo", Challaye wrote, "we relive an age anterior even to prehistoric times"⁴⁹.

⁴⁵ *Le Soir*, 15 October 1905.

⁴⁶ Chayalle in *Le Temps*, 27 May 1905.

⁴⁷ Castellani, in *L'Illustration*, 2 April 1898.

⁴⁸ Pratt (1992); Cohen (1980), and Youngs (1994).

⁴⁹ Chayalle (1909): 59.

Like most other European travelers, Challaye portrayed Africans as animalistic, the women parading naked and unashamed⁵⁰.

Beyond his stock images of African women, Challaye also found cannibalism everywhere he went. “One finds no gray hair, no senility and no blindness: children eat their parents at the first sign of decline”. As for intelligence and maturity, Challaye found little of either. “The black man”, he wrote, “can be compared to a young child and even to an animal, so narrow is his psychological life”. They think only of the here and now, preoccupied as they are by the “satisfaction of physical needs” and especially “sexual pleasure”. All this, Challaye hastened to add, is no reason to despise them or take advantage of their primitive brains. And it was wrong, he maintained, to impose hard, disciplined work on “races accustomed since time immemorial to do nothing”⁵¹.

This conclusion prepared Challaye’s readers for a detailed exposé of the atrocities committed or tolerated by French officials. The first hints of those atrocities surfaced during a bizarre “native dance” staged for the Europeans’ benefit. Brazza saw in that dance “a symbolic representation of the Calvary the inhabitants of this region had had to suffer”. Strangely, Challaye fails to mention an element of this scene reported by another member of the commission, an *inspecteur des colonies* named Saurin. According to him, Brazza also understood from the dance that a great many villagers had recently been taken captive. Questioning the local administrator, who had hoped to hide this crime, Brazza found evidence of a nearby “concentration camp” with 119 women and children held hostage under miserable conditions⁵². The women appeared to have been raped, and press accounts depicted them as suffering from venereal diseases contracted from their captors.

The dance scene, occurring on June 30, 1905, constitutes the turning point of Challaye’s story⁵³. Over the following six weeks, Brazza would uncover the full extent of the crimes and horrors that had turned his once peaceful colony into a grotesque hell on earth. The 119 hostages represented in the dance were at least still alive; descending further toward Bangui, Brazza unearthed a history that had not ended so well. In the town of Mongoumba, just south of Bangui, the commissioners discovered that members of the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: 74-75.

⁵¹ Chayalle (1909): 156, 160-61.

⁵² *L’Humanité*, 27 September 1905; Coquery-Vidrovitch (1972): 176.

⁵³ There is a discrepancy between Challaye’s report and the ones cited by Coquery-Vidrovitch (1972): 176 n3. Challaye has the native dance taking place on 30 June and mentions nothing about the concentration camp. Coquery-Vidrovitch dates the dance to 15 July.

colony's paramilitary regional guard had "brutalized the natives and taken advantage of the women they desired"⁵⁴. Terrified, the villagers began to flee across the river into the Congo Free State.

Desperate to collect a quantity of rubber before everyone left, the top colonial official in the region had his guards seize fifty-eight women and ten children from the different villages. He agreed to release them only after their husbands and fathers paid the elevated taxes he had imposed on them in the form of rubber. The chief of one village had his mother, two wives, and two children taken by the guardsmen, who locked them and sixty-three other hostages in a building in Mongoumba. Male villagers then began to deliver the rubber required of them, which the colonial official immediately handed over to an agent for the local concessionary company. (Companies gave the colonial government cash in exchange for rubber). Weighing the product collected, the government agent judged the quantity too small; he decided not to release the hostages, taking them back to Bangui. There, he locked all sixty-eight in a windowless hut six meters long and four meters wide. During their first twelve days in captivity, twenty-five hostages died, their bodies dumped in the river. Several days later, a doctor, newly arrived in the town, heard cries and moans coming from the hut. He pushed open the door and to his horror found a small number of skeletally thin women and children barely alive amid the stench of dead bodies and human excrement. "The skin was peeling away", wrote Dr. Fulconis, "muscles atrophied, intelligence gone, movement and speech no longer possible"⁵⁵. Of the sixty-eight hostages originally squeezed into the makeshift prison, only twenty-one had survived. One of the women gave birth before passing away, and a woman survivor adopted her child. "In this horrible drama", Challaye wrote, "it was the women cannibals who gave the cruel white men a lesson in humanity"⁵⁶.

After freeing the survivors, the young doctor notified the colonial administration of the atrocities he had seen. The court in Brazzaville took up the case, only to dismiss it on grounds of insufficient evidence. The lone action taken was to transfer the administrator responsible for the hostage taking. He was, however, moved from the outback of Bangui to the capital city of Brazzaville, where everyone wanted to be. Having uncovered this atrocity, Brazza and his colleagues proceeded to accumulate evidence of one chilling abuse after the other. "The book one needs to reread here", Challaye remarked, "is

⁵⁴ Chayalle (1909): 102.

⁵⁵ Fabre (1999): 265.

⁵⁶ Chayalle (1909): 104.

Dante's *Inferno*"⁵⁷. Shortly before the Brazza commission left for Africa, the colonial ministry shipped Toqué to Brazzaville, hoping that the proceedings against him would occur offstage, outside the French press's range. Officials did not expect that Challaye, as special correspondent for *Le Temps*, would be on the spot. The young philosopher was in fact the only journalist to cover the trial; his dispatches stood as the lone public account of the event.

Both Toqué and Gaud faced charges of murdering or ordering the murders of several Congolese men and women. The two defendants denied all accusations leveled by Africans, admitting wrongdoing only when a European, including either Toqué or Gaud, had endorsed or brought a charge. Since Toqué had himself accused his colleague of blowing up the African, Pakpa, Gaud could not deny responsibility. He did, however, claim that Toqué had told him to execute the man. Asked why he had used dynamite, his only response was that he had a few sticks in his hut and thought they would work well as a method of execution. In the pretrial phase, Gaud had testified that death by dynamite would be an ideal form of exemplary violence. The natives would see Pakpa's demise as a magical, divine intervention, something that would instill fear in their hearts and prevent future rebellions. So he hung the dynamite around Pakpa's neck, lit the fuse, and the man exploded. "Gaud recounted his crime", Challaye wrote, "with a stupefying calm"⁵⁸.

On the witness stand, Toqué confirmed what he had said during the pretrial investigation. His superiors had told him that nothing was more important than recruiting porters and collecting taxes. Finding the natives unwilling to work or pay imposts voluntarily, Toqué sent his agents to round up porters by force and take their wives and children hostage. Members of the regional guards routinely raped the women hostages, many of whom later died, along with their children, of hunger and disease. Toqué testified that he believed himself authorized to render justice and even execute Africans he judged guilty of rebellion or insubordination. When he told his superior that he had summarily shot a "rebel" named Pikamandji, Toqué claimed his boss had replied, "You have done the right thing; in the future keep such information to yourself"⁵⁹. Only later would the younger man be charged with murder.

After hearing all the testimony, the court took a full day to reach a verdict. It declared Toqué guilty as an accomplice to murder and Gaud guilty of murder without premeditation. In both cases, the court found "extenuating

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 107.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: 121.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: 115.

circumstance”, sentencing the pair to five years in prison. Most white residents of Brazzaville found the penalty outrageously harsh. “Accustomed to treating blacks as machines or slaves”, Challaye wrote, “to exploiting them and abusing them, they [the white population] were amazed that anyone could judge the lives of these ‘dirty niggers’ so valuable”⁶⁰. On leaving the courtroom, the journalist heard a young civil servant cry out: “It’s as if we have been naturalized as niggers”⁶¹.

Challaye’s observations about the trial and his revelations of atrocities and colonial abuse turned him against the existing regime in the Congo. But he nonetheless retained his allegiance to the most fundamental ideological pillar of the French colonial system, the mission civilisatrice. For him, it was the hero Brazza who incarnated and legitimized that mission. Brazza’s was “the only form of colonialism compatible with a democracy such as ours, a democracy that civilizes and liberates”. His successors had allowed his achievements to collapse, leaving an angry and terrified population that no longer recognized the greatness of French civilization. Whether Challaye believed a new civilizing mission could have redeemed the Congo is unclear, but given the views of other socialists at the time, it’s likely he did. Only in the 1930s did Challaye become an ardent opponent of colonialism in all its forms⁶².

As for Brazza, he was destined to die on the continent long dear to his heart. He became so sick on the last leg of the journey back to Brazzaville that he could barely stand up. He forced himself, Challaye writes, to hold one final meeting with Gentil, who appeared increasingly evasive, increasingly unwilling to let Brazza’s commission do its work. In a letter written just before his return trip home, Brazza claimed that Gentil had attempted to block his efforts at every turn. In the Ubangi-Chari region, where Brazza had discovered “the destruction pure and simple of the population”, local officials, doubtless acting on the governor’s orders, “went to great lengths to prevent me from seeing what had happened in the past and especially what is going on now”⁶³. Brazza could understand why: he found evidence of serious abuses committed even after his commission had sailed for Africa. Worse, he had caught the commissaire general in an outright lie. Although Gentil had loudly

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*: 139.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.* 150. On Challaye’s opposition late in life to colonialism, see Irvine (2007): 144.

⁶³ Brazza’s fellow commissioner Hoarau Desruisseaux had earlier written him that Gentil “has assiduously blocked our investigation. He has created one obstacle after the other and refuses to give us the documents we have requested”. Saintoyant (1960): 175.

announced the end of portage, the commission saw that it had continued even more ruinously than before. Brazza's conclusion was that Gentil should be removed from office. "I return home", Brazza wrote, "with the belief that my mission was necessary. Without it, we would have had a scandal on our hands worse... than those of the Belgians".

After locking horns one last time with Gentil, Brazza headed back across Stanley Pool and down to the Atlantic coast via the Belgian railway. His illness became so severe on the steamship home that he was taken ashore at Dakar, where he died on 14 September 1905. The explorer, Challaye wrote, was so brokenhearted by what he had seen in the Congo, so upset over the ruin of the great humane colony he had built, that he could no longer soldier on. Having presciently refused early on to serve King Leopold, he had been horrified to discover in the French Congo the same evils that shamed its Belgian neighbor. Brazza's "heroic sorrow", Challaye wrote, "his sublime sadness, sapped his strength and hastened his death"⁶⁴. He died a martyr to the mission civilisatrice.

Brazza had long been portrayed as a martyr, working selflessly and at the cost of his health and well-being to create a great empire for France. His death allowed this figurative martyrdom to come true. The great man, this "laic missionary" and "apostle" of freedom, wrote the *Petit Parisien's* Lucien Vrily, had anticipated, even embraced, his sacrifice to a larger cause. Before leaving for the Congo, he had told the journalist, "I will happily surrender all my remaining strength" to prevent the moral ruin of the colony⁶⁵. In announcing Brazza's death, the mass-circulation press and pictorial weeklies depicted the martyr in quasi-religious terms. They showed a saintlike, emaciated Brazza being helped toward his deathbed. Photographs pictured him lying there, his withered face looking old far beyond his fifty-three years, his blank eyes about to close for good. Brazza's biographer and brother-in-law, Jacques de Chambrun, later put these pictures to words: "Those who kneel before his emaciated body, stretched out on the whiteness of a small narrow bed, were struck by the expression on his features seemingly frozen in anguish. Suddenly, they perceived a new look to this face they all had known for so long. No longer was it the face of a hero; it was the face of a martyr"⁶⁶.

Brazza had hoped that the prestige of his name would add strength to his findings and move the Republic to make amends. Now his fame would have to exert a posthumous force. Colonial Minister Clémentel, who had

⁶⁴ Chayalle (1909): 147.

⁶⁵ *PP*, 16 September 1905.

⁶⁶ Chambrun (1930): 252.

never wanted the truth of the Congo to come out, decided to play down Brazza's findings, even while associating himself—and France as a whole—with the saintliness and martyrdom of the great man. With Brazza out of the picture, the colonial minister appears to have decided on a three-pronged strategy: extol the martyr Brazza, silence the returning members of his commission, and bring Gentil to Paris to defend his colonial administration. In the short run, the strategy did not work. A member of Brazza's commission gave copies of documents and other information to the prominent writer Robert de Jouvenel, who then leaked this material, much of it written by Brazza himself, to the press⁶⁷. The explorer's notes sharply criticized Gentil, whom he accused of heinous crimes. Brazza charged not only that Gentil had been complicit in the Congo's atrocities but that he had committed many himself.

The popular press jumped on the sensational new controversy, creating another episode in the ongoing Congo scandal. What could be juicier than a set of disturbing accusations coming "from beyond the grave", as one paper put it? According to "an individual well placed for being perfectly informed [Jouvenel]", Brazza had explicitly charged that Gentil's demands for ever increasing tax receipts and a huge force of porters had led to the hostage camps, the burning of villages, and the constant native rebellions, all repressed with excessively harsh tactics. Worse, Brazza's occult voice was now accusing Gentil of having personally "chicotted" a Gabonese man to death. Gentil had also ordered a woman flogged and then hung by her feet and several others whipped severely and placed in irons for theft and other petty crimes. Summarizing this damning information, the *Petit Parisien's* article gave what it said was a direct quote from Brazza: "Tortures and summary judgments proliferated. M. Gentil paraded through the streets with a personal bodyguard whose members whipped people who failed to salute the Governor"⁶⁸. Such quotations seemed all the more eerily real when Brazza's letter, mentioned above, surfaced in *Le Temps* the following day (September 27).

These accusations against Gentil turned the scandal into an "affair" when the commissaire and his associates, having returned to France a few days earlier, adamantly rejected Brazza's charges, accusing commission members of spreading outright lies. The commissaire's men hesitated to criticize the martyred Brazza directly, focusing their attack on other members of the commission, said to be "determined adversaries" prejudiced against Gentil from the start. The commissaire's associates implied that Brazza was too ill to conduct a genuine investigation of his own, so he took as gospel the

⁶⁷ *Le Matin* and *Le Journal*, 27-28 September 1905.

⁶⁸ *PP*, 26 September 1905.

falsehoods circulated by members of his group, and accepted suspect native testimony at face value. Since even a socialist like Challaye believed that blacks routinely made things up, the colonialists around Gentil knew they could cast doubt on Brazza's report by impugning his native sources⁶⁹. If Gentil had at times been involved in violent conflict, said his chief of staff, M. Pelletier, it was only in the context of warfare against native rebels trying to overthrow French colonial authority⁷⁰.

In a series of interviews with the press, Pelletier denied that many of the now notorious atrocities attributed to mid-level French colonial administrators and indirectly to Gentil had actually occurred. According to Pelletier, the case of the sixty-eight women and children found in a concentration camp, many of them dead, had nothing to do with Europeans; it was a wholly African affair. In Pelletier's account, members of an enemy tribe had kidnapped the victims in question after eating several others. Those kept alive were to be used as slaves⁷¹. In other, similar accounts, Gentil's surrogates attempted to explain away most of the cruelties attributed to the French. This tactic, combined with the widespread belief that African testimony could not be trusted, raised doubts not only about the information leaked from the Brazza documents but also about all prior reports of French abuses. Had Brazza still been alive, his fame and personal reputation might have enabled him to foil these efforts, but without him, Gentil and his allies in the colonial ministry could circulate a counternarrative designed to discredit the leaks coming from the commission of inquiry.

With two opposing explanations of the Congo situation, centering on a pair of antagonists, one deceased, the press polemic—and the affaire it had generated—continued unabated. Most vocal were the conservative newspapers and the socialist *L'Humanité*, which proved as thorough as it was relentless. *L'Humanité's* Gustave Rouanet, who represented the Seine Department in the National Assembly, did an extraordinary job of investigating the Congo affair. He obtained access to the Brazza commission's notes and found many sources willing to reveal what they knew. Beginning in late September 1905, Rouanet wrote no fewer than twenty-nine articles on *La Barbarie Coloniale*, almost one a day⁷². Taken together, his pieces constitute a masterpiece of advocacy journalism and the effective use of anonymous sources. The portrait

⁶⁹ See the polemic on the truthfulness of Africans in *L'Humanité*, 30 September-1 October 1905.

⁷⁰ *Le Temps*, 27 September 1905.

⁷¹ *La Liberté*, 2 October 1905.

⁷² Fabre (1999): 256.

he painted was devastating, not just for individuals like Toqué and Gentil but for the colonial system itself, Rouanet's real target. His articles would have been more influential had they appeared in a mainstream newspaper, and the intensity of his critique may have alarmed papers like *Le Temps* and the *Petit Parisien*, whose journalists had already revealed much of what Rouanet would say, if in less detail. The editors of these two papers likely felt uncomfortable with the socialist writer now repeating, and reinforcing, what they had published. Shortly after Rouanet's series began, *Le Temps* and the *Petit Parisien* backed off, leaving *L'Humanité* to face Gentil's counterattack largely alone. The socialists remained marginal enough in 1905 that opponents could dismiss their journalism on ideological grounds, without having to prove their information wrong.

Under these circumstances, Colonial Minister Clémentel decided to cool things down by announcing the formation of a new commission of inquiry. Its task would be to evaluate the respective claims of the two sides and recommend any reforms that might be needed. Jean-Marie de Lanessan, the former governor-general of Indochina and minister of colonies, chaired the group, and his collaborators included a well-known academic and several high-level civil servants from Clémentel's ministry, all favorable to Gentil⁷³. It is unclear exactly how Lanessan's panel did its work, but most members seemed eager to challenge Brazza's view that the origins of the Congo atrocities lay in the structure of France's colonial organization, especially as directed by Gentil. Lanessan's 120-page report followed to the letter Clémentel's original instructions to the Brazza commission: the abuses, deplorable as they were, resulted from the isolated acts of errant individuals. The colonial system itself was not to blame, nor was Gentil, whose career emerged from the second inquiry completely intact.

If the government found itself exculpated by the committee its leaders had named, the same was not true of the concessionary companies, whose operations, already compromised by market forces, Lanessan called into question. Even though his report explicitly—and repeatedly—pinned the blame on a few individuals, a close reading of the text suggests that the former minister had indeed found structural reasons for the Congo's problems. Those reasons were solely economic; the government bore no responsibility for the colony's ills, though it did hold the keys to their resolution. The concessionary companies, Lanessan wrote, had been a bad idea, and the government should allow no more. In the meantime, the National Assembly would have to fund the Congo more generously, and above all, the Republic would need to

⁷³ Brunschwig (1977): 123-124.

redouble its devotion to the mission civilisatrice. The colonial government, committed as always to the well-being and advancement of the native people, would have to protect the Congolese from exploitation. It must provide food, education, and medical care and ensure that natives living outside the concessionary zone could freely sell the products they raised⁷⁴.

What the Lanessian report ignored was the close structural relationship between the colonial government and the concessionary economy. Both the local administration and the companies required indigenous people to provide labor and tax payments, neither of which the Congolese wanted to give. The only way to obtain the manpower needed for portage and harvesting rubber was to compel people to work. The assessment of taxes served as a crucial means of compulsion, but it was rarely enough. Authorities continued to recruit porters by force, and the Congolese continued to flee from recruiters into the brush, where they not infrequently starved to death. When colonial officials finally built roads and introduced automobiles during the Great War, the need for porters declined. But the humanitarian situation improved only briefly; throughout the 1920s, railway construction led to the massive, forcible conscription of labor. Local people fled from the recruiters or rebelled against them, reproducing the same kinds of abuses Brazza had found decades earlier⁷⁵.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Despite its flaws, the Lanessian report, with its explicit, if muted, criticism of the concessionary companies, went further than the government wanted to go; officials at the Foreign Ministry forbade its publication. They feared it would give ammunition to France's colonial rivals and open the government to lawsuits from the companies. Despite the efforts of socialists and left-leaning Radicals like Joseph Caillaux, who wanted full disclosure of both the Lanessian text and the Brazza commission's notes, the Assembly ultimately voted overwhelmingly to keep everything secret. Only ten copies of the Lanessian report saw print, and all ten were consigned to the archives, where they remain today⁷⁶.

It is, of course, impossible to know what would have happened had Brazza been able to return home bearing his findings. In the past, he had been

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 126-27.

⁷⁵ Coquery-Vidrovitch (1972): 176-95 and Gide (1927).

⁷⁶ Autin (1985): 262-264. The Lanessian report was finally published in Bellec (2014).

an effective publicist, and the colonial ministry would have found it extremely difficult to dismiss him and his devastating observations. As a national hero and charismatic personality, he would have caught the interest of the mass press, which would have given him a great deal of attention. The scandal would have remained alive, and the Congo might have enjoyed some genuine reforms, the colonial system itself perhaps called into question. This is why the Colonial Ministry had been so upset by Brazza's appointment to head the commission of inquiry and why the minister and his associates had worked exceedingly hard to circumscribe the commission's activities. Brazza was considered so dangerous that his wife, Thérèse, who had traveled with him on the final African trip, believed to the end of her days that her husband had not died from dysentery. He had been poisoned, she maintained, to silence him and bury his findings⁷⁷.

With Brazza dubbed a martyr and out of the picture, his opponents ignored his troublesome, divisive conclusions and diverted attention to the unifying, patriotic themes he and his friends had so carefully nurtured during his lifetime. "He was a conqueror", proclaimed *Le Matin*, "but one who conquered with kindness"⁷⁸. Brazza had always rallied a great many French men and women around his image as selfless patriot and intrepid explorer; political leaders now sought to use that image to overcome the divisions the Congo scandal had caused.

What better way to accomplish that goal than a great national communion around the fallen hero lying serenely in state? With fanfare and *éclat*, the French government organized an impressive public funeral for Brazza, a national event of the kind usually reserved for presidents, prime ministers, and luminaries like Victor Hugo⁷⁹. On October 3, 1905, virtually the entire French elite thronged the Church of Sainte Clotilde, sumptuously decorated in black and white. Government ministers, business leaders, military figures, high civil servants, celebrities, and socialites representing the "tout Paris" all came to pay their respects⁸⁰. People who rarely associated with one another rubbed shoulders as they strained to glimpse the ornate coffin of the great man and martyr to France. Such was the national unity expressed in the Church of Sainte Clotilde that clericals and secularists, putting aside their feud over the separation of church and state, pressed together to hear the

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*: 256; Pucci (2009): 188, writes, "To this day, the question of Brazza's death has remained unresolved".

⁷⁸ *Le Matin*, 16 September 1905.

⁷⁹ Ben-Amos (1997 and 2000).

⁸⁰ Martin (2005): 210.

Reverend Father Leroy extol the Catholic virtues of Savorgnan de Brazza⁸¹. For one day, at least, conflicts seemed forgotten as the country drew together around the hero's casketed body.

After representatives of the French army, resplendent in their full dress uniforms, gave an elaborate military salute, a long funeral procession set out for the Père Lachaise Cemetery, where Brazza would be lowered into his in-laws' tomb. En route, thousands of ordinary Parisians poured out of their homes and businesses to pay the hero their last respects. "The entire nation is in mourning", declared *Le Journal*, "when a great man like M. de Brazza draws his final breath"⁸².

At the gravesite, four eulogies contributed to the secular beatification of the French martyr; all emphasized national unity, the civilizing mission, and Brazza's benevolent "conquête pacifique". Brazza's work, intoned the colonialist deputy Paul Deschanel "is pure of human blood". His heroism, Deschanel added, had "widened [France's] borders" and made him "the brilliant artisan of justice and France's ideals"⁸³. Brazza, in short, had served as exemplar of the mission civilisatrice, the man whose explorations had enabled France to illuminate the Dark Continent with the radiance of its superior form of life. The unspoken subtext of this speech was that Brazza embodied the true nature of French colonialism. French men and women should think of "him" and not the dynamiters and the decapitators of colonized peoples when they seek to understand the meaning and value of French imperial expansion.

More than anyone else, Colonial Minister Clémentel associated the French Republic and its empire with the prestige and reputation of the fallen hero. Clémentel asserted that far from harming the Congolese, France, like Brazza, had sacrificed to make them civilized and free. The explorer's recent mission to the Congo, he declared, had "consolidated our moral credit". No one more than Brazza, the minister continued, "incarnates the France of liberty and civilization" or prevented his compatriots from ever doubting "the eternal traditions of justice and humanity that are the glory of France"⁸⁴. Having buried the explorer's report, Clémentel deftly used Brazza's image as charismatic hero and martyr to obscure what the explorer had wanted to expose⁸⁵.

⁸¹ Bauberot (2004).

⁸² *Le Journal*, 4 October 1905.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Although the government suppressed Brazza's draft report, it is clear from the writings of those who accompanied him to the French Congo in 1905 that his findings condemned the very structure of the colonial regime. Saintoyant (1960) and Brisch (1906).

With the ceremony concluded, the Congo scandal quickly faded away. Neither *L'Humanité's* well-documented articles, nor an elaborate parliamentary debate could revive it. In the end, the scandal had served not to challenge deeply held French values, but to affirm them. It reinforced the widespread notion that France's colonial project was noble and good. The Congo scandal had proved to be one of those wrenching public phenomena that ultimately brings people together rather than pulling them apart. Such was the unifying power of Brazza's public image that political leaders could use it to create common perceptions diametrically at odds with what the explorer had ultimately wanted to say.

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