

Belgium's imperialist rape of Africa

King Leopold's Ghost—A story of greed, terror and heroism in colonial Africa by Adam Hochschild, Macmillan, 1998, £22.50, ISBN: 0333661265

6 September 1999

Adam Hochschild's study of King Leopold II of Belgium's creation of the Congo Free State goes to the essence of the economic and political systems established in colonial Africa.

Between 1885 and 1908, there were between five and eight million victims of Leopold's personal rule, under a barbarous system of forced labour and systematic terror. When reading a reference by Mark Twain to these deaths, and the world-wide campaign against slavery in the Congo of which he was a part, Hochschild was surprised at his own ignorance. "Why were these deaths not mentioned in the standard litany of our century's horrors? And why had I not heard of them?" Pursuing his inquiries he uncovered a "vast supply of raw material".

His book has ruffled quite a few feathers, particularly in Belgium. The British *Independent* newspaper's review calls Hochschild's comparisons to contemporary imperialism "unhelpful." But it is such contemporary resonances that place *King Leopold's Ghost* above a routine historical work.

One example from the introduction: "...unlike other great predators of history, from Genghis Khan to the Spanish conquistadors, King Leopold II never saw a drop of blood spilt in anger. He never set foot in the Congo. There is something very modern about that, too, as there is about the bomber pilot in the stratosphere, above the clouds, who never hears screams or sees shattered homes or torn flesh." (p4)

Hochschild examines how, in the nineteenth century European drive for possessions in Africa, the moral rationalisation of the "civilising" mission was used to justify colonialism. An example was the founding of Leopold's International African Association (IAA) in 1876, at a conference of famous explorers in Brussels. As its first secretary, King Leopold opened the conference thus: "To open to civilisation the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples, is, I dare say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress..." (p44)

The aim of the conference was proclaimed to be "abolishing the [Arab] slave trade, establishing peace among the chiefs, and procuring them just and impartial arbitration."

Contrast this with remarks Leopold made to his London minister on the explorer Henry Morton Stanley, hired by the IAA to explore the interior of the Congo: "I'm sure if I quite openly charged Stanley with the task of taking possession in my name of some part of Africa, the English will stop me... So I think I'll just give Stanley some job of exploration which would offend no one, and will give us the bases and headquarters which we can take over later on." (p58)

Leopold felt squeezed out by the British and French Empires, and the rising power of Germany. He studied forms of colonialism from the Dutch East Indies, to the British possessions in India and Africa. *Java or How to Manage a Colony*, by English lawyer JWB Money, appealed to him

because it showed how a small country like Holland had perfected the technique of exploiting vast colonies. Money concluded that the huge profits made from Java depended on forced labour. Leopold agreed, commenting that forced labour was "the only way to civilise and uplift these indolent and corrupt peoples of the Far East." (p37)

Opposing the prevailing desire of Belgian parliamentarians to avoid the expense of colonies, he argued, "Belgium doesn't exploit the world... It's a taste we have got to make her learn." (p38)

Stanley's murderous descent into the Congo is documented in his own diaries. The King sent instructions to Stanley to "purchase as much land as you will be able to obtain, and that you should place successively under... suzerainty... as soon as possible and without losing one minute, all the chiefs from the mouth of the Congo to the Stanley falls..." (p70)

He was to purchase all the available ivory and establish barriers and tolls on the roads he opened up. Land rights treaties should be as "brief as possible and in a couple of articles must grant us everything." (p71) Stanley secured 450 such agreements.

Leopold developed a military dictatorship over a country 76 times the size of Belgium, with only a small number of white officials. Initially, he paid mercenaries, but in 1888 these were transformed into the "Force Publique". At its peak, there were 19,000 conscripted African soldiers and 420 white officers.

By means of bribes and lobbying, Leopold gained recognition for the Congo in 1884 by the United States, followed by a similar deal with France. By making a web of bilateral agreements at the Berlin conference in February 1885, he carved out the boundaries for this huge state. Once his ownership of the Congo was secure, the rubber boom erupted. Rubber sap was in great demand for tyres and other products, and the Congo was covered with such vines. Joint ventures ensued between Belgian, British and Dutch firms. The astronomical profits saved Leopold's colonial empire. An example given is the 700 percent profits of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber and Exploration Company (ABIR).

The race was on to extract as much wild natural rubber as possible before organised cultivation stole the market. Apart from financing Leopold's private army and the Force Publique (which took up half the Congo's budget) to control the slave labourers who gathered the rubber, capital outlay was non-existent.

Natives had to search out vines through inhospitable jungle. In Leopold's Congo it was an illegal offence to pay any Africans with money, so other more brutal forms of exhortation were employed. The British vice consul in 1899 gave a terrifying example of how the Force Publique carried out this task:

"An example of what is done was told me up the Ubangi [River]. This officer[s]... method... was to arrive in canoes at a village, the inhabitants of which invariably bolted on their arrival; the soldiers were then landed,

and commenced looting, taking all the chickens, grain etc, out of the houses; after this they attacked the natives until able to seize their women; these women were kept as hostages until the chief of the district brought in the required number of kilograms of rubber. The rubber having been brought, the women were sold back to their owners for a couple of goats apiece, and so he continued from village to village until the requisite amount of rubber had been collected." (p161)

Companies operating in the Congo used prison stockades to keep hostages. If the men of the village resisted the demands for rubber it meant the death of their wife, child or chief. The Force Publique supplied military might under contract and each company had its own mercenaries.

In the rubber regions, Africans had to gain a state permit to travel outside their villages. Labourers wore a numbered metal disk, so a record could be kept of their individual quota. Hundreds of thousands of desperate and exhausted men carried huge baskets on their heads for up to twenty miles a day.

An account in 1884 describes the actions of an officer known as Fievez taken against those who refused to collect rubber or failed to meet their quota: "I made war against them. One example was enough: a hundred heads cut off, and there have been plenty of supplies ever since. My goal is ultimately humanitarian. I killed a hundred people... but that allowed five hundred others to live." (p166)

The Force Publique had a combined counter-insurgency role: as a force to suppress the natives and as a "corporate labour force." Their murderous assaults against the native population were described as "pacification", as it was during the Vietnam War. The demand was for labour, and they destroyed all obstacles in their way.

Hochschild quotes the Governor of the Equatorial District of the Congo Free State when the demand for rubber became ferocious: "As soon as it was a question of rubber, I wrote to the government, 'To gather rubber in the district... one must cut off hands, noses and ears'." (p165)

Following tribal wars, state officials would see to it that the victors severed the hands of dead warriors. During expeditions, Force Publique soldiers were instructed to bring back a hand or head for each bullet fired, to make sure that none had been wasted or hidden for use in rebellions. A soldier with the chilling title "keeper of hands" accompanied each expedition. Force Publique soldiers were slaves who had been press-ganged through hostage taking, or stolen as children and brought up in child colonies founded by the King and the Catholic Church.

In August 1890, a young trainee steamship officer headed for the Congo basin. His name was Joseph Conrad, the author of the most famous novel to emerge from the European scramble for Africa, *Heart of Darkness*. One of the central characters in the novel is Kurtz, who is in charge of the inner station.

Kurtz is notorious for having a row of native heads surrounding his headquarters. He combines pathological cruelty with an interest in art and philosophy. Hochschild writes that, whilst Conrad must have met dozens of candidates for Kurtz during his time in the Congo, Leon Rom, head of the Force Publique, bares his unmistakable stamp. Rom had a fence round his office with severed native heads on each slat, and a garden rockery full of rotting heads.

Hochschild comments, "High school teachers and college professors who have discussed this book in thousands of classrooms over the years tend to do so in terms of Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche; of classical myth, Victorian innocence, and original sin; of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism. European and American readers, not comfortable acknowledging the genocidal scale of the killing in Africa at the turn of the century, have cast *Heart of Darkness* loose from its historical moorings..."

"But Conrad himself wrote, '*Heart of Darkness* is experience ... pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case'." (p143) It had been Conrad's boyhood dream to discover the heart of Africa—now

that he had arrived he described what he found as "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience." Conrad later added, "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz."

With the industrial scale of murder brought by imperialism, the use of celebrities, lobbyists and "media campaigns raging in half a dozen countries on both sides of the Atlantic", the colonisation of Africa seems "strikingly close to our time," Hochschild writes. Leopold spent hundreds of millions bribing editors and journalists, and even published his own articles under a false name. In 1904 he formed his own Press Bureau, which published pro-Leopold books, pamphlets and attacks on political opponents. It subsidised a number of Belgian newspapers, and a magazine entitled *New Africa*. On its payroll were the Brussels correspondents of the *Times* of London and Germany's *Kölnische Zeitung*, as well as other editors and reporters from Austria to Italy.

The latter part of Hochschild's book is taken up with the activities of those who opposed Leopold's brutal Congo regime. The radical human rights campaigner E.D. Morel set up the Congo Reform Association (CRA) in Britain. From the early 1900s until after Leopold's death in 1909, Morel used information smuggled out of the Congo by missionaries and Leopold's employees to mount a campaign that won the support of prominent politicians and churchmen, both in Britain and the United States. One of these was Roger Casement—later to become the famous Irish republican—who for a time was British consul in the Congo.

Towards the end of his rule, Leopold, desperate to stop the flow of information about the Congo getting back to the West, filed a libel suit against the black American missionary William Sheppard. Morel called on Emile Vandervelde, a socialist lawyer and president of the Second International, who went to the Congo to defend Sheppard. Vandervelde made a brilliant defence speech and the publicity forced Leopold to retreat. One criticism which can be made of Hochschild's book is that this is virtually the only reference made to the role of the socialist movement in Europe in opposing imperialism.

In the conclusion, Hochschild again asks why has the genocidal rule of Leopold in the Congo made so little impact on popular consciousness? Did the Congo Reform Association campaign do any lasting good?

Leopold attempted to destroy the evidence: for eight days in 1908 furnaces in Leopold's Brussels headquarters were at full blast, as Congo State archives were tuned to ash. He sent word to his agent in the Congo to do likewise. This, the "politics of forgetting", was followed by the entire Belgian state.

More important were the limitations of the CRA. The campaign effectively folded after the Belgian government took over the colony in 1908, as though the issues were resolved. Yet most of the brutal state officials deployed under King Leopold were retained by the Belgian state. With the profits extracted from the Congo, huge sums in compensation were paid to the King by parliament. Whilst the policy of holding women and children hostage or burning villages ended, the Belgians continued to use forced labour.

Hochschild also criticises the almost exclusive focus of the CRA movement on Belgium, citing comparable brutality by the US in the Philippines, the British in Australia, the Germans in what is now Namibia. He points out that joint imperialist ventures in the Congo all utilised the Force Publique, while the French, German and Portuguese used the example of King Leopold's Congo as a template for their own systems of rubber extraction. It was safe for campaigners to single out the Congo because such outrage "did not involve British or American misdeeds, nor did it entail the diplomatic, trade or military consequences of taking on a major power like France or Germany." (p282)

Finally, in 1914, Britain and then America justified the outbreak of world war on the need to defend "brave little Belgium" from German aggression. Falsified stories were put out that German troops had committed mass rapes of Belgian women and cut off the hands and feet of

children. As Hochschild explains, "...no one in the Allied countries wanted to be reminded that, only a decade or two earlier, it was the King of the Belgians whose men in Africa had cut off hands." (p296)

There can be no wonder that in this reactionary climate, the very limited critique of imperialism made by the Congo reform movement was easily swept aside. Casement was executed by the British state in 1916 for his attempt to win German military support for the Irish republicans. Morel was sentenced to six months hard labour on trumped-up charges of sending antiwar literature to neutral countries. Both were deserted by their former supporters and admirers.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)