

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Forced Labour and the System of Overburdening in the Interwar Middle Congo: Congolese Populations between Administrative Violence and Local Runaway Schemes, 1918–1948

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Abstract

Forced labour in the Middle Congo was characterized in the interwar period by, on the one hand, a declining role of the notorious French concession companies, and, on the other hand, the growing importance of forced recruitment and forced labour orchestrated by the colonial state. The article attempts to analyse and understand the overall setup of overburdening created by these conditions. Based on new French and Congolese archival resources, it discusses the effects of this overburdening, linking it to the responses shown by local populations, notably through flight and evasion. In a last step, the discussion focuses on the role of intermediaries and their impact on the violence that was locally experienced. The analysis includes a wider perspective into the changes and continuities during the years of World War II, and on the challenges for the forced labour system due to its official abolition in 1946 and the decline of clandestine practices of continuity until 1948.

Introduction

From their inception, the French colony of the Middle Congo and the federation of French Equatorial Africa (AEF) have earned a reputation as “horror colonies”. Starting in the 1890s, forced labour was a cornerstone of French exploitation of local populations in the colony, persisting well beyond its official abolition in the French Empire in 1946. Historical research has focused on the broad and spectacular peaks of forced labour. In her groundbreaking early monograph, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch measured how concession company rule in the early colonial Middle Congo privatized violence, and also controlled taxation, compulsory labour, and the enforcement of both, between the 1890s and the early 1920s.¹ In one of the most recent studies of

¹Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au Temps des Grandes Compagnies Concessionnaires 1898–1930*, 2 vols (Paris, 1972). For the wider context of concession company rule, see Mieke van der

compulsory labour in the Congolese case, James P. Daughton focuses on the infamous Congo-Océan Railway (CFCO) built between 1921 and 1934, whose construction devoured individuals forced into labour contracts, with its brutal conditions leading to thousands of deaths.² Finally, in four equally recent and important research articles, Ferruccio Ricciardi clarifies a number of issues of the Middle Congo's labour realities in the interwar period. He shows the interplay between more rigid norms and regulations defined by international organizations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), already from the late 1920s, and reactions in local economic and social life in French Equatorial Africa, like during the contemporaneous introduction of labour booklets.³ Ricciardi also offers the first analytical discussion of priorities and adaptations within a French concession company in the Middle Congo nearly five decades after Coquery-Vidrovitch's classical book, by interpreting the archives of the Compagnie Française du Haut Congo, kept in the French Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence.⁴ The latter perspective sides with groundbreaking analysis on other African "horror colonies" in terms of forced labour, outside of the French Empire, by focusing on concession company exploitation as one central element, such as on the Leverville oil palm concession in the Belgian Congo by Benoît Henriët or on the lands of the Companhia do Moçambique in Portuguese Mozambique by Eric Allina.⁵

These different approaches give important insights, but the existing interpretations tend to look at dramatic moments, and there are many structural questions left untouched. The first concerns the need for a more complete view of how different forms of forced labour interacted and the effects of their combination. At least after the decline of concession company rule in the 1920s, violently imposed contract labour was only one, albeit crucial, element within a whole *setup* of labour exploitation.⁶ Other routines, namely, forced labour services for the maintenance of public infrastructure

Linden, "The Acquisition of Africa (1870–1914): The Nature of International Law" (Boston, MA, 2016), pp. 162–164.

²James P. Daughton, *In the Forest of No Joy: The Congo-Océan Railroad and the Tragedy of French Colonialism* (New York, 2021).

³Ferruccio Ricciardi, "Le 'travail indigène' ou la citoyenneté par le travail sous contrainte en Afrique Equatoriale française dans l'entre-deux-guerres", *Outre-Mers*, 404–405 (2019), pp. 99–117, 102–104; *idem*, "Entretenir l'entreprise coloniale. Travail de subsistance et division sexuée de la production en Afrique équatoriale française (années 1920–1940)", *Entreprises et histoire*, 107 (2022), pp. 30–44.

⁴Ferruccio Ricciardi, "Qu'est-ce qu'un 'travailleur africain'? Marché, coercition et mobilité en Afrique équatoriale française (1911–1940)", *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 245–246 (2022), pp. 153–182; *idem*, "Freedom of Movement versus Freedom of Work? Coping with the Mobility of Indigenous Workers in a Palm Oil Concession in French Congo (1910–1940)", *Labour History*, 64:6 (2023), pp. 691–705.

⁵Benoît Henriët, *Colonial Impotence: Virtue and Violence in a Congolese Concession (1911–1940)* (Berlin/Boston, MA, 2021); *idem*, "Elusive Natives: Escaping Colonial Control in the Leverville Oil Palm Concession, 1923–1941", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 49:2 (2015), pp. 339–361; Eric Allina, *Slavery by any Other Name: African Life under Company Rule in Colonial Mozambique* (Charlottesville, VA/London, 2012).

⁶Victor Fernández Soriano, "'Travail et Progrès': Obligatory 'Educational' Labour in the Belgian Congo, 1933–60", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 53:2 (2018): pp. 292–314.

(the *prestations*), had their own marked effects, which added to what we will call here the overall setup of forced labour.⁷

There have been some important attempts to discuss such overall setups for French colonialism, but they principally interpret French West Africa (AOF) and they are incomplete: the classical overview monograph of Babacar Fall describes the different forms and categories of colonial forced labour in France's African colonies, while the recent study by Romain Tiquet on Casamance and other parts of French Senegal masterfully locates them in a far deeper, locally grounded discussion.⁸ However, the parallel existence of forced public labour services alongside compulsory contracts for private construction – supplemented by penal labour and coerced agricultural tasks – created a situation of constant overburdening that has received only tentative scholarly discussion.

Moreover, with the exception of Peter Gaida's overview of the entire French Empire – which remains schematic for this region – existing studies largely overlook French Equatorial Africa, despite its territories having a more notorious reputation as “horror colonies”.⁹ Certainly, for the Middle Congo, a systematic study on the proliferation of forced labour forms and their cumulative effect of overburdening is therefore appropriate. This approach of taking the overall setup into account draws inspiration from Gregory Mann's systematic analysis of the *indigénat*, i.e. the practices of legal and effective discrimination of “the natives” within France's colonies in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ The primary goal of this article is to deliver a systematic study encompassing the different forms and situations of forced labour in the Congolese case, and to understand how they combined to shape the overall regime.

The inhabitants of the Middle Congo tried to escape forced labour whenever possible, particularly its Congolese setup, which was marked by massive overburdening. A second goal of this article is therefore to show the connection between overburdening and practices of evasion. As in many other “horror colonies”, runaways formed a sizeable group, yet few studies provide a systematic understanding of the particular periods and practices of these reactions. Even in Daughton's study, we principally learn that desertions from CFCO construction sites were frequent and that administrators responded to them with a degree of fatalism. However, Daughton does not categorize or structure the various reactions.¹¹ This article will show how evasion became endemic, and discuss the decisive moments and motives for runaways.

⁷ Ricciardi rightly points out the difficulties for contract labourers and concession owners at the Compagnie Française du Haut-Congo (CFHC), whenever the administration attempted to confiscate workers for public tasks, see Ricciardi, “Travailleur africain”, p. 158; *ibid.*, “Freedom of Movement”, p. 695.

⁸ Babacar Fall, *Le travail forcé en Afrique-Occidentale française (1900–1946)* (Paris, 1993); Romain Tiquet, *Travail forcé et mobilisation de la main-d'œuvre au Sénégal* (Rennes, 2019).

⁹ Peter Gaida, *Le travail forcé dans les colonies françaises, 1900–1946: “L'Empire de la contrainte”* (Paris, 2021). See, however, Alexander Keese, “Hunting ‘Wrongdoers’ and ‘Vagrants’: The Long-Term Perspective of Flight, Evasion, and Persecution in Colonial and Postcolonial Congo-Brazzaville, 1920–1980”, *African Economic History*, 44 (2016), pp. 152–180.

¹⁰ Gregory Mann, “What was the *indigénat*? The Empire of Law in French West Africa”, *Journal of African History*, 50:3 (2009), pp. 331–353.

¹¹ Daughton, *Forest of No Joy*, pp. 172–187.

Thirdly, forced labour – experienced as a powerful, overburdening experience in everyday life – had the potential to generate intervention by intermediaries, such as chiefs and certain local clerks working for the administration. Emily Lynn Osborn and the contributors to the pioneering edited volume by Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, have demonstrated the importance of intermediaries in creating and maintaining systems of colonial rule. However, such figures rarely appear as individuals influencing whole communities in their reactions to forced labour.¹² Conversely, Romain Tiquet points out the role of urban Senegalese elites in the interwar period as advocates for rural populations subjected to forced labour – notably through coverage of the issue in local newspapers. Yet, Senegal remains an exceptional case: under French colonial rule, segments of its urban population enjoyed unusual rights, which, within the AOF, also created opportunities for legal challenges to mistreatment that were broadly absent in the case of the AEF.¹³ Thus, the discussion of the overall setup of forced labour and local reactions, including the involvement of intermediaries, helps us to better understand the realm of compulsory labour in the Middle Congo.

We argue that this combined panorama – overburdening through forced labour, the local reactions of its victims, and the importance of intermediaries – creates a powerful case for analysing the effects of forced labour structures in the global history of colonialism. The Middle Congo offers particularly interesting conditions for such dense analysis of a wider forced labour setup, especially as we hope to convincingly base it on new research in rarely used or unused colonial archives. The territory also represents a case in which Yan Slobodkin's hypothesis of a general silence around colonial violence in archival sources certainly does not hold true.¹⁴ Slobodkin has relied on this argument in his study of Côte d'Ivoire to explain the archival silence surrounding the mass brutality and repression in the 1930s, Tiquet has convincingly shown that colonial officials had strong incentives to obscure local realities of colonial intervention, and Wallace Teska has insisted on dead ends within the administrative process that interrupt the transmission of scandals and abuses to the upper levels of the hierarchy. Yet, in the case of Congo, crisis-related correspondence reflecting on the motives of malfunctions, and fierce internal criticism, are notably frequent.¹⁵ Colonial administrators discussed scandals and internal problems, and they named both participants and the local populations involved. Such crisis/internal criticism correspondence is even more frequently available if historians move beyond the well-trodden paths of interpretation – namely, the correspondence that arrived at the Government-General of French Equatorial Africa in Brazzaville and the French Colonial Ministry.

¹²Emily L. Osborn, "'Circle of Iron': African Colonial Employees and the Interpretation of Colonial Rule in French West Africa", *Journal of African History*, 44:1 (2003), pp. 29–50; Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily L. Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts (eds), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison, WI/London, 2006).

¹³Romain Tiquet, "Challenging Colonial Forced Labor: Resistance, Resilience and Power in Senegal (1930s)", *International Labor and Working Class History*, 93 (2018), pp. 135–150.

¹⁴Yan Slobodkin, "State of Violence: Administration and Reform in French West Africa", *French Historical Studies*, 41:1 (2018), pp. 33–61, 38.

¹⁵Romain Tiquet, "Rendre compte pour ne pas avoir à rendre des comptes", *Cahiers d'histoire: Revue d'histoire critique*, 137 (2017), pp. 123–140; Wallace Teska, "Dead-End Scandal in M'Pésoba: Local Politics and Colonial Justice in French West Africa, 1913–18", *Journal of African History*, 63:3 (2022), pp. 384–399.

Current-day Republic of Congo appears as an anomaly with regard to the territorial archives of the former French colonizers. For the Congo, these archives are largely untraceable, with the exception of a small collection of documents discovered by Brice I. Owabira and Alexander Keese in 2017 in Pointe-Noire, capital of the colonial territory from 1947 to 1957.¹⁶ Historians of the colonial period of the Middle Congo – unless they have drawn on the archives of concession companies, as was the case for Coquery-Vidrovitch and Ricciardi – have typically relied on the reports that reached the Government-General in Brazzaville. These reports, subsequently “repatriated”, are now available in the ANOM.

We will focus on alternative archival series that, in our view, offer more relevant material in terms of crisis/internal conflict correspondence. Notably, a whole generation of historians working on Congolese history over the last two decades has largely overlooked the Middle Congo files held by the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN) for the 1930s and 1940s. This documentation originates from various levels of the colonial administration, including the Territorial Inspectorate, and contains a wealth of material in terms of contradictions and internal criticism. For developments in the 1940s, we also rely on documents from the newly constituted archive of the Préfecture of Pointe-Noire (APPN-CG) in the Republic of Congo, which is likely to become one of the richest district archives in Central Africa.¹⁷

This article will first discuss categories of compulsory labour and, in particular, question the nature of “the contract”, building on the analysis carried out by Ricciardi and others; it will also address periodization. It will then create an early panorama of overburdening at the start of the interwar period, drawing on two particularly critical sources: an inspectorate report – the Picanon report – and colonial administrator Raymond Harquet’s commentary on the early phase of CFCO construction. We then explore the mechanisms and effects of forced labour as a system that overburdened local populations, illustrated through a wider range of examples, and interpret flight as a reaction. The subsequent section analyses a paradigmatic case of intermediaries taking roles within the panorama of excessive compulsory labour. The final part addresses changes and continuities during World War II, concluding with a brief discussion of the official abolition of forced labour in 1946 and its (more or less) hidden continuities until 1948.

While the analysis of the overall setup of forced labour concentrates on the Middle Congo, it is useful to highlight analogous processes and observations from neighbouring Gabon. As Christopher Gray showed, the links between both colonies through border-crossing movements, wider projects having an impact on both territories, and common administrative mentalities, create situations in which analogies make sense.¹⁸ We will profit from such transborder observations where they prove useful.

¹⁶Alexander Keese and Brice I. Owabira, “Rescuing, Interpreting, and Eventually Digitizing Regional Postcolonial Archives: Endangered Archives and Research in Pointe-Noire, Republic of Congo”, *History in Africa*, 47 (2020), pp. 143–165, 151–152.

¹⁷Alexander Keese and Annalisa Urbano, “Researching Post-Independence Africa in Regional Archives: Possibilities and Limits in Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana, and Congo-Brazzaville”, *Africa*, 93:4 (2023), pp. 542–561, 555–556.

¹⁸Christopher Gray, *Colonial Rule and Crisis in Equatorial Africa: Southern Gabon, ca. 1850–1940* (Rochester, NY/Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 114–115.



Figure 1. Gabon and the Middle-Congo in the interwar period (shows CFCO railway line from 1934).

Contracts (or “Contracts”), Services, and the Categories of the Setup of Forced Labour

Both public forced labour and contract labour characterized the colonial Middle Congo until 1946 and even beyond. However, varieties of contexts and overlapping routines make it complicated to pinpoint practices. The road towards definition is therefore thorny, and there have been relatively few attempts; generally, the thriving field of global labour history tends to work around the absence of a definition.¹⁹ We will refer here to a colonial form of forced labour, which uses the possibility of physical coercion and legal punishment against those refusing to work for the colonial state or its agents, in the widest sense of that word, as one crucial element. This definition comes close to the actual 1930 Forced Labour Convention C29 of the International Labour Organization, but it includes penal labour.²⁰ As we will discuss below, our definition of colonial forced labour integrates contract labour under certain, and very common, colonial conditions: “contracts” for which recruitment took place through coercion by state agents, and from which colonial law criminalized “desertion”, need to be part of that definition.²¹ The whole system certainly enabled capitalist exploitation in colonies, serving the interests of both European firm owners and of the colonial state’s fiscal apparatus.

Nevertheless, it is worth questioning whether such forms of forced labour were exclusively a response to capitalist needs.²² In colonial contexts, obtaining workers where there were none available, introducing “civilization” through “hard work”, and finishing infrastructure projects to better control the colonies were all part of the overall strategy, and the colonial state pushed for all these objectives. In other parts of colonial Africa, taxation was an alternative means of compelling locals to accept hard labour. In the Middle Congo, however, the French administration and the agents of concession companies never trusted this method entirely. Instead, they relied on obligatory *corvée* labour and intimidation into allegedly voluntary labour contracts.²³ Repression against “vagrancy” was another option for punishing “loafers” through corrective labour. While some of the penal labourers deployed on work sites may have been contract “deserters” who were apprehended and sentenced accordingly, the debate on vagrancy only became important after the official abolition of forced labour in 1946. It was only at that moment that colonial administrators began to view vagrancy laws as a

¹⁹See, however, Marcel van der Linden and Magaly Rodríguez García, “Introduction”, in *idem* (eds), *On Coerced Labor: Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery* (Leiden/Boston, MA, 2016), pp. 1–7, 1.

²⁰Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (New York/Cambridge, 1996), pp. 29–31, 37.

²¹Ricciardi, “Travail indigène”, pp. 104–107.

²²Alessandro Stanziani, *Les métamorphoses du travail contraint. Une histoire globale (XVIII^e–XIX^e siècles)* (Paris, 2020), pp. 15–16.

²³See also Ewout Frankema and Marlous van Waijenburg, “Metropolitan Blueprints of Colonial Taxation? Lessons from Fiscal Capacity Building in British and French Africa, c.1880–1940”, *Journal of African History*, 55:3 (2014), pp. 371–400, 389–392.

potential strategy for retaining certain “perpetrators” within the labour system under the guise of corrective labour.²⁴

In the interwar period, international scrutiny of compulsory forms of labour became far more aggressive in some cases, particularly through the formulation of new norms.²⁵ However, while this led to legal and economic rhetoric insisting on the principle of fighting any forms of “slavery” and outlawing “forced labour”, the practical implications remained complex. The logic of *mise en valeur* (modernization of the colonies) made access to a substantial, stable labour force ever more necessary. As colonial agents saw it, and as Colonial Minister Albert Sarraut formulated it in a famous publication, this imperative also served the interests of private investors operating locally.²⁶ Forestry and railway construction, which were private ventures partly relying on public concessions of projects, thus profited from the massive intervention of colonial agents in providing the necessary labour force.²⁷ Thus, while capitalist logics of exploitation based on compulsory recruitment had their place, they were not the exclusive motor of what the agents of the colonial state did: in the AEF, economic expansion and the rhetoric of the “civilizing mission” went hand in hand in the 1920s.²⁸

Voluntary contract labour was difficult to secure, at least in sufficient numbers. While the earliest, most violent practices of forced recruitment in the first phase of the colonial presence were, in theory, no longer welcome, the routines remained contradictory and mostly coercive.²⁹ The observations of colonial lawmaker Arthur Girault at the start of the twentieth century remained valid: to have a stable labour force, private agricultural, mining, and forestry properties needed forced recruitment and compulsory mechanisms in the management of contract labourers implemented by the colonial state.³⁰ Yet, the risk of strong international criticism became a reality in the interwar period: according to ILO Convention C29, the threat of penalties during recruitment for a contract fell into the category of outlawed forced labour practices.³¹ The French government did not ratify the convention before 1937, but its existence created an international mood that obliged colonial administrators to better justify their behaviour. Therefore, while the direct effects of ILO intervention in French Equatorial

²⁴Alexander Keese, “The Slow Abolition within the Colonial Mind: British and French Debates about ‘Vagrancy’, ‘African Laziness’, and Forced Labour in West Central and South Central Africa, 1945–1965”, *International Review of Social History*, 59:3 (2014), pp. 377–407, 392–395.

²⁵Daniel R. Maul, “The International Labour Organization and the Struggle against Forced Labour from 1919 to the Present”, *Labor History*, 48:4 (2007), pp. 477–500, 479–483.

²⁶Jean Suret-Canale, *Afrique noire occidentale et centrale. L'ère coloniale 1900–1945*, Tome II (Paris, 1982), p. 94; Albert Sarraut, *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises* (Paris, 1923).

²⁷Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo*, vol. 1, pp. 86, 155.

²⁸Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, CA, 1997).

²⁹Tiquet, *Travail forcé et mobilisation*, p. 21; Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo*, vol. 1, pp. 16, 21.

³⁰Arthur Girault, *Principes de la colonisation et de la légalisation coloniale*, vol. 1 (2nd edn, Paris, 1904), p. 114.

³¹James P. Daughton, “ILO Expertise and Colonial Violence in the Interwar Years”, in Sandrine Kott and Joelle Droux (eds), *Globalizing Social Rights: The International Labour Organization and Beyond* (New York, 2013), pp. 85–97.



Figure 2. Workers cutting a 40 meter slope during the construction of the Congo-Océan Railway, 1923–1924.

Source: Alamy.

Africa were limited – since French colonial administrators were not required to implement the anti-forced labour convention before World War II rendered it temporarily obsolete – it pushed the colonial administration to report on forced corvée labour in particular throughout the 1930s. Colonial officials also provided more information on their efforts to improve labour conditions in general.³²

The gigantic CFCO project had the potential not only for internal scandal, but also to conjure international accusations. Official reports therefore insisted on the “voluntary” nature of workers’ recruitment, which they claimed was based on “encouragement”. The literature of the 1960s already shows awareness of the general panic among many Congolese when faced with the prospect of being drafted for these “contracts”.³³ Moreover, in the case of the CFCO, contractual relationships operated at different levels. The Government-General of French Equatorial Africa and the Société des Batignolles had an agreement, obliging the former to supply the workforce for the project up to a maximum of 8,000 men.³⁴ Thus, behind a rhetoric of “volunteers” and “administrative encouragement” was forced recruitment, as denounced by André Gide in his influential text *Voyage au Congo*, published in 1927, in which he exposed the absence of real contracts and the coercive reality (Figure 2).³⁵

³²Ferruccio Ricciardi, “Categorizing Difference: Labor and the Colonial Experience (French Empire, First Half of the 20th Century)”, in Olivier Giraud and Michel Lallement (eds), *Decentering Comparative Analysis in a Globalizing World* (Leiden/Boston, MA, 2021), pp. 326–346.

³³See the classic work by Gilles Sautter, “Notes sur la construction du chemin de fer Congo-Océan (1921–1934)”, *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*, 7:26 (1967), pp. 219–299, 248.

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 239–240.

³⁵Daniel Durosay, “Autour du ‘Voyage au Congo’. Documents”, *Bulletin des Amis d’André Gide*, 29:129 (2001), pp. 57–95, 90.

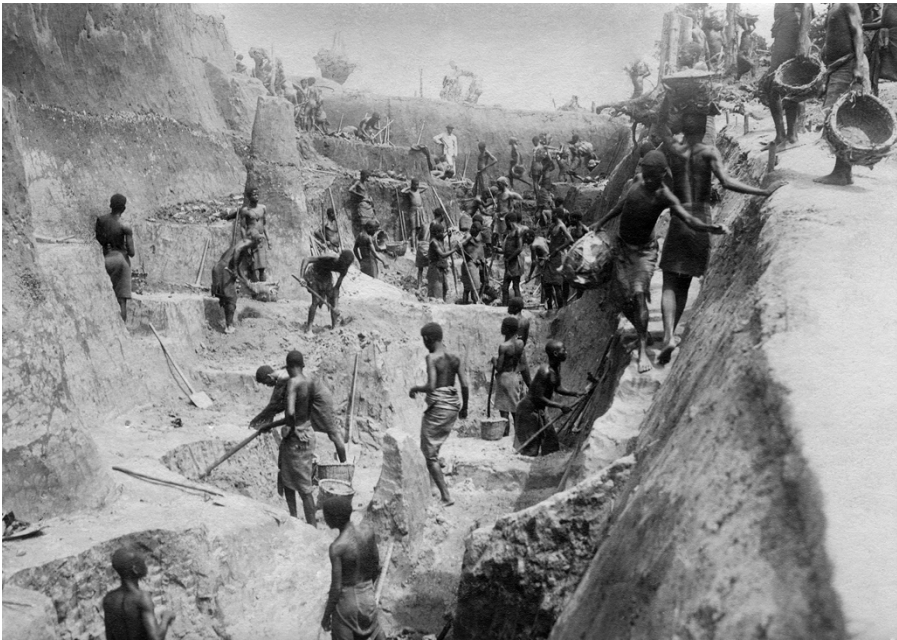


Figure 3. The soil is removed in baskets during the construction of the Congo-Océan Railway, 1923–1924.
Source: Alamy.

More recently, in his attempt at an overview of forced labour in the French Empire between 1900 and 1946, Peter Gaida quotes the 1926 report by Inspector Bernard Sol concerning CFCO recruitment. In this previously unknown discussion of the nature of contract labour, the French inspector insists on the entirely artificial nature of the contract: its existence was pure fiction, but the fiction gave overseers and the administration the means to criminalize desertion and “laziness” at work, and to inflict punishment.³⁶ The contract allowed the Société des Batignolles to keep a reluctant labour force under control without admitting that the public administration forced locals to work for “the machine”, i.e. in railway construction (Figure 3).³⁷

There were exceptions to the general pattern of recruitment. From the early phases of construction of the CFCO, for instance, the Société des Batignolles needed more highly skilled workers and therefore recruited some trained personnel in Gabon. However, the logic of forced recruitment into labour contracts was omnipresent. It was not limited to the CFCO either: in 1931, for example, the administration

³⁶Gaida, *Le travail forcé*, p. 148.

³⁷The “machine” often appears as a term in archival sources. This expression undoubtedly refers to the locomotive that roared along the tracks laid by recruits, see, e.g., CADN, Archives du Congo français rapatriées de l’ambassade de France à Brazzaville 1902–1960 (hereafter Fonds Brazzaville), 116/PO1/87, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou, [Rapport] Conscription d[e] Railway – Subdivision d[e] Madingou – Année 1931 – 1^{er} Trimestre 1931 (without number), n.d., pp. 2–3.

intervened to force 200 workers into contracts for the wood concession of former administrator-turned-settler Harquet, in Kayes.³⁸

The role of forced recruitment for private employers disguised as “contract work” lingered on during the 1930s. However, six years after the completion of the CFCO railway line, in 1940, the administration had entirely changed its tone regarding contract labour in official correspondence in the Middle Congo. Colonial agents claimed that the “natives” refused to sign “real” labour contracts because they preferred a life marked by frequent changes of employer – one that, in their view, verged on vagrancy. Thus, the comment of Gabriel Fortuné, Inspector of Administrative Affairs, while visiting the subdivision of M’Vouti – a region where construction work for the CFCO had been especially harsh – is revealing. Referring to the gold prospecting company Romano – one of many enterprises unable to secure contract labour and forced to rely on unstable day labourers, he remarked as follows:

Not a single worker is employed by contract. Mr Oustry [the European manager] says that the firm would wish to exclusively have contract labourers. But, in a general manner and with the exception of workers who in the past have been recruited via contract, the labour force in the Subdivision of M’Vouti shows a clear repugnance for signing any engagement. The worker of this subdivision likes to change his workplace. Moreover, he gets a good wage – if 15 days of work are sufficient for him to live during a month, he imagines that one can just have a rest at the end of these 15 days. And as he currently has the guarantee of finding work again, be it with the same or a different employer, he prefers his condition of day labourer over that of being bound by contract. A contract would leave him less freedom of action.

I will examine in the conclusion the goal that would seem to get the labour force of the subdivision out of vagrancy and to fix them with the employers and within the country.³⁹

The “fiction of the contract” therefore helped colonial agents to systematically sidestep the legal framework created for compulsory labour in the French context. In the case of the CFCO, this allowed administrators to recruit in more brutal and aggressive ways, as Daughton has shown for one particular agent, Georges Pacha.⁴⁰ Employers profiting from such schemes managed to avoid appropriate remuneration or any negotiation regarding wages. By eagerly pushing for forced recruitment through contracts that favoured private firms, at least until 1936, colonial agents kept up a double discourse, hiding the colonial state’s inability to conform to its own legal standards in the

³⁸CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou, [Rapport] *Conscription d[e] Chemin de Fer – Subdivision d[e] Madingou – Année 1931 – 2^e Trimestre 1931* (without number), n.d., p. 13.

³⁹CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/136, Fortuné, Inspector of Administrative Affairs, *Rapport sur la situation de la main-d’œuvre employée par les entreprises privées dans la Subdivision de M’Vouti* (Exécution de l’Ordre de Mission n° 362/SG du 27 Décembre 1939) (without number), 8 January 1940, p. 2.

⁴⁰James P. Daughton, “The ‘Pacha Affair’ Reconsidered: Violence and Colonial Rule in Interwar French Equatorial Africa”, *Journal of Modern History*, 91:3 (2019), pp. 493–524, see also Daughton, *Forest of No Joy*, ch. 3.

colonies: while forced labour for private employers was officially banned, contracts that only existed in theory and into which workers were compelled through forced recruitment presented a patina of sound procedures. Interestingly, during the years of the war effort, from 1940, the tone had already changed, and the alliance between firms and colonial agents had become shaky. The Société des Batignolles, the former construction firm of the CFCO, massively deplored mass desertions and the locals' refusal to accept contracts. The representatives of the company argued that the administration's 1922 decree on labour organization undermined the contract as an economic method. This argument was certainly absurd for the early 1920s, when the administration disregarded individual refusals during recruitment drives for the private firm. However, in 1942, and even under the hardship of war conditions, local populations had a better idea of their legal rights, and administrators no longer had the courage to ignore these legal provisions. As we will show, abuses persisted for several years in other fields, notably in public labour.⁴¹

Finally, it is useful to emphasize that during the interwar period, the question of colonial forced labour in the Middle Congo unfolded in four principal, though at times overlapping, stages. The first period involved the phasing out of concession company rule and the establishment of regular administrative control over the often massive tracts of land that had formerly been left in the hands of company administration. This process was largely complete by the mid-1920s. A second period was concerned with administrative consolidation, in which the colonial state tried to shift forced labour to use it primarily for public tasks, like road and infrastructure maintenance. This evolution, which continued throughout the 1920s, remained notably incomplete, because administrative officials never managed to emancipate themselves from the economic sway of the most important private firms.⁴² A third period is defined by the Congo-Océan Railway construction project itself. With its insatiable demand for ever more workers during the construction period, between 1921 and 1934, the CFCO project created conditions in which the daily organization of forced labour for the colonial state was, for the individual administrator, often subordinated to the obligation to guarantee the labour force for the railway's construction sites. Finally, a fourth period is characterized by the reform projects of the Popular Front, whose impact between 1936 and 1938 is far better documented for French West Africa.⁴³ Colonial administrators and inspectors, while of course not discussing specific periods of the organization of labour in their domain, were nevertheless aware of the shifting demands of each of these periods, and some were very outspoken – and, at times, critical – about the processes.

⁴¹ APPN-CG, 96/2, Engineer and Head of Division of the Société des Batignolles in the Middle-Congo to Administrator of District of Kouilou, *Main d'œuvre indigène* (n° 4688), 8 October 1942, pp. 1–2.

⁴² Christopher Gray and François Ngolet, "Lambaréné, Okoumé and the Transformation of Labor along the Middle Ogooué (Gabon), 1870–1945", *Journal of African History*, 40:1 (1999), pp. 87–107, 101–102.

⁴³ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "The Popular Front and the Colonial Question in French West Africa: An Example of Reformist Colonialism", in Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (eds), *The French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 155–169; Michel Brot, "Did the Popular Front Have any Significant Impact in Guinée?", in Chafer and Sackur (eds), *French Colonial Empire*, pp. 188–202.

Overburdening: Forced Public Labour and Compulsory Contract Labour in the Late 1910s and 1920s

The presence of an administrative inspector sent to the subdivision of the Bakongos in the Middle Congo to investigate shocking conditions, gives an important first window on the realities of forced labour in a district of that territory after World War I. Edouard Picanon, a particularly critical inspector of administrative affairs, came to enquire into administrative malpractices. Some issues were unrelated to compulsory labour and repression, but he reported extensively on malnourishment of penal workers under the *indigénat*, describing many of them as “human skeletons” affected by multiple illnesses and ailments.⁴⁴ During Picanon’s earlier travels as an inspector, he had already criticized the organization of *corvée* labour on the roads of the military-controlled districts in Gabon as chaotic and unreliable, often resulting in excessively harsh labour conditions, even by the standards of colonial practice.⁴⁵

In the subdivision of the Bakongos, rural road maintenance, the clearing of village roads, and the provision of straw bundles used as ceilings for huts and their portage all belonged to the realm of compulsory labour for the colonial regime. Picanon criticized the fact that these practices were applied to all kinds of roads, including major overland routes, for which, according to colonial legislation, only free labour was supposed to be used.⁴⁶ The inspector’s views of internal organization are a rare glimpse into local negotiation processes: Picanon held that while the recruitment exercise in 1918 should have left every able-bodied man in the subdivision with seven days of work during that year, “the practice” was quite different. Administrators indeed delegated the organisational task to local “traditional” chiefs, discussed in the report as “tribal chiefs” or “chiefs of the land”; these chiefs were responsible for the constitution of work gangs. The leeway given to internal hierarchies within villages was thus fundamental. The native guards in the service of the colonial administration, assigned to the practices of recruiting public labour, were no more knowledgeable about the mechanisms of designating individuals as workers than the European administrator of subdivision himself. The inspector commented that the method of trusting “native custom” was probably very adequate; he remarked, nevertheless, that there was a risk of abuses and that the administration had to tackle and remedy this potential for mistreatment. Picanon himself admitted that the chiefs, by forcing female household members to feed the work gangs, played into an abusive interpretation of state obligations in *corvée* labour: in principle, colonial legislation gave the administration the task of providing food for the labourers, but this was not translated into practice.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ ANOM, GGAEF, 6Y/5, Picanon, Inspector-General of the Colonies, Mission 1918: Rapport fait par M. Picanon, Inspecteur Général des Colonies, concernant la vérification de M. Loizeau, Administrateur de 3^{ème} classe des Colonies, Chef de la Circonscription des Bakongos (Moyen-Congo), à Mindouli, à l’époque du 12 Août 1918 et explications fournies par cet Administrateur sur les résultats de sa vérification (without number), 5 May 1919, pp. 13–15.

⁴⁵ ANOM, GGAEF, 6Y/5, Picanon, *Transmission à M. le Gouverneur Général de l’A.E.F. des 16 Rapports de Détail N° 64 à 79 inclus* (without number), 5 May 1919, p. 15.

⁴⁶ ANOM, GGAEF, 6Y/5, Picanon, *Mission 1918* (without number), 5 May 1919, p. 22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

For many individuals, the combination of male *corvée* labour for public works and portage, and the intimidation and compulsion used by colonial agents to help private employers find waged contract labour led to massive overburdening. Conditions actually deteriorated in the decade after Picanon's criticism. The overview from 1926 provided by Harquet, then administrator of the Madingou subdivision – one of the most troubled spots at the crossroads of various forms of labour services – demonstrates how much the implementation of forced labour and forced recruitment led to this constant overburdening⁴⁸ of the local populations:

During the third trimester, the Subdivision of Boko-Songho-Madingou gave an immense effort:

- 29,138 days of portage both for the Administration and commerce.
- 5,400 days of labour on the work sites of the automobile route.
- 3,500 days of labour for the construction of the Post.
- 24,000 days of labour on the work sites of the C[ongo] O[céan].

And one needs to add:

For a total of: 62,038 days remunerated.

- 5,290 days for the maintenance of the roads of the Subdivisio[n]
- 5,850 days for the transport of provisions to the store at Madingou.

In total: 73,178 days meaning labour days per valid man.

The native has responded well to the different demands of the administrator of the subdivision during this trimester.⁴⁹

The two main problems of using *corvée* labour concerned obligations that the administration was, in principle, called upon to respect, such as transport and provision of food, and observance of the stipulated days of work per year and per *corvée* labourer. The latter officially remained limited to between twelve and twenty days annually in the interwar period, making it difficult to create a cheap, stable labour force. This problem was often less relevant in practice, but there was nevertheless a legal framework limiting administrative exploitation, at least in theory. There were yet other alternatives: in his 1919 report, Picanon had pointed out for the subdivision of the Bakongos that the administration could also rely on the penal labour of those charged with minor infractions by the administrator as a viable alternative. Although, in Picanon's report, this accounted for only 15,980 days of penal labour for the years between 1912 and 1918, the option was nevertheless attractive: in the case of such

⁴⁸In less refined form, this idea can also be found in the accusations formulated by Albert Londres, *Terre d'Ebène* (Paris, 1929), p. 121.

⁴⁹ANOM, GGAEE, 6Y/5, Picanon, Mission 1918 (without number), 5 May 1919, pp. 13–15; CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Harquet, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou, [Rapport] Conscription d[e] Railway – Subdivision d[e] Madingou – Année 1926 – 3^e Trimestre 1926 (without number), n.d.

forced workers, for whom work was part of their punishment, there was even less evidence of restraint in the severity of their treatment.⁵⁰

Harquet's 1926 report for Madingou is such an unusual and important document because it shows that contract labour for the CFCO constituted (for the 300 workers recruited in the subdivision) only one third of the days of labour that local populations "gave". While the forced contracts with the Société des Batignolles building the railway line were the most notorious, the overall setup of overburdening local populations was much harsher as a result of the combination of forced labour in the public sector and for public tasks and the constant risk of being channelled into severe penal labour in case of infractions.

A glance at neighbouring Gabon, where local populations were less likely to be affected by the CFCO construction, confirms this observation. The 1929 revolt of the Awandjis and Udassas under Chief Wongo in the Gabonese Adoumas subdivision was, according to the critical if partly apologetic report of the subdivision's administrator, Louis Turenne, to be found in general malaise: the harsh modalities of corvée labour, reliance on local chiefs to designate these public workers, their use of much-hated portage tasks, and constant use of penal labour to punish infractions such as "desertion" from contracts or public work, all fed into local anger and sparked insurrection.⁵¹ Equally, attempts by administrators in Gabon to explain their problems controlling labour in 1930 – given the new international mood of condemnation of colonial forced labour and more discussion and scrutiny – constitute some useful insights in comparison with a Middle Congo that was still in the shadow of the railway project. The reports in question have elicited little interest since the publication of Christopher Gray's book.⁵²

The Gabonese reports are clear on the percentages of compulsory or "encouraged" work according to descriptive categories used and according to the possible available labour force. In the Woleu N'Tem district in the first half of 1930, 6,770 of the 18,000 persons deemed eligible for recruitment for corvée labour were actually drafted.⁵³ In the region close to Gabon's colonial capital of Libreville, the subdivision of Estuaire-Nord, the percentage was similar: of 1,986 "able-bodied men", more than half were channelled into contracts with wood concessions and private plantations, while the administration used 648 individuals for public road construction and maintenance; however, it remains an open question whether that really meant that no one was actually drafted for both kinds of tasks in the same year.⁵⁴ As René Hauchecombe, the administrator of the subdivision of the Ouroungous, close to Port-Gentil, maintained, the principal administrative challenge was the complex search for a balance "regarding the employment of one third of the able-bodied male population and the execution of

⁵⁰ ANOM, GGAEF, 6Y/5, Picanon, *Mission 1918* (without number), 5 May 1919, pp. 12–13.

⁵¹ ANOM, GGAEF, 6Y/5, Turenne, *Note: Prestations*. (without number), 11 February 1929, pp. 1–2. On the revolt, see Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Congo*, pp. 202–206.

⁵² Gray, *Colonial Rule and Crisis*, p. 185.

⁵³ ANOM, GGAEF, 4(1)D/36, Saint-Yves, *Colonie du Gabon – Circonscription du Woleu N'Tem: Rapport Trimestriel – Janvier, février et mars 1930 – Année 1930 – 1^{er} Trimestre* (without number), 31 March 1930, p. 15.

⁵⁴ ANOM, GGAEF, 4(1)D/36, Bonvin, *Colonie du Gabon – Circonscription de l'Estuaire: Rapport Trimestriel – 1^{er} Trimestre* (without number), n.d., p. 17.

labour tasks that one should demand from the natives (*originaires*) of the subdivision, without putting at risk the good work of the European companies".⁵⁵ Such logic was certainly close to being the basis of the administration's repressive action in the Middle Congo.

Finally, the observations from Gabon help us to understand administrative strategies and hesitations beyond the influence of the CFCO. Administrators would refrain from massive recourse to *corvée* labour on roads in regions such as the Nyanga, threatened by famine, and instead invest themselves and their native guards in surveillance and enforcement of the production of surplus agricultural products.⁵⁶ As in the case of the Okano, close to the border with the Spanish colony of Equatorial Guinea, they would moderate their pressures to avoid constant flight across the border.⁵⁷ Conversely, the case of the Woleu-N'Tem subdivision demonstrates particular hardships in public road labour, when, in 1930, many were forced to march to their labour sites between Minvoul and Oyem, which constituted a long trek of nine to ten days in each direction, coming on top of the ten days of road labour.⁵⁸ Moreover, when, in early 1930, the administrator of the Woleu-N'Tem decided he needed forced labourers for the construction of a school building in Oyem, he noted that the vast majority of eligible men lived in remote places that meant a long walk to work on the roads.⁵⁹ It seems, therefore, that failures in organization and difficult transport conditions were the norm.

In the Middle Congo, the intersection of public *corvée* and needs of the railway project gave the experience of overburdening a particular form. Portage services were essential and occupied the majority of workers in the vicinity of the railway line.⁶⁰ However, once the men were recruited for a CFCO site, access to labour for portage became limited, sometimes with catastrophic consequences for whole communities: there was a lack of men to carry food to the "volunteers", and in some cases this also affected the production of food in adjacent regions. An example given by Gilles Sautter provides illuminating statistics: 161 men working as porters were necessary to guarantee provisions to a shop in Mboukou-Nsitou, located about ten kilometres from the terminus of the trail. The continuity of this service, destined to be abolished by the newly built road, led to a high mortality rate, as the administration sent the weakest to carry out portage while the strongest were contracted into work on the site. However, sometimes the construction work needs were such that all relatively able-bodied men were required, leaving few available for portage.⁶¹

⁵⁵ ANOM, GGAEF, 4(1)D/36, Hauchecombe, *Colonie du Gabon – Circonscription des Ouroungous: Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1930 – 1^{er} Trimestre* (without number), n.d., p. 9.

⁵⁶ ANOM, GGAEF, 4(1)D/36, Lapiere, *Colonie du Gabon – Circonscription de la Nyanga: Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1930 – 1^{er} Trimestre* (without number), 31 March 1930, p. 17.

⁵⁷ ANOM, GGAEF, 4(1)D/36, Da Costa, *Colonie du Gabon – Circonscription de l'Okano: Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1930 – 1^{er} Trimestre* (without number), n.d., p. 4.

⁵⁸ ANOM, GGAEF, 4(1)D/36, *Colonie du Gabon – Circonscription du Woleu N'Tem: Rapport Trimestriel – Janvier, février et mars 1930 – Année 1930 – 1^{er} Trimestre* (without number), 31 March 1930, p. 13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Sautter, "Chemin de fer Congo-Océan", p. 241.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

Even more devastating than the forced transport of food to labour sites was the CFCO construction project's dependence on the food production of nearby communities, which was enforced by guards and local chiefs. By the end of construction in 1934, the administrator of the Madingou-Mouyondzi subdivision commented that forced food production was now "unsatisfactory", in his view; this gives us an important impression of the degree of compulsion between 1921 and 1934.⁶² Generally, local workers sometimes referred to themselves as "slaves of the governor", although this term was mostly vague, as the idea of being enslaved was more widely used for forced mechanisms of military recruitment in the Middle Congo and Gabon. The terminology was complicated by the fact that some individuals used for both labour services and as military recruits were indeed former domestic slaves of local notables: this was the case for Emmanuel Ganga, former slave of Pierre Kouka, a paramount chief judged and deported during the Amicale Affair of 1930.⁶³ Administrators were generally insensitive to such accusations: they held that economic successes remained contingent upon forced labour, as "[m]easured and paternal compulsion – much more than anarchic laissez-faire – very often leads to these happy outcomes".⁶⁴

However, while the CFCO contracts were the epitome of physical hardship, the harshness of public compulsory labour was not far behind. On paper, the system was strictly controlled, and although, by the mid-1930s, the number of days per person and year had increased to a maximum of twenty, that was still thought of as limited, and officials claimed that the labourers were protected by rigid control.⁶⁵ The actual situation was different: firstly, corvée labour on secondary roads remained frequently unpaid, against imperial stipulations.⁶⁶ Moreover, in addition to road maintenance, labourers in the Bouenza region had other tasks to fulfil: while penal labourers were used for water corvée and some harder practices of working the soil, regular corvée labourers had to clear brushwood.⁶⁷ Guards accompanying the groups of labourers were often violent, and judicial files also hint at sexual violence against the wives of corvée labourers providing food, although officials claimed that notorious cases

⁶²CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Capagorry, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou-Mouyondzi, *Département du Pool – Subdivision de Madingou-Mouyondzi – Rapport du Quatrième Trimestre 1935* (without number), 20 January 1936, p. 4.

⁶³CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/106, Administrator of Subdivision of Mayama, *Rapport – Politique – 1^{er} Semestre 1938* (without number), 30 July 1938, pp. 4, 5, 7.

⁶⁴CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/106, Administrator of Subdivision of Mayama, *Département du Pool – Rapport – Politique – 2^{ème} Semestre 1937* (without number), n.d., p. 8. On the ambivalent balance between repression and reform attempts between 1934 and 1946, see also Keese, "Hunting 'Wrongdoers' and 'Vagrants'", pp. 163–166.

⁶⁵CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Capagorry, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou-Mouyondzi, *Département du Pool – Subdivision de Madingou-Mouyondzi – Rapport du Deuxième Trimestre 1935* (without number), 27 July 1935, p. 33; CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Capagorry, *Département du Pool – Subdivision de Madingou-Mouyondzi – Rapport du Quatrième Trimestre 1935* (without number), 20 January 1936, p. 39; CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/106, Administrator of Subdivision of Mayama, *Département du Pool – Rapport – Politique – 2^{ème} Semestre 1937* (without number), n.d., p. 22.

⁶⁶CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Capagorry, *Département du Pool – Subdivision de Madingou-Mouyondzi – Rapport du Deuxième Trimestre 1935* (without number), 27 July 1935, p. 4.

⁶⁷CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Administrator of Subdivision of Bouenza, *[Subdivision de Bouenza – Rapport Politique – 3^e Semestre 1932 – Prestations]* (n° 11), 30 September 1932, p. 1.

such as that of native guard Rakoutio were rare.⁶⁸ Food was difficult to come by for tasks on more remote sites;⁶⁹ and, in some cases, French gendarmes channelled penal labour into their own plantations, as with the abuses documented for Chiron in Tchimbamba.⁷⁰

Local populations were not at all content with their obligations, but in the Middle Congo they had few options before the mid-1930s to buy themselves out of service, while some of Gabon's districts were forerunners in that regard. In Gabon's Estuaire, administrators argued that even after two decades of constant pressures for labour services, the Pongwé and Fang residents in the subdivision refused to accept *corvée* labour as something normal. Scorn for these services was so widespread that locals would rather use their existing wages from other sources, minimal as they might have been, to pay the tax (the *rachat*) that freed them from compulsory public labour. While colonial officials often held that Gabonese or Congolese colonial subjects preferred hard physical work during a circumscribed period over "civilized" practices of tax payment in currency, these examples show the opposite, and offer a window onto interpretations of the local victims of forced labour.⁷¹

In other regions of colonial rule over African populations, locals appropriated themselves the material advantages of becoming free road workers; in particular, María José Pont Cháfer has suggested the importance of such a mechanism for the British Gold Coast's Northern Territories, which ultimately made forced labour obsolete.⁷² However, while the administration in the Middle Congo needed skilled workers for certain tasks and was ready to offer them better conditions than the meagre wages given to forced *corvée* labourers, such free labour remained in the shadow of *corvée* until 1946. Even with the *rachat* providing some resources to the administration, which naturally had to be invested in contract road labour, colonial agents continued to be focused on *corvée*.⁷³ Local populations did not have any opportunity to change these dynamics before 1946, although, as we will show, in some parts of

⁶⁸CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1, 87, Administrator of Subdivision of Bouenza, [*Subdivision de Bouenza – Rapport Politique – 4e Semestre 1933*] (without number), n.d., p. 25.

⁶⁹CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1, 106, Jean Lagadec, Administrator of Subdivision of Mayama, *Département du Pool – Subdivision de Mayama – Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1935* (without number), 30 June 1935, p. 11.

⁷⁰CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1, 136, Gondran, Inspector of Administrative Affairs, *Rapport à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général* (without number), 10 July 1943, pp. 1–3.

⁷¹ANOM, GGAEF, 4(1)D/36, *Colonie du Gabon – Circonscription de l'Estuaire: Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1930 – 2ème Trimestre* (without number), n.d., p. 3.

⁷²María José Pont Cháfer, "From Forced to Voluntary Labour in Rural Africa: The Transition to Paid Voluntary Labour on the Roads of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast", *International Review of Social History*, 68:2 (2022), pp. 205–231.

⁷³For the widespread absence of free waged labour for many tasks, see, for example, CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116PO/1/87, Administrateur of the Subdivision of Chemin de fer, *Gouvernement de l'Afrique Equatoriale Française – Colonie du Moyen Congo – Circonscription du Chemin de fer – Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1929 – 4ème Trimestre* (without number), n.d.; for examples of skilled waged workers for particular tasks, see for the Mouyondzi–Sibiti road, CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116PO/1/87, Capagorry, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou-Mouyondzi, *Gouvernement de l'Afrique Equatoriale Française – Région du Moyen Congo – Département du Pool – Subdivision de Madingou-Mouyondzi – Rapport du Deuxième Trimestre 1935* (without number), 27 July 1935, p. 36; for the small numbers of permanent waged road workers in maintenance, see CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116PO/1/87, Capagorry, *Gouvernement*

the territory, administrators continued to respect the *rachat* during the war years and reluctantly enlarged the group of free waged workers.

From 1946, the public sector needed wage labour more urgently, but experienced serious problems: instead of becoming a dynamic field of wage workers accumulating financial resources, road work remained unpopular, as private firms – now experiencing the consequences of forced recruitment of contract labour having become outlawed – had to offer serious daily wages, which made public-sector day labour unattractive for the time being. Like in Impfondo, the high prices or the absence of merchandise in shops aggravated the situation: while by 1948 colonial inspector Landrau remarked that too many Congolese wage workers had abundant “paper money” and few occasions to spend it, the colonial administration could not even match these wage conditions.⁷⁴

Generally, the victims of forced recruitment in Gabon ran away or tried, where possible, to buy themselves out of labour obligations. They benefitted from closeness to borders; they sometimes tried to play the administration off against the large companies. However, while forced labour and desertion found an uneasy balance in the Gabonese case by 1930, the even more dramatic conditions of the Middle Congo led to fiercer and longer-lasting reactions.

Reacting to “Contract Labour” and the Almighty *Corvée*: Overburdening and Responses between 1925 and 1940

Measuring the reactions of locals simultaneously faced with “contract labour” and “public labour” is difficult. There are no reliable statistics on who fled, and administrators were reluctant to say too much about their shortcomings in controlling local populations. However, some episodes of flight are especially telling, and we will try to interpret them as expressions of such reactions.

Crises triggered by mass flights were frequent and appeared very early during the French colonial presence in the Middle Congo. Episodes of runaway bands crossing the border into neighbouring territories were common; administrative correspondence from the region since the turn of the decade notes these incidents. Occurrences of mass flight in 1909 and 1910, orchestrated by an influential paramount chief, had the German colony of Cameroon as a destination.⁷⁵ But after World War I, other French colonies such as Gabon and Oubangui-Chari also became adequate places to hide.

Work for the CFCO tended to lead to the strongest reactions. In 1927, one of the largest drives to get contract labourers in Madingou, through a group of native guards, led to hundreds fleeing from the subdivision in a huge panic.⁷⁶ Some of André

de l'Afrique Equatoriale Française – Région du Moyen Congo – Département du Pool – Subdivision de Madingou-Mouyondzi – Rapport du Troisième Trimestre 1935 (without number), 23 October 1935, p. 39.

⁷⁴CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116PO/1/1, Gondran, Inspector of Administrative Affairs of the Middle Congo, *Mabirou* (without number), 12 June 1948, p. 10; CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116PO/1/1, Landrau, Inspector of Administrative Affairs of the Middle Congo, *Inspection du District d'Impfondo – Partie Economique* (without number), 15 April 1949, p. 22.

⁷⁵CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/108, Governor of the Middle-Congo to Administrator of the Subdivision of Sangha, *Politique à suivre sur la zone frontière* (without number), 2 September 1918, p. 2.

⁷⁶CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Brouillet, Chef de Subdivision de Madingou, [*Rapport Madingou*] – 2e Trimestre 1927 (without number), n.d., p. 3.

Gide's public attacks against Jean Weber, director of the Compagnie Forestière Sangha-Oubangui, belong to that context.⁷⁷ In 1926, when none of the 300 contract labourers rounded up in Madingou fled immediately, colonial officials considered the situation highly unusual.⁷⁸ Moreover, flight movements could be extensive: in 1925, nine whole villages from the Madingou region disappeared into the Belgian Congo, and although, with Belgian support, the French authorities ultimately managed to recapture the refugees, this episode was exemplary for the potential for flight in the region.⁷⁹

As correspondence from the Haute-Sangha region demonstrates, running away from CFCO recruitment in the area was endemic at different times and flight tended to be towards distinct geographical areas.⁸⁰ Runaways accepted life-threatening risks, for example when hiding on the steep slopes of Djimber Mountain. As Sautter has pointed out, fear of recruitment was so massive that inhabitants integrated this panic into local religious beliefs.⁸¹

The immense problems of flight from the CFCO labour in Madingou in 1931 led the administration to finally involve local dignitaries, i.e. village chiefs, in the recruitment task, and no longer just to round up "contract labour" via native guards. During forced recruitment, "traditional" chiefs had significant leeway to designate those eligible for the "contract". By 1931, some administrators demanded what they called an "impartial recruitment", and they tried to advertise the fairer treatment now to be practised to prevent local panic and flight.⁸² According to the administration, this option of internal "persuasion" within the communities caused an immediate "improvement" in terms of numbers of runaways.⁸³

Forced labour on public sites had similar effects: again, workers were keen to run away. Generally, for the Badondo communities living close to the border with the Belgian Congo, officials argued that the administrator needed to function as a kind of gendarme.⁸⁴ At Boko Songho in 1933, corvée labourers fled into the Belgian Congo,

⁷⁷"Réplique à la Forestière", *Le Populaire*, 1, 27 July 1927. Available online at: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k819039s>; last accessed on 15 April 2025.

⁷⁸CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Harquet, Administrator of Subdivision of Boko-Songho, [Rapport] *Circonscription d[e] Railway – Subdivision d[e] Madingou – Année 1926 – 3e Trimestre 1926* (without number), n.d..

⁷⁹CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Harquet, *Gouvernement Général de l'Afrique Equatoriale Française – Colonie du Moyen-Congo – Circonscription du Chemin de Fer – Subdivision de Boko-Songho – Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1925 – Mois de Mars – 1er Trimestre 1925* (without number), 31 March 1925, p. 1.

⁸⁰CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/108, Emile Buhot-Launay, acting Lieutenant-Governor of the Middle Congo, to Administrator of Subdivision of N'Goko Sangha, *Incidents à la frontière du Gabon et du Moyen-Congo. Organisation d'une tournée concertée avec les chefs des C/ions voisines pour la dispersion des campements situés près de la frontière du Gabon* (without number), 29 September 1932, p. 1.

⁸¹Sautter, "Chemin de fer Congo-Océan", pp. 247–249.

⁸²CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Yves Lotte, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou, *Colonie d[u] Moyen-Congo – Circonscription d[e] Chemin de fer – Subdivision de Madingou – Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1931 – 1er Trimestre* (without number), 31 March 1931, p. 3.

⁸³CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, *Chef de Circonscription du Chemin de Fer, [Rapport] Circonscription d[e] Chemin de Fer – 2e Trimestre 1931* (without number), n.d., p. 4.

⁸⁴CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Yves Lotte, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou, *Colonie d[u] Moyen-Congo – Circonscription d[e] Chemin de fer – Subdivision de Madingou – Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1931 – 1er Trimestre* (without number), 31 March 1931, p. 2.

leaving many of the labour sites on the roads deserted. Some administrators argued that direct discussion with the Badondos to convince them of the economic advantages of settling on the French side of the border would encourage them to tolerate the corvée obligations.⁸⁵ In Mayama, the administrator held that public labour was impossible to sustain given the huge number of runaways: in 1937, he opted for a substantial reduction of corvée periods, limiting them to ten days – something that was well in line with the more generous rhetoric of the Popular Front in the Metropole, and potentially successful in stemming the tide of constant flight. In a place like Mayama, this decision cost the administration 25,000 days of labour and could only be implemented using loans conceded by the Metropole.⁸⁶

World War II aggravated the situation and led to massive tensions. Due to renewed pressures and harsher mechanisms of drafting individuals for corvée, labourers fled into the deep forest, and the administrators admitted no longer having the necessary labour force. Meat and other resources were frequently unavailable. Eric Jennings has already sketched the panorama of degradation of living conditions in French Equatorial Africa under the Free French, due to the use of compulsory labour for the “war effort”.⁸⁷ But it is also compelling to look at the continuities of earlier local reactions: in Mayama, in 1942, the administrator confessed that work on the roads had become so arduous that he needed to systematically target the entire population for corvée road labour, abandoning the remaining restraints of part of the 1930s, or even the 1920s. Village communities, understanding this change, refused the administration’s calls to resettle close to main roads and stayed hidden in the rainforest.⁸⁸ The other reaction was to insist on the *rachat*, whose legitimacy as a measure of choice for colonial subjects had been reinforced by the Popular Front and more frequently reached the Middle Congo, while it had already been more common in parts of Gabon, as pointed out above. In Mayama, in 1942, demand for the *rachat* increased fifteen-fold.⁸⁹ In the Brazzaville region, in 1943, the entire eligible population chose to pay the *rachat*, an unprecedented situation that led the administrator to complain that current funds for waged workers were at one quarter of the pre-war level, with rising wages, making it impossible to replace forced public labour with waged work despite the growing number of men paying the labour tax. Even so, in 1944, compulsory road labour became obsolete close to the capital due to these demands to buy one’s freedom.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Administrator de la Subdivision de Madingou-Mouyondzi, *Rapport Politique* [– Madingou-Mouyondzi – Année 1933] (without number), n.d., p. 2.

⁸⁶ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/106, Administrator of Subdivision of Mayama, *Département du Pool – Rapport – Politique – 2ème Semestre 1937* (without number), n.d., p. 36.

⁸⁷ Eric Jennings, *La France Libre fut africaine* (Paris, 2014).

⁸⁸ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/106, Administrator of Subdivision of Mayama, *Département du Pool – Rapport Economique Annuel – 1942* (without number), 31 March 1943, p. 9.

⁸⁹ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/106, Administrator of Subdivision of Mayama, *Département du Pool – Rapport – Politique – 2ème Semestre 1942* (without number), n.d., p. 14–15.

⁹⁰ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/71, Administrator of the Subdivision of Brazzaville, *Département du Pool – Subdivision de Brazzaville – Rapport Politique 1943* (without number), n.d., p. 10.

This ultimately provided an impetus for abandoning omnipresent forced public labour shortly before its official abolition in 1946, under massively altered political circumstances. In 1942, in places like Mayama, larger groups of free labourers were still a rare occurrence, like the eighty men recruited for road labour for a daily wage of 2 francs.⁹¹ But by 1944, the combination of ever more desertions and pressures from Paris to accept the *rachât*, as previously promised, finally led to the demise of *corvée* labour. While the administration would search for other strategies to maintain part of the forced labour logic in the Middle Congo and Gabon, mass compulsory recruitment for public labour had ended.⁹² The official abolition of forced labour simply confirmed this process.

Essential Roles: Intermediaries and Flight in the Middle Congo's "Horror Region" of Forced Labour in the Interwar Period

In their "crisis correspondence", officials discussed dangers emanating from local individuals escaping administrative control and using their position as intermediaries against the interests of European firms and the colonial state, even if they worked for the latter. An important example of such "crisis correspondence" includes three long, confidential letters from February and March 1929 discussing a whole network of subversion of colonial control, set up by the interpreter Milan to save individuals from forced recruitment for the CFCO.⁹³ While certainly biased and partly speculative, the administrative discussion elucidates how such intermediaries managed to mobilize impressive resources locally, and to create entire networks.⁹⁴

As pointed out, in 1929, flight from the Haute-Sangha region had become a regular phenomenon. To deal with this problem of runaways, the administrator Jeandin recommended punitive measures against deserters hiding "in the bush".⁹⁵ He also suggested better control of local populations through the introduction of passes, and better and updated census operations to avoid the overburdening of locals with labour tasks; finally, he wished to elaborate on ethnic categories to find out who came from which side of the border.⁹⁶ Based on this three-pillar strategy, the administrator hoped to reduce the number of runaways to the neighbouring territory of Cameroon in particular, and to avoid a sharp decline in recruitment numbers from the area. Having

⁹¹CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/106, Administrator of Subdivision of Mayama, *Département du Pool – Rapport – Politique – Premier Semestre 1942* (without number), 19 September 1942, p. 9.

⁹²Keese, "Slow Abolition", pp. 391–393.

⁹³Londres, *Terre d'Ebène*, p. 224. Londres also points out that some chiefs in charge of recruitment preferred to commit suicide rather than to obey. Thus, it seems that, in some respects, the intermediaries' role in recruitment was so unbearable that some simply could not perform it. This was hidden by the colonial state so as not to reveal the shaky foundations of the system.

⁹⁴On the power of interpreters for an earlier period, and for Guinea-Conakry, see Osborn, "Circle of Iron".

⁹⁵CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1, 108, Jeandin to Administrators of Subdivisions of Abong-Mbang and Lomié, *Transfuges du Moyen-Congo* (without number), 9 February 1929, p. 1. The expression used in this context is "prendre la brousse".

⁹⁶*Idem*. Like the contract mentioned earlier, the above-mentioned pass system appears to be an illusion. In any case, lack of administrative personnel precluded the individual creation of such documents of identification.

recently arrived at his position, Jeandin reiterated the explanations of his predecessor that pointed to bush camps maintained by influential locals, who were said to hide runaways in the forest and falsely report them to the administration as having fled to Cameroon. Jeandin's predecessor had already discussed three names as being related to these clandestine practices: the chiefs Mintama and Makangla and an interpreter called Milan.⁹⁷

Reacting to this letter, the administrator Chefdrué insisted on curtailing cross-border travel between Cameroon and Middle Congo. He held that many had used such routes to flee to Cameroon in the hope of avoiding recruitment for railway construction, and, once escaped, they also helped their relatives and friends. The new system, in which the runaways never actually left the Middle Congo, was said to rely on bribes paid to influential persons in Souanké.⁹⁸ The interpreter and the two chiefs managed to avoid enquiries, explaining the absence of the missing local populations to the colonial authorities as flight to Cameroon.⁹⁹ This mechanism of saving "natives" from the most demanding work elicited a series of responses from the colonial regime. The sources are clear about the effects but remain obscure about certain details. Milan and the two chiefs allegedly set up bush camps near the road between Souanké and Sembé, hiding the local runaways in these places. However, nothing is said about the three ringleaders' personal movements or any assistance they may have received to set up this infrastructure.

With evidence found for this scheme, local officials attempted to intervene and to punish those responsible for disrupting colonial labour recruitment practices. The administrator Gatau suggested assigning Milan to a different post, insisting that such a move would diminish local recalcitrance and that the interpreter was easy to replace. The administrator of the subdivision disagreed: despite suspicions about Milan's loyalty, he held the interpreter's role to be indispensable given his unique knowledge of the region and actually irreplaceable because of his – unspecified – services to the administration. Milan's importance was thus given greater weight than the negative opinion of administrators of subdivisions.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, Milan was given responsibility for a post in the bush. This post had been unoccupied since 1925 due to lack of personnel and financial resources within French Equatorial Africa. Putting the interpreter into that role, the colonial administration openly asserted its power through an intermediary, without having to pay him as much as French civil servants. These contradictions within the colonial chain of command and internal negotiation processes show the limits of control. While knowing that such intermediaries already had a record that included helping runaways, the colonial system nevertheless used them to work in remote areas, allowing them to acquire considerable power and respect from local populations. In more extreme cases, the administration then lost its direct control over the locals to these individuals. Chefdrué, as administrator of the subdivision of Abong-Mbang, insisted that the whole affair was impossible to investigate if Milan

⁹⁷ *Idem.*

⁹⁸ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/108, Chefdrué to Marchand, French High-Commissioner of Cameroon, *Relations entre le Cameroun et le Moyen-Congo* (without number), 15 February 1929, p. 2.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ *Idem.*, p. 2.

remained in his position in the region: the interpreter had become a person of trust, an advocate of the locals, and, given his immense prestige, local populations refused to cooperate in any serious investigation.¹⁰¹

The Milan affair is an impressive example of incomplete colonial control, which allowed an intermediary to remain indispensable for the administration while at the same time setting up a whole system of runaway routes. Chefdrué pressed for the interpreter's removal because he held that such conditions were frequent in the territory. In fact, in the district of N'Goko-Sangha, administrators also decried the "power" of auxiliaries with a long career in the colonial service, due to the recognition they received from European officials. The author of the letter indicated that severe penalties had to be taken against Milan if the latter confessed his guilt in hiding local runaways.¹⁰²

The case of Milan and his two allies amongst local dignitaries is therefore a common "exception". The phenomenon was certainly not limited to the district of Haute-Sangha but existed in the interwar period in the Middle Congo (and Gabon) in broader dimensions; administrators' remarks about its prevalence in neighbouring subdivisions are telling. Therefore, ambiguous intermediaries appear as an important part of systems of colonial control and their subversion. Intermediaries created spaces of freedom within their regions, both for personal interest and organizing or accompanying flight movements of local groups.

For the case of village chiefs as intermediaries, analysis is sometimes more straightforward, because their role is more frequently described. A substantial proportion of those incited their populations to run away; remarkably, as in the case of Milan, they even returned from their refuges from time to time, to engage in border-crossing commerce. A well-documented example is that of Gavouka in the Madingou region, who, after running away with much of his community, was replaced by his brother, but continued to be relevant both as a trader in the region and with informal authority over the remaining villagers.¹⁰³ By 1931, in Mouyondzi, for example, several runaways timidly returned from "the bush" – an outcome the administrator indicated as somewhat positive – but the administration needed the initiative of the intermediaries, especially chiefs, to achieve these results.¹⁰⁴ In the 1930s, while most administrators tried to advocate a balance between repression and concessions to deal with the runaway phenomenon and to win chiefs as intermediaries back to the colonial cause, some played the card of extensive violence: Jean Lagadec sought out fugitives in the bush and systematically torched their camps, while offering incentives only to the most important regional chiefs. In the Mayama district, this strategy was successful in the mid-1930s,

¹⁰¹ *Idem*.

¹⁰² CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/108, Raphaël Antonetti, Governor of the Middle Congo, to Administrator of Subdivision of N'Goko-Sangha, *Des transfuges de la subdivision de Souanké* (without number), 22 March 1929, p. 2.

¹⁰³ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Capagorry, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou-Mouyondzi, *Département du Pool – Subdivision de Madingou-Mouyondzi – Rapport du Deuxième Trimestre 1935* (without number), 27 July 1935, p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/87, Administrator of Subdivision of Mouyondzi, *Circonscription d[e] Mouyondzi – 2^e Trimestre 1931* (without number), June 1931.

but local populations once again started to run away on a large scale as soon as the war situation from 1940 tipped the balance towards ever more dramatic hardships.¹⁰⁵

In Komono, in 1944, a number of village chiefs led their populations to disappear in the deep forest. Some of them were found afterwards; many complained about bad treatment from overseers, which had led them to go into hiding.¹⁰⁶ Discussing these problems, colonial officials claimed they were much in favour of improving the living conditions of the “natives”, allowing them to get more viable wages instead of exploiting them through public labour or channelling them into badly paid contracts.¹⁰⁷ However, in spite of such promises, forced labour continued to be important until its official abolition two years later. This was for rubber collection specifically, which again became fundamental under the war conditions: free labour was impossible to organize and compulsory means were key.¹⁰⁸

The same contradictions can be found concerning European firms using African labour, which were visited by the colonial inspector Fortuné in 1940: in principle, he described employers as more benevolent, insisting on surveillance of workers, especially on the use of passes to avoid desertion, but being much more open to offering better conditions of work.¹⁰⁹ However, this possible change of mood was not yet widespread. In 1945, when the administration recruited mining labour for the Chantiers des Mines de M’Fouati company, they again relied on compulsory measures to get “volunteers” into contracts, with the proprietor, Maarten, holding that he preferred labour without any real paper contract at all.¹¹⁰ And even after the official abolition of forced labour, the local mechanisms of forced recruitment resisted this abolition: the French administrator of Franceville in Gabon complained vividly that local populations from his district fled to Ewo in the Middle Congo in an attempt “to escape the recruitment of workers for Gabon”.¹¹¹

Shortly before the abolition of forced labour was voted for in the metropole in April 1946, the logic of compulsory measures was challenged, but was, as yet, unbroken – and running away from such hardships remained an essential response to continued

¹⁰⁵ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/106, Jean Lagadec, Administrator of Subdivision of Mayama, *Département du Pool – Subdivision de Mayama – Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1935* (without number), 30 June 1935, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/136, Administrator of Subdivision of Komono, *Etat des indigènes de la Subdivision du Komono susceptibles de sanctions (exodes du mois de Juillet 1944)* (without number), n.d.

¹⁰⁷ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/136, Fortuné, Inspector of Administrative Affairs, 21 October 1939, pp. 15–16.

¹⁰⁸ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/136, Inspector of Administrative Affairs, *Note sur la situation politique et économique du Département du Haut-Ogooué* (no. 10), n.d.

¹⁰⁹ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville 116/PO1/136, Fortuné, Inspector of Administrative Affairs, *Rapport sur la situation de la main-d’œuvre employée par les entreprises privées dans la Subdivision de M’Vouti* (without number), 8 January 1940, pp. 35–37.

¹¹⁰ CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 116/PO1/136, H. Landrau, Inspector of Administrative Affairs, *Inspection des Chantiers des Mines de M’Fouati (C.M.C.F.) des 12–16 et 19 Octobre 1945* (without number), 20 October 1945, pp. 1–3.

¹¹¹ APPN-CG, 123/10, Jacques Fourneau, Governor of the Middle Congo, to Government-General of French Equatorial Africa, Directorate of Political and Social Affairs, *Rapport Politique Mensuel.*– (n° 513/AP-MC), 25 August 1948, p. 1.

abuses. Only gradually did the presence of certain new middlemen change this situation. African public sector employees who were better informed about the new rights became such intermediaries, and they motivated local groups working under constraints, for example in the provision of food for workers' gangs, to mobilize for better conditions: the employee Ayama in the Kouilou was such a case, and, as a result, he was much-despised by the local administration.¹¹² Even then, the Governor of the Middle Congo recommended heavy-handed intervention and compulsion where it was the best method to find workers for new agrarian initiatives, such as more extensive rice production.¹¹³ At the same time, Fourneau deplored the bad state of the public infrastructure, including of the buildings, which, according to him, was due to the end of compulsory road labour services.¹¹⁴

The end of compulsory labour between 1940 and 1948 was thus uneven. Colonial officials had difficulties departing from coercive strategies, local populations were always ready to run away from forced labour where feasible, and the importance of intermediaries helping in or even orchestrating escapes from labour services and forced recruitment in favour of private employers remained an important factor. Certainly, trends towards less violent and coercive solutions played themselves out from the late 1930s, and the official abolition of forced labour in 1946 created the conditions for massive change. In the years immediately after World War II, the overburdening of local populations by forced labour would gradually stop. However, the effects of compulsory labour needed time to trickle out, and the logic of these practices remained very present in the colonial mindset.

Conclusion

Forced labour in the Middle Congo during the interwar period belongs to a complex system of shifting balances. Historians are aware of the immense brutality that sustained the overburdening of Congolese populations in the 1920s, 1930s, and much of the 1940s, and especially in the context where the construction of the CFCO added a huge chunk of additional labour on top of already considerable exploitation. However, it is important to come to a finer analysis of the demands and reactions, the contradictions, and the strategic choices. It is clearly insufficient to simply enumerate episodes of exploitation linked to the scandals of the railway construction or to describe compulsory labour in AEF as "endemic". The more important aim is to identify empirical examples originating in crisis correspondence and administrative discussions of local reactions, and to use them to systematically understand the dimensions of arbitrariness, the logic of overburdening the labour force, and the room for manoeuvre the Congolese had under those conditions.

¹¹² APPN-CG, 153/2, Henri Peuvergne, Administrator of the Region of Kouilou, to Fourneau (n° 22), 25 February 1947.

¹¹³ APPN-CG, 135/2, Fourneau to Administrator of the Region of Likouala-Mossaka, *Manœuvres pour travaux riziculture dans la cuvette centrale congolaise* (n° 1148/AP-MC-), 2 [missing month] 1949.

¹¹⁴ APPN-CG, 135/2, Fourneau to Administrator of the Region of Pool (n° 1208/ C.), 11 May 1949.

French officials demanded “public labour” in the form of *corvée*. Yet, its implementation often remained improvised: discourses of a fair distribution relying on census operations of a certain quality level were clearly wishful thinking. Administrators repeatedly expressed the sentiment that “traditional authorities” should be better involved in the process, but they mostly remained on the margins in the official procedures. However, in the internal negotiation processes, the strong influence of chiefs, headmen, and other local authorities becomes evident in several key files documenting recruitment and work distribution, where internal observations highlight their active roles. Regarding the interests of private companies and, notably, of the CFCO, the French administration pressured locals into fictive “contracts”, the allegedly voluntary character of which enlarged the burden already imposed on Congolese populations. It also complicated the recruitment of free or semi-free labour for the future, namely, in the post-World War II period, as the idea of fixed contracts had already taken a particular shape that made Congolese populations reluctant to consider them.

Caught in colonial conditions characterized by overburdening, potential workers created their strategies of weighing the hardships of living as runaways against the hardships imposed on them by the massive labour burden. Those who had the additional resources and knowledge of the process would opt for the payment of a labour tax freeing them from public forced labour. However, such recourse was not available in large parts of the Middle Congo (and not even everywhere in Gabon), and where it was, administrators could try to informally prohibit its use. Consequently, many forced or potential forced workers would run away when the burden became too great.

A particular part of the internal criticism/crisis correspondence gives precious insights into strategies and decisions made, and, in particular, into the role certain individuals who normally depended on the administration held. Both “traditional chiefs” and interpreters could take part in clandestine networks hiding workers or facilitating escape routes. Administrators often had only inconclusive evidence of these forms of behaviour and, in their rural practices, they could not renounce the contributions of their local allies. These experiences show again that, beyond a system of pure colonial brutality, complex processes of negotiation and decision-making prevailed. Colonial administrators might have had an obsession for complete control, but this degree of control never materialized. The aggravation of conditions during World War II, so aptly commented upon by Eric Jennings, represented the last peak of systematized violence. Yet, like the preceding periods of mass exploitation, it remained ambiguous. This phase once again triggered flight movements, but it also contributed to a decisive if gradual colonial reform process that was mostly finished by 1948.

Ultimately, the case of the Middle Congo in the interwar period, although an extreme case in a wide, global panorama of forced labour practices in the first half of the twentieth century, offers some important takeaways for global labour history. First, it serves as a warning to historians to search for the multiplicity of forms of compulsion in many regional settings: while extreme experiences like the construction of the CFCO might have strongly coloured local experiences, only the complete picture of forms of unfree labour brings us to an understanding of the workers’ everyday life. Second, it makes sense to systematically approach forced workers’ strategies and reactions: just

to point to general comments about desertion from forced labour is insufficient, as the more complex range of reactions needs better scrutiny. Finally, forced labour settings, such as the interwar Middle Congo, generated ample room for manoeuvre for intermediaries. These roles, like other cases of compulsory labour obligations and services, merit closer analysis. They help us to understand the often complicated balance of exploitation and reaction prevailing in many arenas of forced labour.

Cite this article: Céline Belina and Alexander Keese, “Forced Labour and the System of Overburdening in the Interwar Middle Congo: Congolese Populations between Administrative Violence and Local Runaway Schemes, 1918–1948”, *International Review of Social History* (2025), pp. 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025100539>