

Liberia and the League of Nations

Liberia's constitution prohibited slavery, and Liberians had cooperated in bringing an end to slave trading along the Grain Coast. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the export of native labor, procured by dubious means and contracted out under appalling conditions, became a lucrative business for the **Americo?** Liberians who were engaged in it. **Cacao** plantations on the small Spanish island? colony of Fernando Po needed a dependable flow of workers that was not available **legally** or as **cheaply** from the British and French colonies that were closer at hand.

In 1905 Liberia agreed to supply workers on contract, and German ships were **chartered** to carry them to Fernando Po. The agreement was formalized in a treaty between Liberia and Spain signed in 1914. Under its terms Liberian contractors were paid a fee for each worker sent to Fernando Po, and wages accumulated over the two

Liberia from 1912 to 1930

[Daniel Edward Howard](#) was the President of Liberia from 1912 to 1920 and had to deal with wars on all fronts - internally and externally. The finances of the State were so bad that the pay of government employees was suspended for months at a time. The European war, World War I, resulted in the trade between Liberia and Britain, France and the United States reduced to almost zero due to the German submarine blockade.

In 1917, Liberia joined the Allies against Germany and liquidated a property of German nationals in Liberia. The money generated from this liquidation was deposited into the Liberian government bank account to compensate for loss of revenue from the blockade. The war ended in 1920, and Liberia's Legislature ratified the Treaty of Versailles.

[Charles D. B. King](#) became Liberia's President in 1920 and serve for 10 years. Since the war had caused the financial situation of Liberia to be in such bad condition, President King and a commission embarked upon a journey to the United States to get assistance in paying of her debts and straightening her financial affairs. They arrived in March of 1921, shortly after President Harding had taken office. The State Department and Treasury had all new personnel and the Congress had many new congressmen.

Congress had suspended all foreign credit and extension of foreign loans, even though the State department was sympathetic with the request from the

Liberian delegation. Negotiation drag on until October before the State Department finally granted Liberia a loan for five million dollars. The commission was greatly relieved because the long, painful negotiations were complete. However, great disappointment followed when the U.S. Congress failed to ratify the agreement.

In 1923, the Firestone Rubber Company explored the possibilities of establishing a rubber plantation in Liberia. In fact, the conditions in Liberia are ideal for rubber trees and a one million acre plantation was established in Harbal. This was a great economic boost for Liberia due to the employment of 25,000 workers. A loan for 5 million dollars was secured shortly afterwards that allowed Liberia to consolidate and bond all internal and external debts. In addition, certain public works were to be developed with money from this loan. One of which was the establishment of Liberia's first radio station which broadcast its first message in 1927.

While the nation was feeling so good about the recent events, tragedy occurred in November of 1927 when a ship carrying soldiers sank near the Monrovia port killing thirty including former President Daniel Howard and his son. President King and his vice-president resigned from office in 1930 admits scandal resulting from the accusations of slavery and forced labor. In 1921, the Liberian legislature approved a provision prohibiting the export of labor to the Island of Fernando Po. These laborers were said to be forced into work.

The League of Nations established a commission to determine the extent of forced labor and slavery still practiced in Liberia. The Liberian government also appointed a commission to investigate these allegations. It was found that forced labor was used for construction of certain public works such as roads in the interior. And certain tribes did practice domestic servitude that could be considered as slavery. These practices were ordered to cease but some politicians and leading citizens demanded that the King administration step down.

Edwin Barclay, having completed the last term of C.D.B. King became President of Liberia in 1930 and served until 1944. During his tenure, President Barclay had to deal with a campaign against the Kru Tribes of Sinoe County, economic depression, and the beginning of World War II.

The Kru Campaign

Actually, the Kru campaign began towards the end of the King administration. The unsettling of the population was a result of several factors: rumors saying the Government had lost authority and the Kru Coast would be placed under foreign sovereignty; bitter political canvassing campaign preceding the general election of 1931; resentment of the tribes whose social economy was disturbed by the rigid enforcement of the Act with regard to inter-tribal slavery; and economic distress resulting from the world wide trade depression.

To resolve this situation, Barclay invited the leaders of several tribes involved to Monrovia for an inquiries. The government concluded the unrest was promoted by the tribesmen themselves and not the Liberian Government. The main factors were: disputes over tribal boundaries, power struggles for political supremacy within the tribes; and misrepresentation of the purpose of the Anti-Slavery Act. These misrepresentations included the removal of the Frontier Force and the change in sovereignty. When the government force did in fact leave, this spurred the people to believe the rumors were true, and passive resistance toward the Liberian government increased. The tribesmen refused to pay the hut tax, refused to allow movements of the interior tribes to the coast land, and exacted heavy toll on the trade passing through their land. These conditions became the source of conflicts between the tribes.

Barclay dispatched a special Commission with one company of troops to patrol the Kru Coast from Maryland County to Nana Kru. Their mission was to settle conflicts between warring tribes but avoid hostile conflicts at all cost and no reprisals toward any tribe for any reason. The beginning of the endeavor was carried out without incident. As the Commission began traveling up the coast from Maryland, one chief near Sinoe refused passage and a conflict resulted with one man being killed.

The passage resumed to Sasstown where Chief Nimley refused to cooperate with a planned meeting of chiefs. The next day, Nimley's tribesmen attacked the Government troops and after seven hours of fighting, the chief's two principle towns were captured and destroyed. Similar unrest was dealt with successfully in Bassa Co. and in some western province without the need for force.

As a result of the tribal unrest, Barclay reorganized the native administration. And a consistent new land policy was established to remove the inequities inherent in the previous policy. All notables of the tribes involved gave approval.

Another situation that was eradicated was the "pawn system." This was the practice of chiefs of certain tribes to send children of their tribe to coastal tribes for work for payment to the chief. By stopping this practice, the interior tribes said they could not generate money for the hut tax. And the carriers, formally pawns, refused to work for the one shilling per day wage.

The Depression

Liberia's economy is very much dependent on the economy of the rest of the world and especially the United States. When America was suffering through the depression of the '30's, Liberia also had a depression. The Government of Liberia had made a loan in 1926 secured by the Firestone Company who began a one million acre rubber plantation the same year.

However, by the year 1931, it became apparent to the Liberian administration that payments on that loan were not possible. The government ask for consideration from the lending bank and Firestone to no avail. Therefore, the Liberian Legislature past the Moratorium Act suspending payment of this loan until terms more suitable to Liberia ability to pay could be negotiated. The Council of the League of Nations was willing to assist Liberia with certain stipulations. The negotiations dragged on for nearly a year. Many trips, telegraphs, and meeting were put forth to solve this problem. One chief sticking point was the League's requirement to have their delegates place in key position in the administration of the Liberian government. Barclay and other Liberian officials felt this was an infringement of sovereignty of Liberia. Eventually, two key officials were placed in positions to advise the government, but with limitations set forth by the Liberian government. Loan payment were continued with the assistance of the League.

The War

During the final years of the Barclay administration war broke out in Europe. Barclay declared that the British currency be withdrawn as legal tender and only the Liberian coins and the United States coins and notes be the official currency. The war cause the government to ration some scarce commodities. Several Inter-Allied conferences were held and after the Casablanca conference in 1943, United States President, F.D. Roosevelt, visited Liberia and met with President Barclay. Barclay and President elect William V.S. Tubman also traveled to the United States it meet again with the U.S. President.

year period of the worker's contract were deposited in gold in Monrovia to be paid in local currency when he returned to Liberia. Most of the workers were Kru, supplied to contractors by their chiefs or headmen in consideration of a fee per head.

Demand for plantation workers increased sharply in the early 1920s at a time when Liberia was virtually bankrupt and welcomed the opportunity to earn revenue through the sale of labor. To exploit the potential of an expanding market in contract labor, a syndicate was formed that included a number of highly placed government figures. During the 1927 presidential election campaign, Thomas J. Faulkner, the American-born former mayor of Monrovia who was the nominee of the reformist People's Party, made the abuse of contract labor an issue.

For the first time since the True Whigs had returned to power in 1877, the People's Party offered a credible **alternative** to voters that was based on real differences in policy rather than on a factional dispute within the ruling party. Faulkner polled 9,000 votes, losing to King, who received 24,000, but his performance was far better than that of any previous opposition candidate. After his defeat, Faulkner made public charges of exploitation of contract labor and implicated members of the syndicate in illegal activities.

The matter was brought to the attention of the League of Nations, which appointed a commission of inquiry under the British jurist, Cuthbert Christy, to investigate the allegations made against Liberia. The commission, which included former Liberian president Arthur **Barclay** and Charles S. Johnson of Fisk University in Tennessee, spent several months in Liberia observing conditions and conducting **interviews**. In its report, published in 1930, the Christy Commission accused high-ranking Liberian government officials of complicity in procuring involuntary labor by impressment and of other practices illegal under international law. It also defined pawns as a form of slavery and condemned the LFF for brutality in suppressing resistance to forced labor. When the United States government added its voice to the chorus of complaint, King assured Washington that his government would abide by the recommendations of the League of Nations to regulate the export of labor, but he characterized the commission's accusation that slavery existed in Liberia as "malicious propaganda" used by the colonial powers to discredit the republic.

The United States was not satisfied with King's response, and Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson wrote a sharply worded note repeating charges made against government officials and calling for punishment of the guilty parties. Under pressure from the United States, King named a Liberian commission to look into the charges against government officials. When evidence was presented that linked Liberian vice president Allen B. Yancey to the syndicate, both he and King

resigned from office, and Edwin James Barclay, the secretary of state, was sworn in as president.

Barclay was concerned about the implications for Liberian sovereignty if the League of Nations chose to act upon the Christy Commission's recommendation that the league involve itself further in the country's internal affairs. Despite the purge of the administration, the new president still had reason to fear **action** taken by the colonial powers. Britain, for example, had suggested consideration of appointing an Anglo?

American commission to oversee reform, and imposition of a League of Nations trusteeship was also mentioned. Early in 1931 Britain and Germany, in conjunction with the United States, delivered an ultimatum to Liberia, calling on it to accept an international commission to carry out reforms that, the document declared in patronizing terms, the government in Monrovia neither desired nor had the **capability** to carry out.

Although Barclay categorically rejected the joint ultimatum, he said that his government would accept the findings of a panel of experts appointed by the League of Nations and requested advisers to help in preparing financial and judicial reforms. In response to this initiative, the League of Nations named an eight-nation panel, including Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, and Venezuela, as well as a representative of Liberia. Liberia, the report stated, "represents the paradox of being a Republic of 12,000 citizens with 1,000,000 subjects."

It deplored the lack of modern health care (except on the Firestone plantation), the high incidence of preventable disease, and the primitive sanitation conditions. The government had failed, it continued, to take even the most basic steps toward improving conditions among tribal Africans. The country's financial situation was called "tragic" and its monetary system "confusing." Included in its recommendations were the establishment of a public health service, renegotiation of the FCA loan to make more funds available for development, and a radical reform of native African affairs policies allowing elected chiefs to exercise real power in the Hinterland. It called for the **abolition** of forced labor and the end of pawning.

Many of the solutions proposed by the commission were unrealistic, however. For instance, at a time when the country's revenues had been reduced to only about \$450,000 a year as a result of the impact of the Great Depression, the commission expected the Liberian government to expend \$400,000 to improve public services.

The Liberian president chose not to respond directly to the commission's recommendations, although improvements in social services were instituted as funds became available later in the decade. Forced labor was banned, and pawnage was phased out. Barclay stonewalled on other recommendations, however, and let time work in his favor.

The 1930 Forced Labour Scandal

After his defeat in the 1927 presidential elections, Thomas Faulkner accused the President-elect, Charles D.B. King, of allowing slavery to exist in the Republic. Worse, he also stated that certain highly placed government officials were engaged in the forced shipping of labourers to the Spanish island of Fernando Poo. Moreover, he accused them of making use of the Liberian Army (called Frontier Force) to achieve this. The accused government officials were the President of the Republic and Standard-Bearer of the True Whig Party (TWP), the country's ruling political party, Charles King, the Secretary-General of the TWP and Postmaster-General Samuel A. Ross, and the country's Vice-President Allen N. Yancy.

After Faulkner's accusations a wave of international reactions followed and a Committee of the League of Nations was established to examine the allegations. The Committee was composed of Dr Cuthbert Christy, an Englishman (representing the League of Nations), Charles S.A. Johnson, an Afro-American (representing the USA), and former Liberian president Arthur Barclay (representing Liberia).

TheChristy-report

In 1930 the 'Christy Report' was published, named after the Committee's chairman. The Committee concluded that:

- Slavery as defined by the Anti-Slavery Convention, in fact, does not exist in this Republic.
- Shipment to Fernando Poo and Gabon is associated with slavery because the method of recruiting carries compulsion with it.
- Persons holding official positions have illegally misused their office in recruiting with the aid of the Liberian Frontier Force.

The House of Representatives then started the procedure to impeach President King who hastily resigned. He thus escaped a public trial as the Liberian Constitution reads: 'No person shall be held to answer for a capital or infamous crime, except in case of impeachment.' Vice President Yancy made the same decision – defended and advised by his cousin, the lawyer William Tubman (who became President in 1944). The third high-ranking Liberian involved, Samuel A., Ross, had died in the beginning of the year. Secretary of State Edwin Barclay succeeded King.

Firestone

Not only Americo-Liberian government officials had benefited from the fruits of forced labour. A large foreign enterprise was also involved, as the Christy-report stated:

- Labour for private purposes is forcibly impressed by the Government, and used in the Firestone Plantations.

Since the US Government had supported Firestone's plans and ambitions from the beginning of its operations certain Liberians also criticized the US Government, like Clarence L. Simpson, Vice-President under Tubman (1944 – 51).

Prior to Firestone's arrival in Liberia the employment in the monetary sector of the economy was practically limited to the civil service and a small number of trading companies. A few hundred people were employed by the Government, virtually all recruited from the ranks of the Americo-Liberians. After 1926, the only employer of significance was Firestone. This company employed more than 10,000 labourers on its plantations in 1930. According to official government sources, however, more than 8,500 had not come to work for Firestone voluntarily.

A Liberian ('Old Man Paul') interviewed by the present author (FVDK) in the 1970s confirmed the forcible character of the recruitment. 'I was a small boy when Firestone came to Liberia', he stated, and continued: '(...) during the King Administration soldiers of the Liberian Frontier Force would come to the villages and compel people to leave for the Firestone Plantations to work there.'

The recruitment system that supplied Firestone with tens of thousands labourers continued until the early 1960s. In August 1961 the Government of Portugal – in retaliation of Liberia's staunch anti-colonial position – filed a complaint with the International Labour Organization (ILO) concerning the observance of the Liberian Government of the Forced Labour Convention of 1950. Before the Commission which had been appointed by the ILO to investigate the complaint published its findings in 1963, the Liberian Legislature hastily enacted a law regulating the recruitment of labour in Liberia (1962). It was then only that the recruitment system that had supplied Firestone since 1926 with labourers became outlawed.