

A story of king leopolds ghost history essay



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The reign of King Leopold and the extravagant story of his acquisition of the Congo is explored in Adam Hochschild's book entitled, *King Leopold's Ghost*. Committing horrendous amounts of atrocities during his influence, using methods of torture, sex slavery, labor slavery, and flat out robbery as means of control, King Leopold surely left his mark on the Congo and its people even a hundred years after the declaration of the "free state." Although some of Leopold's motives can be traced in the beginning of the book through adolescent documentation, a constant theme within his reign of the Congo and his personal life was an intense desire for power, wealth, and seeing no boundary in his endeavors. At this point in history, colonialism was a popular tactic for trade wealth within the major powers of Europe, so Leopold met little to no resistance in his establishment of a colony to bring Belgium to the trade competition. The Berlin Conference in 1884 enabled Leopold to claim his stake in the Congo during this "scramble for Africa." The continent was subsequently partitioned among the European powers. Typical of the era, not a single African attended the conference. Henry Morton Stanley (Leopold's sidekick and enabler of all the dirty work in the colony), one of the only men present to have actually stepped foot in Africa, represented Leopold at the conference and by its conclusion, Leopold's status as the de facto sovereign of the colony of the Congo was assured. By royal decree of May 29, 1885, the fifty-year-old king declared his new, privately controlled country, the Congo Free State. Through tools of false media representations and political bribery, Leopold was able to depict a scene of Belgisch humility and commendable work; he claimed to bring the benefits of medicine, technology and Christianity to so-called heathen peoples. By this method, Leopold was hailed as a great champion of

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humanitarianism during the period of the worst abuses in the Congo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although King Leopold initially met no resistance, once imperialism took full force, outsiders seemed to have a very different opinion of the self-proclaimed humanitarian in the "paradise" of the Congo. King Leopold met much resistance from other European countries including Britain and France, moreover met negative force from the United States. His regime also dealt with defiance inside of the Congo within his own conscript army, whose soldiers sometimes found commonalities with the rebels they were supposed to pursue. Although Leopold ensued extremely violent and traumatizing tactics within forced labor, he was met with mostly nonviolent contention.

As Dr. Wilkie explained, Leopold's motivations in the Congo were based around a type of new imperialism in the nineteenth century. Africa was rich with natural resources (ivory and rubber being most desirable) and Leopold took advantage of these resources to the fullest extent (unfortunately exploiting the people in the Congo simultaneously). This new imperialism was also connected with a great sense of nationalism felt by Europe, the United States, and Japan. Each place felt an overwhelming sense that their nation was so great that they needed to expand their prestige. (15 February 2011) King Leopold and his coconspirators certainly felt this racial entitlement of the era and carried a hunger for economic prosperity. Leopold wrote to Stanley " There is no question of granting the slightest political power to negroes. That would be absurd. The white men, heads of the stations, retain all the powers" (Hochschild 67). Their militia killings and dehumanizing practices of labor compliance included using family members

for ransom in trade of work or goods, starvation, threats to kill, cutting off hands when rubber quotas were not met, rape, and killing extensive numbers of elephants for ivory (just to name a few happenings). Within all of this psychological terror created within the community of the Congo, Leopold's efforts to cover up his conspiracy of taking labor and stealing the natural resources of his colony to sell in Europe did not go unnoticed.

A variety of travelers and scholars went to the Congo and documented the troublesome activities and leaders, and a few made a significant impact to it's future. George Washington Williams and Edmund Dene Morel made it possible to imagine the atrocities in the African colony during the time and created much questioning and eventual anti-imperial resistance to the King's regime. George Washington Williams was an American Civil War veteran, historian, and minister. He carried a false identity of having a scholarly background and degree with political prestige, yet he left his life behind in the Unites States to Belgium to eventually travel to the Congo. He eventually did in 1890 with discouragement from Leopold. Outraged at the many atrocities he witnessed, he wrote a series of letters called the Open Letter, which were republished as pamphlets and subsequently enjoyed wide circulation in newspapers. One letter reads,

Stanley and his white assistants has used a variety of tricks, such as fooling Africans into thinking that whites had supernatural powers, to get Congo chiefs to sign their lands over to Leopold.... Far from being a great hero, Stanley has been a tyrant. His 'name produces a shudder among this simple folk when mentioned; they remember his broken promises'.... Leopold's establishment of military bases along the river had caused a wave of death

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and destruction... Leopold's claim that that his new state was providing wise government and public services was a fraud. There were no schools and no hospitals... (Hochschild 109-110)

The letters condemned Leopold's administration of the Congo and enumerated various other atrocities including slavery, sexual slavery, torture and widespread murder. Leopold responded by discrediting Williams--easy to do as many of William's credentials were fabricated. Although no immediate responses were considered, his initial documentation opened the doors for others to come and see what was really going on; as the chapter suggests Williams was " the first heretic." Other men, such as William Henry Sheppard (an African-American Presbyterian missionary) went into the colony and documented their findings only to be denied by King Leopold profusely. Yet, a British journalist and human rights activist by the name of Edmund Morel would change that pattern of denial. Morel's interest began when he secured a job as a clerk with Elder Dempster, and thereby gained access to shipping manifests for freight between Belgium and the Congo. For months he observed loading and unloading procedures in Belgium and compared what he saw with the shipping manifests he reviewed. He quickly realized that nearly the only thing exported to the Congo were firearms and ammunition; whereas, a steady stream of ivory, rubber and other precious goods arrived from the Congo. The trade was obviously supremely unbalanced, and Morel rather quickly deduced that the only explanation was widespread slavery. He knew he could not keep quiet about his discoveries, and promptly told his boss that led to others trying to bribe him to keep quiet. " Morel knew he had taken a monumental step. 'I had launched the boat,' he wrote, 'and there

could be no turning back.'" (Hochschild 186) His frustration led him to quit his job and devote himself full-time to the crusade against atrocities in the Congo and Africa. His efforts were tireless and his organizational abilities were formidable. Morel became the center of humanitarian publishing, and numerous other individuals regularly communicated with him.

From Morel's hand there now flowed a torrent of attacks on Leopold... he started his own publication. The West African Mail, 'An Illustrated Weekly Journal Founded to Meed the Rapidly Growing Interest in West & Central African Questions,' would be a forum where no one could censor him.

(Hochschild 186)

Largely due to Morel's efforts, in 1903, the British Parliament passed a resolution protesting atrocities in the Congo. The government decided to send a representative to make an official tour of the Congo, and they selected Roger Casement. His voyage through the Congo was thorough, and the man proved very observant and incorruptible. In 1904, he produced what would eventually be known as the Casement Report, a damning document detailing abuses in the Congo. This report and later documentation given to Morel by Henry I. Kowalsky (Colonel and lawyer hired by King Leopold) that showed bribes paid to judges, journalists, politicians, and editors and similar materials were published. This created an extreme amount of pressure towards Leopold on the international political front. After trying to save himself with the Commission of Inquiry, Henry was unable to falsify anything else and the Commission only validated the Casement Report; resulting in his final scheme to blow up back in his face. King Leopold soon entered negotiations to sell the Congo to Belgium in his seventies. Because of

everything that had happened in this sequence of events, it proves that one man can make a difference in an awful and powerful situation, and anti-imperial mentalities of the King proved to be so impactful that it led to the demise of his precious Congo.

To sum up the atrocities with countering resistances that took place in the Congo in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Hochschild says,

E. D. Morel talked, as well, about causes: above all, the theft of African land and labor that made possible Leopold's whole system of exploitation. It was this radicalism, in the best and deepest sense of the word, that underlay the passion of the leading Congo reformers and that led Morel and Casement, after their battle for justice in the Congo, to Pentonville Prison. The larger tradition of which they are a part goes back to the French Revolution and beyond; it draws on the example of men and women who fought against enormous odds for their freedom, from the slave revolts of the Americas to the half-century of resistance that brought Nelson Mandela to power in South Africa. During its decade on the world stage, the Congo reform movement was a vital link in that chain, and there is no tradition more honorable. At the time of the Congo controversy a hundred years ago, the idea of full human rights, political, social, and economic, was a profound threat to the established order of most countries on earth. It still is today. (306)

The story of King Leopold has a bittersweet ending because although in this battle of good versus evil, good prevailed, but only at the cost of approximately ten million lives. Leopold and his regime was met with opposition from many individuals and great political powers by the end of his

rule in the African colony. Mentalities within the Congo were supported by economic greed, imperial power, and racism. Outside the Congo had this mentalities as well, but they were not put into reality as well as Leopold was able to do. By the end of this story, mentalities were obviously greatly shifted about corrupt metropolises with the horrors that were proven inside the colony. Still, keeping in mind the ideas of power within the written word and one man's persistence, Morel was able to impact this catastrophe in historical and political humanity with remarkable strength, while also sparking new belief systems around colonialism and the rights of human beings.