on Lado and Rhino Camp

Edwardian Ivory Poachers over the Nile

By W. ROBERT FORAN

The trade of owning land.
—Thos. Carlyle: "Downing Street"

HISTORY is liable either to be forgotten or, in the effluxion of time, grossly distorted by those of little or no real knowledge. This is particularly true of East and Central Africa. From time to time, many gross fallacies have been published, and often they have been given credence. There can be few now living who knew intimately the Belgian leased territory of the Lado Enclave on the west bank of the Nile, or who have an accurate knowledge of the history of this region of East-Central Africa. Between 1904 and 1910 I happened to become intimately acquainted with this area, having at intervals joined the band of ivory poachers operating in this territory.

The scramble for territory in Africa among the Great Powers of Europe—Britain, Germany, France and Belgium—was at its height from the 'Eighties of the last century. Belgium had secured control of the Congo; France had done likewise for the northern and western areas of that region; Britain, over Uganda and what is now Kenya Colony, and portions of West Africa; and Germany, of what is now Tanganyika Territory, as well as small portions of West Africa. A lease of the Lado Enclave region on the west bank of the Nile was granted to King Leopold II of the Belgians for the duration of his life, but a condition imposed was that six months after his death the entire leased area should be relinquished and handed over to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

This concession was administered by Belgians in the personal employ of King Leopold, though not all of them were Belgians and many other different Europeans were included. None of them enjoyed a high reputation. All revenue accruing from the Lado Enclave was supposed to go into the Royal purse. In effect, until six months after his death in June of 1910, the area was the King's private estate. In this respect, if for no other reasons, the Lado Enclave was unique in all Africa. There was no other region held on similar terms. There had been, before and since, grants of large blocks of land to companies or private individuals within various territories of the African continent, but never anything approaching the magnitude of this lifetime concession granted to the King of the Belgians.

It may well be asked: what exactly was the Lado Enclave, and what the actual area comprising it? The Lado Enclave was a narrow strip of territory, roughly 220 miles long and about 100 miles at its widest part, extending along the west bank of the Nile and inland to the borders of the Belgian Congo. Its northernmost boundary was the frontier of the Anglo-Egyptian

AFRICAN AFFAIRS
vol. 57 no. 227 April 1958
pp. 125-134

Sudan ; on the east it was bounded by the Nile ; the western limit was the Congo Free State (now the Belgian Congo) ; and the southern boundary was the Luri district, including the western shores of Lake Albert.

This region was peopled by savage, untutored and treacherous tribes—the Azande and Bari in the north ; the Madi, Alur, Lugbare and Tuk-a-Tuk in the central portion ; and the Luri and Mahagi in the south. The climate was of the worst possible description. From an ivory-hunter's point of view, however, it was a " No Man's Land " and a veritable paradise because it held immense herds of elephants—sometimes numbering from 200 to 2,000 animals of all ages and sexes. Quite a large proportion of the older bulls carried tusks which weighed 100 lb. or more each. Some that were shot furnished ivory of 150 lb. or more per tusk. That is why it became a Mecca for ivory-hunters and attracted a number of men who reaped a rich harvest for nearly a decade before the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan took over the administering of this region early in 1911.

The history of the area had some peculiar features. No longer is it known as the Lado Enclave, having ceased to be so named from early in 1914. The northern portion was then incorporated in the Mongalla Province of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, while the southern area added to the Uganda Protectorate to form the West Nile district. That division of territory has known no further alterations since. Until the end of 1910, the Lado Enclave was administered for Leopold II but it did not form an integral part of the Congo Free State, though probably the *Chef de Zone*, whose headquarters were sited at Lado on the west bank of the Nile, did come under the Governor-General of the Congo Free State when major decisions had to be made.

King Leopold died in June of 1910. Under the terms of his lease, therefore, six months later the Lado Enclave was surrendered to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The actual transfer took place on January 1, 1911. By that date the Belgians had evacuated the region from the frontier of the southern Sudan to just north of Mahagi Fort near the shores of Lake Albert. The Mahagi district, then renamed the "Mahagi Strip", remained with the Belgians and was added to the south-eastern portion of the Belgian Congo.

The Sudan Government incorporated this newly-acquired territory and attempted to govern it from Mongalla (the most southerly post on the east bank of the Nile). The then-Governor of Mongalla, Lieut.-Colonel R C R Owen, was faced with the unenviable task of trying to administer the area with no augmentation of his staff. The situation was complicated. A few miles to south of Mongalla on the east bank was the Sudan-Uganda border. The country on the east bank from the border formed part of the Uganda Protectorate. The southern area of the Sudan on the west bank had now been extended as far south as the " Mahagi Strip " and westwards to the frontier of the Belgian Congo. The difficulties experienced in assuming effective control over this new region now included in the Sudan, from Mongalla were almost insurmountable.

At the start the Sudan found it was next to impossible to establish, or even exercise, any sort of effective control over this additional slice of

territory. The essential staff was non-existent for the purpose. The Belgians had established a number of fortified posts on the banks of the Nile—Kiro, Lado, Rejaf, Dufile and Mahagi (on Lake Albert)—and a few minor ones in the hinterland. The Sudan was unable to staff them. Moreover, the Belgians had maintained a large number of officials ; each district being in charge of a *Chef de Poste.* But the Sudan could not hope to do likewise, at any rate for the time being.

Some kind of equitable readjustment of boundaries between the Sudan and Uganda was considered a necessity. For the next two years negotiations between the two Governments were taking place with this object in view. An agreement about exchanges of territory was finally reached, and the terms became operative in 1914.

The Sudan then took over the country on both banks of the Nile to about 5 degrees north, including the former Uganda *boma* at Gondokoro and that at Nimule ; while Uganda surrendered her area on the east bank from Nimule northwards, accepting in exchange the region to south of 5 degrees north on the west bank (southern portion of the erstwhile Lado Enclave) as far as the northern boundary of the " Mahagi Strip". Uganda's *bomas* at Gondokoro and Nimule were handed over to the Sudan, and scrapped by its Government because having now ceased to serve any useful purpose. The headquarters of the West Nile district of Uganda were established at Arua in the Lugbare country and near the border of the Belgian Congo.

Gondokoro, Kiro, Lado and Rejaf were abandoned by the Sudan. Those places no longer appear on modern maps. Nimule was retained by the Sudan, but only as a customs post on the southern frontier ; and as such it still functions. Koba, the Uganda Government *boma* on the east bank of the Albert Nile and just north of Lake Albert, was closed down and the headquarters of the district removed to Gulu—a new *boma*—on February 27, 1911. Koba has also vanished from maps.

Kiro and Lado, the latter being the headquarters of the former Belgian administration, were closed down because of being redundant. Kiro was situated on the west bank and only a few miles north of Mongalla ; and Lado was roughly equi-distant to the south but north of Gondokoro. Both Rejaf and Dufile, old Belgian posts, still find a place on maps ; and the former is not entirely without its value in modern times.

About 1911 the Sudan established a new *boma* at Kajo Kaji on the west bank of the Nile between Nimule and Rejaf, the latter being a former Belgian post about 15 miles south of Gondokoro and which already had been abandoned. The Governor of Mongalla appointed Major Hugh O. Stigand in charge of the southern Lado area, with his *boma* at Kajo Kaji. Later, Major Stigand succeeded Lieut.-Colonel Owen as Governor of Mongalla Province and not long afterwards was killed in action with rebellious Dinka tribesmen.

On modern maps now appears Rhino Camp, situated on the west bank of the Albert Nile about two-thirds of the way between Dufile and Pakwach. It was never a Belgian post. This place now has two cotton ginneries and also serves as a fuelling station for steamers on the Nile between Butiaba

(on Lake Albert) and Nimule. Rhino Camp is a regular stop for the East Africa Railways and Harbours passenger-steamer *Lugard II*, plying between Pakwach and Nimule, or in the reverse direction. This spot owes its name to the fact that ex-President Theodore Roosevelt's camp was sited there while hunting in the Belgian Lado Enclave early in 1910. I was the special correspondent of the Associated Press (U.S.A.) with his expedition, and my cables were despatched from Wadelai but filed as being from " Rhino Camp". This place-name has survived ever since that time and achieved permanence.

Mahagi Fort, the most southern Belgian post of the Lado Enclave, was situated a short distance inland from the shores of Lake Albert. Mahagi port was no more than a landing stage on the lake's shore. The port, I believe, still exists. To the south-east of Mahagi are the rich Kilo goldfields, which still flourish.

What sort of country was the Lado Enclave ? That may well be asked. In those early years there existed no semblance of roads and motorised transport was entirely non-existent. It was necessary to walk, or ride a mule, over narrow and tortuously winding native tracks. There were no telegraphic or telephonic communications. Wireless also did not exist. The only means of communication between the Belgian posts was by utilising native runners to carry letters from one *Chef de Poste* to another. Movement about this region had to be done with a porter-safari and each carrier's load kept down to a maximum of 60 lb. in weight. Travellers necessarily had to live primitively.

The ivory hunters were compelled to dispense with anything in the nature of luxuries in order to attain a greater degree of mobility. There were always the Belgian armed patrols to be evaded. To escape them it was often imperative to make long marches by day and night, travel at best possible speed, and halting only for brief periods to rest or have a snack meal. Hotels or resthouses, no matter how crude, could not be found anywhere in the Lado Enclave. Travellers camped or bivouacked for the night near any water. The ivory hunters, if under a dire threat of capture by an armed patrol, were often unable to camp or bivouac for the night but had to march onwards at speed during the hours of darkness. Whenever hunting elephants on the west bank of the Nile their days were always extremely tough, but they reckoned all the hazards and acute discomforts were well worth accepting uncomplainingly. The rewards were very considerable if able to clear their stock of tusks into Uganda on conclusion of the hunting safari.

Practically all the country adjacent to the Nile was justly rated as being most unhealthy—malaria, blackwater fever, sleeping sickness, and other diseases were rife. Some of the hunters died of blackwater fever while collecting ivory in the Lado Enclave, others contracted it and died later in a hospital in Uganda or Kenya. The altitude between Mahagi Fort in the south and Kiro in the north varied between 2,050 and 1,500 feet above sea level. The prevailing temperature in the lowlands rarely fell below 120 degrees Fahrenheit in a tent during the daytime, while at night it was anything between 75

and 90 degrees. The tempers of the local African tribes were always unpredictable ; the reception of a white man in their midst ever uncertain ; and they had a reputation for being cunning, treacherous, and murderously inclined at most times. By and large, they were never pleasant people with whom to have any intimate contacts.

Farther inland from the Nile and along the border of the Belgian Congo, however, there could be found fairly well-elevated ranges of hills which afforded a far more salubrious climate and less chance of being captured by a Belgian patrol. Moreover, those higher terrains possessed additional advantages not to be despised by the ivory-hunters. They were the habitat of immense herds of elephants.

It is with the Lado Enclave during the period between 1903 and 1912 that I am here chiefly concerned. There was enacted then a story of adventure that is colourful and has no parallel in African history. It will probably never again be possible to repeat such experiences, as the last territory available for doing so, the Ubangi-Shari region of French Equatorial Africa, was closed down in 1932.

Ivory poachers in the Lado Enclave conducted themselves in keeping with the true traditions of earlier freebooters. They proved themselves worthy successors of the old-time adventurers. Mostly, each hunter played a lone hand. Only two of those who participated in this enterprise now survive.

Their records during that decade belong to the era when East-Central Africa was still labelled as " Darkest Africa". Today that epic period is little known or even remembered. Assuredly, it deserves to be. The great majority are entirely ignorant of what then transpired along the west bank of the Nile, or know anything about the handful of men taking part in it.

It may be asked why the Lado Enclave was popularly regarded as a " No Man's Land " ? That is quite simply explained. The Belgians made no genuine efforts to administer this region effectively, while such control as was exercised by them could only be deemed nominal and ineffectual. There existed little semblance of law and order in the strict meaning of that term ; Belgian posts were sited too far apart ; and inter-communication was always likely to break down, as native runners employed for the purpose had a habit of failing to arrive at their destinations.

Each station was in charge of a *Chef de Poste*, supported by a force of armed African *askari*. The latter had an evil repute, and not without good cause. Any effort made to establish law and order in a district was left almost entirely to these somewhat brutal *askari*, who invariably went out on patrols in considerable strength. This was essential, otherwise they would have received short shrift from the various tribes. Little discipline was enforced and no proper supervision ever exercised over these roving patrols, who behaved as they liked and savagely oppressed the native people.

For a *Chef de Poste* to venture out from his station for a duty tour of the district was a rare occurrence. They were content to send out patrols of

askari and with no white man in charge of their activities; and the natural consequence was that the tribes were constantly and shamelessly subjected to looting and other crimes by the *askari*.

Some of the more powerful Chiefs of various tribes—Jura of the Luri in the Mahagi district, Issa and Amka of the Lugbare. and Ajurr Asida of the Madi—maintained their own standing armies. A number of their warriors were armed with rifles of various types. It was strongly suspected that Greek and Asian traders sold them the weapons and a moderate supply of ammunition. Generally speaking, the patrols sent out wisely gave a wide berth to these Chiefs.

In many instances, too, the stamp of officials (not always Belgians) left much to be desired. The majority could not only be bribed openly, but also demanded it; others hunted elephants for their own profit; and, practically without an exception, all regarded the African population as their chattels.

It is only fair to say that the Belgian officials appreciated the fact that their tenure of this territory was insecure and solely dependent upon the life of their royal employer. No permanent buildings were erected. They made do with mud-and-thatch hutments, which could be built cheaply and maintained simply enough. The majority of the officials were actuated solely by a desire to exploit the resources of the country—ivory and rubber, for the most part—by either fair or foul means while the opportunity was still available to them. They were traders far more than administrators. The idea of establishing any form of effective government, or on approved lines, made no sort of appeal. It is not improbable that a largish proportion of the revenue yield of this region never reached the treasury of King Leopold but was withheld by the officials. The *Chef de Zone* at Lado adamantly refused to have other than official associations with his juniors and once told W. D. M. (" Karamoja ") Bell, when he was hunting for ivory in the Lado on a special seven months licence, that they were all " just so much scum."

Those who may recollect the horrific reports published much about that time by travellers through the Congo Free State, concerning the exploitation of Africans there in the collection of rubber, will experience little surprise that conditions in the Lado Enclave also left much to be desired. Whatever may be history's verdict on King Leopold, it cannot be denied that he was a man of stupendous ideas and ambitions. His foundation of the Congo Free State, which was recognised in April of 1884, grew out of the Brussels Conference of 1876. During the early stages of this region it was called, in turn, by diverse names—the International African Association, the *Comite d'Etudes*, and the International Congo Association. Next it became the Congo Free State and, still later, the Belgian Congo. In every sense it was a big project, and one which was destined to have an incalculable effect on Africa as well as upon Belgium.

Conditions existing in the Belgian Congo more than 60 years ago are now vastly improved. The present administration provides a heartening picture and is a model for all neighbouring territories. There can now be discovered

little cause for any criticism but a great deal which is deserving of our commendation and admiration. An enormous change has come over the Belgian Congo during the last 50 years, while its indigenous population have been given every reason to experience a sense of gratitude for all which has been accomplished on their behalf.

In view of the conditions prevailing in the Lado Enclave up to 1912, it need occasion no surprise that a number of men were attracted there to hunt elephants for their personal profit through the sale of ivory resulting from their prowess. Where the maintenance of law and order was a mockery, they felt fully justified in taking every possible advantage of this fact no matter how great the risks incurred. They ignored any game laws that had been promulgated, dispensed with the formality of purchasing a shooting licence from the Belgians, and defied the officials in much the same manner as did the African population of this territory.

Elephants had been hunted in the Lado for many years, but only by men armed with rifles since about 1903. Immense herds of them roamed at will over this region ; and there was a day early in 1904 when " Bill " Buckley and " Pete " Pearson, then shooting in partnership, encountered one which they estimated to number 2,000 animals of all sexes and ages. They secured many pairs of heavy tusks in a morning's shooting. It is likely that this herd was composed of several smaller ones joined together for a seasonal migration.

In British territories elephant hunting offered a life of adventure, but was not a profitable enterprise. It could only be rewarding if able to shoot *ad lib* for ivory ; and that could not be done in Kenya or Uganda. From 1904 the game laws in both territories were enforced far more strictly. An annual licence cost £50, but entitled its holder to kill only two bulls with tusks weighing not less than 30 lb. each ; and a third could be shot in any one year by payment of an additional fee of £10 to the Game Department. The sale of the ivory obtained on licence was insufficient to show much profit after covering all the costs of the safari. It was imperative, therefore, for those hunters wanting to make their living out of ivory to seek out some other region where elephants could be shot freely ; and the Belgian Lado Enclave offered them the best choice.

The purchase of a licence had to be waived because of the difficulty and long delay in concluding the business. A Belgian licence was next to impossible to procure, except by influence at Brussels—at least, a licence that was of any real value to an elephant hunter. This was the chief, and practically the only, snag to be overcome if desirous of hunting for ivory legitimately in the Lado Enclave. No *Chef de Poste* was authorised to issue a game licence under any circumstances ; and even the *Chef de Zone* at Lado only had authority to issue one entitling a hunter to shoot two bulls and no more.

There were two types of licence—(a) one costing about £20, which entitled a hunter to shoot for five months in a year, and with no restrictions on numbers, sex or weight of tusks ; and, (b), the *Chef de Zone's* licence to

kill only two bulls. The first could only be issued in Brussels or by the Governor-General of the Belgian Congo, whose headquarters were at Boma on the estuary of the Congo river. It needed time and much frustration to get a five months' *ad lib* licence from Brussels, while this was even longer and more difficult from Boma. Far more applications were refused than ever granted. Indeed, there existed no certainty of receiving favourable consideration for an issue of one of those elusive elephant licences. The chances of success were negligible. Even if lucky, the licence could only be used between May and October and for only five of those months; but this restriction could be side-stepped if prepared to bribe a Belgian official. Even so, there was always the likelihood that other officials would demand bribes to shut their eyes to any out-of-time shooting of elephants. The fact that one official had been bribed cut no ice with others, rather stimulated the desire to participate in the "squeeze". Unless handsomely bribed, a hunter would soon have found himself in Queer Street. "Karamoja" Bell, the Hon. Charles and Hon. Rupert Craven, and Quentin O. Grogan were the only ones to shoot for ivory on one of these special licences obtained in Brussels; and the three latter men, after the licence had expired, carried on with their hunting for ivory in the Lado Enclave as poachers.

The restricted licence was valueless to a hunter. It was not even considered for a moment. I knew of no man who ever took one out from the *Chef de Zone* at Lado. All in all, it was deemed foolish to hunt with a licence on the west bank of the Nile and much preferable to accept the risks entailed by poaching for ivory there. And that is what they all did.

It cannot be said that the Belgians encouraged elephant hunting in the Lado Enclave on a game licence. Legalised hunting for ivory had been rendered so difficult that all felt it was an uneconomical approach to the enterprise. It is not in the least surprising, therefore, that those venturing over the Nile to hunt for ivory did so as poachers and dispensed with the formality of taking out a licence. Even the few legalised hunters operating there were subjected to being fired upon by patrols of Belgian *askari* or forced to suffer indignities at a Belgian post and mulcted in bribes to the official. This type of incident once happened to "Karamoja" Bell near Mahagi port on Lake Albert.

Elephant-hunters made capital out of the fact that the Lado was inadequately administered and its African population suffering from many abuses. The chief secret of success was to gain the friendship of the local natives. If willing co-operation could be enlisted, this went far towards obviating a hunter being captured while poaching. Generally it was found that the African tribes were reasonably co-operative if handled with tact and discretion. They would give timely warning of the movements of Belgian *askari* out on patrol in the neighbourhood; sold essential food supplies at reasonable prices; and provided the necessary porters to carry the tusks to the bank of the Nile for crossing with the loot into Uganda.

Only a few of these adventurers experienced any kind of serious trouble with the tribes. If a man ever became involved in an unpleasant situation,

he had only himself to blame. The local natives were ready to do almost anything in return for being kept well-supplied with elephant meat; and it was a fixed practice to give all carcasses to nearby villages as a gift. Occasionally the meat was bartered for milk, eggs, chicken or other food supplies. The natives normally proved eager to circumvent the efforts of the "Biligigs" to capture an elephant hunter and quite often were invaluable allies in this respect.

With only a single exception, all treated the natives well and were just in all their relations with them. The great majority of these elephant hunters conducted themselves in the Lado Enclave in an exemplary manner and always avoided queering their pitch by mistreatment of the tribes. Even to this day many of them are still remembered with respect, and also affection, by the older generation of Africans in the Lado. That must stand to their credit.

Those who may feel disposed to condemn this defiance of the game laws in Belgian territory can know little, or nothing at all, about the conditions then prevailing in the Lado Enclave during those early years. They can also have no understanding of the reasons which induced these men to hunt without a licence. To all intents and purposes, it *was* a "No Man's Land" and so treated by this small band of professional elephant hunters. Yet, having been one of them at the odd times chance offered, my judgment may appear to be somewhat biased.

They all maintained permanent base-camps in Uganda along the east bank of the Nile—many at Koba, one or two at Wadelai, a few at Nimule, and rarely one at Gondokoro. They were a cosmopolitan band of men, represented by many different nationalities—British, Rhodesians, South Africans, Germans, Italians, Scandinavians, Austrians, Americans, Armenians, Syrians, Persians, Greeks, a few were Indians and Arabs. But the bulk of them were British-born citizens. Most of them came from Uganda or Kenya; others from German East Africa (now Tanganyika), the Sudan, South Africa, Nyasaland, Portuguese East Africa and Rhodesia.

A fair proportion amassed quite a comfortable fortune. Some were more successful than others. Much depended upon their hunting craft and marksmanship, adroitness in avoiding capture by the Belgians, getting the tusks safely into Uganda, and then selling the haul of ivory at a fair price to Greek or Indian traders established at Koba, Nimule or Gondokoro. A few of them cleared £3,000 to £4,000 profit from a six months' shooting safari for ivory, or as much as £7,000 each year.

There is nothing new in man's greed for ivory. Indeed, the slaughter of elephants must have been immense even during ancient times. It was rife in Ancient Egypt; in the times of Solomon, Pericles and Phidias; and in the later period of Polybius. Then, apparently, the ivory trade became moribund for a number of centuries; but it witnessed a revival on a much larger scale in West Africa during the 17th century. The trade was beginning to gather momentum, too, within East-Central Africa during the 19th

century; and in the opening years of the present century it increased to a staggering extent.

By then, all other territories, except French Equatorial Africa, had promulgated game laws and imposed rigid restrictions. In the French territory, which constituted the last of the "open" elephant country available, an unlimited licence could be secured at a cost of about £20 annually and the sole prohibition insisted upon the size of the tusks secured. That region, too, became closed in 1932. Today there is no region of the African Continent where a professional hunter can shoot freely for ivory.

There is still a fair amount of poaching for ivory in Portuguese East Africa, being done on much the same lines as formerly along the west bank of the Nile. African poachers operate in most other territories of Africa, but the game departments concerned are taking strong steps to suppress such activities. It was recently stated officially that African poachers in the Tsavo National Park of Kenya kill about 60 elephants illegally every month.

While the sun continued to shine brightly for them, the elephant hunters on the Nile made the most of their opportunities in spite of the grievous risks taken and the severity of the handicaps to be overcome. They knew all the thrills and excitements which any man could reasonably desire to experience.