Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity: King Leopold II and the Congo

The European colonization of Africa was one of the greatest and swiftest conquests in human history. In 1870 roughly 80 percent of Africa south of the Sahara Desert was governed by indigenous kings, chiefs, and other rulers. By 1910 nearly this entire huge expanse had become European colonies or land, like South Africa, controlled by white settlers. The bloodiest single episode in Africa’s colonization took place in the center of the continent in the large territory, known as the Congo.

For centuries African slave dealers had raided parts of this area, selling their captives to American and European captains who sailed Africa’s west coast, and to traders who took slaves to the Arab world from the continent’s east coast. But heat, tropical diseases, and the huge rapids near the mouth of the Congo River on the Atlantic had long kept the Congo’s interior a mystery to Europeans. From 1874 through 1877 the British explorer and journalist Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904) crossed Africa from east to west. For much of the journey he floated down the river, mapping its course for the first time and noting the many tributaries that, it turned out, comprised a network of navigable waterways more than 7,000 miles long.

Although Stanley is best known as the man who found Livingstone, his trip across the Congo basin was the greater feat of exploration and had far more impact on history. As he headed back to England, Stanley was assiduously courted by King Leopold II of Belgium. Leopold (1835–1909) had ascended to the throne in 1865. A man of great charm, intelligence, ruthlessness, and greed, he was openly frustrated with inheriting the throne of such a small country, and in doing so at a time in history when European kings were rapidly losing power to elected parliaments. He had long wanted a colonial empire, and in Stanley he saw someone who could secure it for him. The Belgian cabinet of the day was not interested in colonies. But for Leopold this posed no problem; he would acquire his own.

In 1879 Stanley returned to the Congo as Leopold’s agent. He built outposts and a road around the river’s rapids and, using small steamboats, he traveled up and down the great river and its tributaries. Combining gift-giving with a show of military force, he persuaded hundreds of illiterate African chiefs, most of whom had little idea of the terms of the agreement to which they were ostensibly acceding, to sign away their land to the king.

Stanley made his way back to Europe with a sheaf of signed treaties in 1884. Meanwhile, Leopold had already begun the job of persuading first the United States and then all the major nations of Europe to recognize his claim. A master of public relations who portrayed himself as a great philanthropist, the king orchestrated successful lobbying campaigns in one country after another. He made further progress toward realizing his objective at a diplomatic conference in Berlin in 1884 and 1885 that the major European powers attended. In 1885 he proclaimed the existence of the misnamed État Indépendant du Congo, or, as it was known in English, the Congo Free State, with himself the King-Sovereign. In later years he sometimes referred to himself as the Congo’s proprietor. It was the world’s only major colony owned by one man.

Equipped with repeating rifles, cannons, and machine guns and fighting against Africans with only spears or antiquated muskets, King Leopold’s 19,000-man army (black conscripts under white officers) gradually took control of the vast territory. From the start the regime was founded on forced labor. Hundreds of thousands of Africans were put to work as porters to carry the white men’s goods, as cutters of the wood needed to fire steamboat boilers, and as laborers of all kinds. In the early years the
main commodity Leopold sought was ivory. Joseph Conrad, who spent six months in the Congo in 1890, draws a memorable portrait of this rapacious trade in his novel *Heart of Darkness*.

**The Rubber Boom**

In the early 1890s, however, a larger source of wealth suddenly loomed. The invention of the inflatable bicycle tire, followed soon by that of the automobile tire, triggered an enormous boom in rubber. Throughout the world's tropics people rushed to establish rubber plantations. But new rubber trees often require fifteen years of growth before they can be tapped. During that window of time those who profited were the people who owned land where rubber grew wild. No one owned more land like this than King Leopold II, for equatorial rain forest, dotted with wild rubber vines, comprised half of his Congo state.

**[THE KING'S ENEMIES]**

King Leopold II's rule over the Congo met fierce resistance. In the far south, for example, a chief named Mulume Niama led warriors of the Sanga people in a rebellion that killed one of the king's officers. State troops pursued them, trapping Mulume Niama and his soldiers in a large cave. They refused to surrender, and when troops finally entered the cave three months later, they found 178 bodies. Nzansu, a chief in the region near the great Congo River rapids, led rebels who killed a hated colonial official and pillaged several state posts, although they carefully spared the homes of nearby Swedish missionaries. Nzansu's men fought on sporadically for five years more, and no record of his fate exists.

In addition, Leopold's regime faced resistance from within his own conscript army, whose soldiers sometimes found a common cause with the rebel groups they were supposed to pursue. The largest mutiny involved three thousand troops and an equal number of auxiliaries and porters, and continued for three years. "The rebels displayed a courage worthy of a better cause," (Flament et al., 1952, p. 417) acknowledged the army's official history—which, remarkably, devoted fully one-quarter of its pages to the various campaigns against mutineers within the army's own ranks.

The king also faced enemies of another sort. To curry diplomatic favor, he allowed several hundred Protestant missionaries into the Congo. Most made no protest, but some were outraged at the brutal forced labor system. In articles in church magazines and in speeches throughout the United States and Europe on visits home, they described what they saw: Africans whipped to death, rivers full of corpses, and piles of severed hands—a detail that quickly seared itself on the world's imagination. Army officers often demanded of their men a severed hand from each rebel killed in battle.

E. V. Sjöblom of Sweden was one of the first and most outspoken missionaries in the Congo. Alice Harris, a British Baptist, took photographs of the atrocities she witnessed. William Morrison, a white man, and William Sheppard, the first black missionary in the Congo, were Presbyterians from Virginia whose acts of witness so infuriated Congo colonial authorities that they put the men on trial for libel.

Leopold's most formidable enemy surfaced in Europe. A British shipping company had the monopoly on all cargo traffic between the Congo and Belgium, and every few weeks it sent to the port of Antwerp a young junior official, Edmund Dene Morel, to supervise the unloading of a ship arriving from Africa. Morel, in his mid-twenties at the time, noticed that when his company's ships arrived from the Congo, they were filled to the hatch with enormously valuable cargoes of rubber and ivory. When the ships
turned around and steamed back to Africa, however, they carried no merchandise in exchange. Nothing was being sent to the Congo to pay for the goods flowing to Europe. Instead, the ships carried soldiers, and large quantities of firearms and ammunition. Standing on the dock, Morel realized that he had uncovered irrefutable proof that a forced labor system was in operation 4,000 miles away.

Morel soon quit his job and in short order turned himself into the greatest British investigative journalist of his time. For a dozen years, from 1901 to 1913, working sometimes fourteen to sixteen hours a day, he devoted his formidable energy and skill to putting the story of forced labor in King Leopold's Congo on the world's front pages. In Britain he founded the Congo Reform Association, and affiliated groups sprang up in the United States and other countries. He wrote three books on the Congo, several dozen pamphlets, and hundreds of newspaper articles, making much use of eyewitness testimony from the missionaries. He traveled throughout Britain speaking to large audiences and was adept at recruiting bishops, well-known writers, and other luminaries to join him on the lecture platform. More than one thousand mass meetings to protest slave labor in the Congo were held, mostly in Britain and the United States, but also in Europe and as far away as Australia and New Zealand.

After Morel orchestrated a protest resolution by the British Parliament, the government, in response, asked its representative in the Congo to investigate his charges. The British consul, an Irishman named Roger Casement, later famous as an Irish patriot, took the assignment seriously. Renting a missionary steamboat, he spent more than three months traveling in the interior. He produced an excoriating, detailed report, complete with sworn testimony from witnesses, which is in many ways a model for the reports produced by contemporary organizations like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch.

The king's colonial officials quickly set up a brutal but effective system for harvesting wild rubber. A detachment of soldiers would march into an African village and seize the women as hostages. To secure their wives' release, the men would have to disperse into the rain forest to collect the sap of wild rubber vines. As the vines near a village were often drained dry, the men would sometimes have to walk for days to find areas where they could gather their monthly quota of rubber. As rubber prices soared, so did the quotas. Discipline was harsh; reluctant military conscripts, disobedient porters, and villagers who failed to gather enough rubber all fell victim to the notorious chicotte, a whip made of sun-dried hippopotamus hide with razor-sharp edges. A hundred lashes of the chicotte, a not infrequent punishment, could be fatal. Army officers and colonial officials earned bonuses based on the amount of rubber collected in areas under their control. These were an incentive for ruthless, devastating plunder.

Many women hostages were raped and a significant number starved to death. Male rubber gatherers often died from exhaustion. And under such circumstances people tended to stop having children, so the birthrate plummeted as a result. With most able-bodied adults prisoners or forced laborers for several weeks out of each month, villages had few people who could plant and harvest food, or go hunting or fishing, and famine soon spread. Furthermore, huge, uncounted numbers of Congolese fled the forced labor regime, but the only refuge to which they could escape was the depths of the rain forest, where there was little food and no shelter; travelers would discover their bones years later. Tens, possibly hundreds, of thousands of Africans also died in two decades' worth of unsuccessful uprisings against the king's regime.

An even greater toll was taken by disease: various lung and intestinal diseases, tuberculosis, smallpox, and, above all, sleeping sickness. The great population movements caused by the colonial regime brought these illnesses into areas where people had not built up an immunity to them, and many would have died even under a government far less brutal than Leopold's. However, disease of any kind always
takes a far greater toll on a traumatized, half-starving population, with many people already in flight as refugees.

In two ways the Congo’s rubber boom had lasting impact beyond the territory itself. First, the system of exploitation established there became a model for colonial rule in other parts of central Africa. Many of the surrounding colonies also had rain forests rich in wild rubber—Portuguese-controlled northern Angola, the Cameroons under the Germans, and the French Congo, part of French Equatorial Africa, across the Congo River. Seeing what profits Leopold was reaping from forced labor, officials in these colonies soon adopted exactly the same system—including women hostages, forced male labor, and the chicotte—with equally fatal consequences.

The events in King Leopold’s Congo also rippled beyond its borders in a more positive way: They gave birth to the twentieth century’s first great international human rights movement (see sidebar). The movement, in fact, eventually forced Leopold to relinquish his private ownership of the Congo to the Belgian state in 1908. By that point he had made a huge profit from the territory, conservatively estimated as the equivalent of more than $1.1 billion in early twenty-first century terms.

The Toll

In the newly christened Belgian Congo, however, the forced labor system did not immediately end. It was too lucrative, for the price of rubber was still high. Eventually, the price fell and wild rubber supplies began to run out, but by that time World War I had begun, and large numbers of Africans were forced to become porters, carrying supplies for Belgian military campaigns against Germany’s African colonies. Forced labor remained a major part of the Congo’s economy for many years after the war. Starting in the early 1920s, however, the system became considerably less draconian, mainly because colonial officials realized that otherwise they would soon have no labor force left.

"We run the risk of someday seeing our native population collapse and disappear," declared the permanent committee of the National Colonial Congress of Belgium in 1924, "so that we will find ourselves confronted with a kind of desert" (Hoornaert and Louwers, 1924, p. 101).

Between the time that Leopold started to assume control of the Congo (around 1880) and when the forced labor system became less severe (after 1920), what happened could not, by strict definition, be called genocide, for there was no deliberate attempt to wipe out all members of one particular ethnic group. But the slashing of the territory’s population—through a combination of disease, famine, slave labor, suppression of rebellions, and diminished birthrate—indisputably occurred on a genocidal scale.

In estimating situations without the benefit of complete census data, demographers are more confident speaking of percentages than absolute numbers. Using a wide variety of local and church sources, Jan Vansina, professor emeritus of history and anthropology at the University of Wisconsin and the leading ethnographer of Congo basin peoples, calculates that the Congo’s population dropped by some 50 percent during this period, an estimate with which other modern scholars concur. Interestingly, a longtime high colonial official, Major Charles C. Liebrechts, made the same estimate in 1920. Shocked by recent local census statistics that showed less than one child per woman, the official Commission Institué pour la Protection des Indigènes made a similar reckoning in 1919. Its report that year to the Belgian king mostly focused on disease, but stressed that forced labor for rubber and other products "subjects the natives to conditions of life which are an obstacle to their increase" and warned that this
situation, plus "a lack of concern about devastating plagues ancient and modern, an absolute ignorance of people's normal lives [and] a license and immorality detrimental to the development of the race," had reached "the point of threatening even the existence of certain Congolese peoples" and could completely depopulate the entire region (Bulletin Officiel, 1920, pp. 657, 660, 662). Writing in the same year, R. P. Van Wing, a Belgian Jesuit missionary, estimated that the population of the Bakongo people, one of the territory's largest ethnic groups, had been reduced by two-thirds.

Obtaining more precise statistics is difficult, for in 1908 King Leopold ordered the archives of his Congo state burned. But numerous surviving records from the rubber-bearing land in the adjoining French Congo, which closely followed the model of the Leopoldian forced labor system, also suggest a population loss there of around 50 percent. If the estimates from varied sources of a 50 percent toll in King Leopold's Congo are correct, how many people does this mean? In 1924 the first territory-wide census, when adjusted for undercounting, placed the number of colony inhabitants at some ten million. If that figure is accurate and it represents 50 percent of what the population had been in 1880, this would suggest a loss of 10 million people.

[GEORGE WASHINGTON WILLIAMS]

Virtually no information about the true nature of King Leopold's Congo reached the outside world until the arrival there, in 1890, of an enterprising visitor named George Washington Williams. He was a veteran of the American Civil War, a historian, a Baptist minister, a lawyer, and the first black member of the Ohio state legislature. Wearing one of his many hats, that of a journalist, Williams expected to see the paradise of enlightened rule that Leopold had described to him in Brussels. Instead, he found what he called "the Siberia of the African Continent." Almost the only early visitor to interview Africans about their experience of the regime, he took extensive notes, and, a thousand miles up the Congo River, wrote one of the greatest documents in human rights literature, an open letter to King Leopold that is one of the important landmarks in human rights literature. Published in many American and European newspapers, it was the first comprehensive, detailed indictment of the regime and its slave labor system. Sadly, Williams, only forty-one years old, died of tuberculosis on his way home from Africa, but not before writing several additional denunciations of what he had seen in the Congo. In one of them, a letter to the U.S. Secretary of State, he used a phrase that was not commonly heard again until the Nuremberg trials more than fifty years later. Leopold II, Williams declared, was guilty of "crimes against humanity." ADAM HOCHSCHILD

Some writers, almost entirely in Belgium, claim that such estimates are exaggerated. But other scholars use even higher numbers. Although neither figure is well-documented, Hannah Arendt’s seminal The Origins of Totalitarianism cites an estimated minimum population loss of 11.5 million, and a Congolese historian writing in 1998, Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, estimates the loss at roughly 13 million. Humankind will never know even the approximate toll with any certainty, but beyond any doubt what happened in the Congo was one of the great catastrophes of modern times.

SEE ALSO Slavery, Historical

BIBLIOGRAPHY


