

Mass crimes against humanity and genocides

The Congo Free State genocide:

Circa 1885 to 1912

Léopold II's personal kingdom:

King Léopold II (1835 - 1909) occupied the Belgium throne from 1865 until his death in 1909. Outside of Belgium, however, he is chiefly remembered as the personal owner of the Congo Free State. This was a private project undertaken by the King to extract rubber and ivory from his personal colony, relying on human slavery. He was ultimately responsible for the death of possibly tens of millions of Africans.

Léopold fervently believed that overseas colonies were the key to a country's greatness, and worked tirelessly to acquire colonial territory for Belgium. However, neither the Belgian people nor the Belgian government were interested, and Léopold eventually began trying to acquire a colony in his private capacity as an ordinary citizen.

After a number of unsuccessful schemes for colonies in Africa or Asia, in 1876 he organized a private holding company, Association Internationale Africaine, which was disguised as an international scientific and philanthropic association. In 1879, under the auspices of the holding company, he hired the famous explorer Henry Morton Stanley to establish a colony in the Congo region. Stanley gained control of the area from local chiefs through "cloth and trinket" treaties. The chiefs thought that they were signing friendship treaties; in fact, they were selling their land. Much diplomatic and economic maneuvering resulted in the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, at which representatives of 14 European countries and the United States recognized Léopold as sovereign of most of the area he and Stanley had laid claim to. On 1885-FEB-05, the result was the Congo Free State (later the Belgian Congo, then Zaire, and now the Democratic Republic of Congo). At 905,000 square miles, (2.344 million km²), it was an area 76 times larger than Belgium. Léopold was free to rule the Congo Free State as a personal domain. He became sole ruler of a population that Stanley had estimated at 30 million people, without a constitution, without any international supervision, without ever having been to the Congo, and without more than a tiny handful of his new subjects having heard of him.

The genocide, mutilations and other crimes against humanity:

Under Léopold II's administration, the Congo Free State was subject to a terror regime, including atrocities such as mass killings and maimings which were used to subjugate the indigenous tribes of the Congo region and to procure slave labor.

His administration was a brutal colonial regime operated to maximize profitability. The first change was the introduction of the concept of terres vacantes — "vacant" land, which was anything that no European was living on. This was deemed to belong to the state, and servants of the state (i.e., any white men in Léopold's employ) were encouraged to exploit it.

Next, the Free State was divided into two economic zones: the Free Trade Zone was open to entrepreneurs of any European nation, who were allowed to buy 10 and 15-year monopoly leases on anything of value: ivory from a particular district, or the rubber concession, for example. The other zone — almost two-thirds of the Congo — became the Domaine Privé: the exclusive private property of the State, which was in turn the personal property of King Léopold.

Natives were required to provide State officials with set quotas of rubber and ivory at a fixed, government-mandated price, to provide food to the local post, and to provide 10% of their number as full-time forced laborers — slaves in all but name — and another 25% part-time. To enforce the rubber quotas, the Force Publique (FP) was called in. The FP was an army whose purpose was to terrorize the local population. The officers were white agents of the State. Of the black soldiers, many were cannibals from the most fierce tribes from upper Congo. Others had been kidnapped during the raids on villages in their childhood and brought to Catholic missions, when they received a military training in conditions close to slavery. Armed with modern weapons and the *chicotte* — a bull whip made of hippopotamus hide — the Force Publique routinely took and tortured hostages (mostly women), flogged, and raped the natives. They also burned recalcitrant villages, and above all, took human hands as trophies on the orders of white officers to show that bullets hadn't been wasted.

One junior white officer described a raid to punish a village that had protested. The white officer in command: "ordered us to cut off the heads of the men and hang them on the village palisades, also their sexual members, and to hang the women and the children on the palisade in the form of a cross." After seeing a native killed for the first time, a Danish missionary wrote: "The soldier said 'Don't take this to heart so much. They kill us if we don't bring the rubber. The Commissioner has promised us if we have plenty of hands he will shorten our service'." In the words of author Peter Forbath's: "The baskets of severed hands, set down at the feet of the European post commanders, became the symbol of the Congo Free State. ... The collection of hands became an end in itself. Force Publique soldiers brought them to the stations in place of rubber; they even went out to harvest them instead of rubber... They became a sort of currency. They came to be used to make up for shortfalls in rubber quotas, to replace... the people who were demanded for the forced labour gangs; and the Force Publique soldiers were paid their bonuses on the basis of how many hands they collected."

In theory, each right hand proved a judicial murder. In practice, soldiers sometimes "cheated" by simply cutting off the hand and leaving the victim to live or die. More than a few survivors later said that they had lived through a massacre by acting dead, not moving even when their hand was severed, and waiting till the soldiers left before seeking help.

To visit the country was difficult. Missionaries were allowed only on sufferance, and mostly only if they were Belgian Catholics who Léopold could keep quiet. White employees were forbidden to leave the country. Nevertheless, rumors circulated and Léopold ran an enormous publicity campaign to discredit them, even creating a bogus Commission for the Protection of the Natives to root out the "few isolated instances" of abuse. Publishers were bribed, critics accused of running secret campaigns to further other nations' colonial ambitions, eyewitness reports from missionaries dismissed as attempts by Protestants to smear honest Catholic priests. And for a decade or more, Léopold was successful. The secret was out, but few believed it.

Eventually, the most telling blows came from a most unexpected source. Edmund Dene Morel, a clerk in a major Liverpool shipping office and a part-time journalist began to wonder why the ships that brought vast loads of rubber from the Congo returned full of guns and ammunition for the Force Publique. He left his job and became a full-time investigative journalist, and then (aided by merchants who wanted to break into Léopold's monopoly or, as chocolate millionaire William Cadbury who joined his campaign later, used their money to support humanitarian causes), a publisher. In 1902 Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* was released: based on his brief experience as a steamer captain on the Congo ten years before, it encapsulated the

public's growing concerns about what was happening in the Congo. In 1903, Morel and those who agreed with him in the House of Commons succeeded in passing a resolution which called on the British government to conduct an inquiry into alleged violations of the Berlin Agreement. In 1904, Sir Roger Casement, then the British Consul, delivered a long, detailed eyewitness report which was made public. The British Congo Reform Association, founded by Morel with Casement's support, demanded action. The United States and many European nations followed suit. The British Parliament demanded a meeting of the 14 signatory powers to review the 1885 Berlin Agreement. The Belgian Parliament, pushed by socialist leader Emile Vandervelde and other critics of the King's Congolese policy, forced Léopold to set up an independent commission of enquiry, and despite the King's efforts, in 1905 it confirmed Casement's report in every damning detail.

Léopold offered to reform his regime, but few took him seriously. All nations were now agreed that the King's rule must be ended as soon as possible. No nation was willing to take on the responsibility, and it was not seriously considered to return control of the land back to the native population. Belgium was the obvious European candidate to run the Congo, but the Belgians were still unwilling. For two years Belgium debated the question and held fresh elections on the issue; meanwhile Léopold opportunistically enlarged the *Domaine de la Couronne* so as to milk the last possible ounce of personal profit while he could.

Finally, on 1908-NOV-15, four years after the Casement Report and six years after *Heart of Darkness* was first printed, the Parliament of Belgium annexed the Congo Free State and took over its administration. However, the international scrutiny was no major loss to Léopold or the concessionary companies in the Belgian Congo. By then, Southeast Asia and Latin America had become lower-cost producers of rubber. Along with the effects of resource depletion in the Congo, international commodity prices had fallen to a level that rendered Congolese extraction unprofitable. The state took over Léopold's private dominion and bailed out the company, but the rubber boom was already over.

British writer Arthur Conan Doyle met Morel in 1909 and was inspired to write *The Crime of the Congo* -- a book which he finished in eight days. It is "filled with graphic descriptions of violence and illustrated with photos of mutilated people, dealt with the atrocities committed in the Belgian Congo on behalf of King Leopold II." He later campaigned for an end to the atrocities in the Congo.

The situation in the Congo finally improved. However, the territory given the ironic title of Congo Free State is now ironically titled The Democratic Republic of the Congo. Much of the instability of the present country can be traced to the atrocities of Léopold II.

The death toll:

Estimates of the total death toll vary considerably. The massive reduction of the population of the Congo was noted by all who have compared the country at the beginning of the colonial rule and the beginning of the 20th century. Estimates of observers of the time, as well as modern scholars (most authoritatively Jan Vansina, professor emeritus of history and anthropology at the University of Wisconsin), show that the population halved during this period. According to Roger Casement's report, this depopulation was caused mainly by four causes: indiscriminate "war", starvation, reduction of births and diseases. Sleeping sickness ravaged the country and was used by the regime to justify demographic decrease. Opponents of King Léopold's rule concluded that the administration itself was to be considered responsible for the spreading of

this dreadful epidemic. One of the greatest specialists of sleeping sickness, P.G.Janssens, Professeur émérite de l'Université de Gand, blamed "...the brutal change of ancestral conditions and ways of life that has accompanied the accelerated occupation of the territories."

In the absence of a census (the first was made in 1924), it's even more difficult to quantify the population loss of the period.

British diplomat Roger Casement's famous 1904 report estimated the death toll at 3 million for just twelve of the twenty years history of Léopold's regime.

Investigative reporter and author Peter Forbath estimated at least 5 million deaths.

Adam Hochschild, estimated 10 million.

The Encyclopædia Britannica gives a total population decline of 8 million to 30 million.

Léopold II's reputation today:

In the Democratic Republic of Congo: Léopold II is still a controversial figure. In 2005 his statue was taken down just hours after it was re-erected in the capital, Kinshasa. The Congolese culture minister, Christoph Muzungu decided to reinstate the statue, arguing people should see the positive aspects of the king as well as the negative. But just hours after the six-metre (20 ft.) statue was erected in the middle of a circle near Kinshasa's central station, it was taken down again, without explanation.

In Belgium: Léopold II is perceived by many Belgians as the "King-Builder" ("le Roi-Bâtisseur" in French, "Koning-Bouwer" in Dutch) because he commissioned a great number of buildings and urban projects in Antwerp, Brussels, Ostend and elsewhere in Belgium. The buildings include the Royal Glasshouses at Laeken, the Japanese tower, the Chinese pavilion, the Musée du Congo (now called the Royal Museum for Central Africa) and their surrounding park in Tervuren, the Jubilee Triple Arch in Brussels and the Antwerp train station hall. He funded these buildings with the wealth generated by the exploitation of the Congo.

There has been a "Great Forgetting", as Adam Hochschild describes in his book King Leopold's Ghost:

"The Congo offer a striking example of the politics of forgetting. Leopold and the Belgian colonial officials who followed him went to extraordinary lengths to try to erase potentially incriminating evidence from the historical records."

Remarkably the colonial Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren Museum) does not mention anything at all about the atrocities committed in the Congo Free State. The Tervuren Museum has a large collection of colonial objects but of the largest injustice in Congo, Hochschild wrote: "there is no sign whatsoever." Another example is to be found on the sea walk of Blankenberge, a popular coastal resort, where a monument shows a colonialist with a black child at his feet (supposedly bringing him "civilization") without any comment.