

King Leopold's Ghost



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ADAM HOCHSCHILD

Adam Hochschild was born and raised in New York City, and studied history and literature at Harvard University in the early 1960s. Immediately following his graduation, he worked with civil rights activists in Mississippi, and later with anti-government journalists in South Africa. In the mid-1970s, he co-founded the influential progressive magazine *Mother Jones*. Hochschild published his first book in 1986, a memoir called *Half the Way Home: A Memoir of Father and Son*. Since then, he's published a series of successful nonfiction works on a variety of human rights subjects, including the legacy of Josef Stalin, the Boer War in South Africa, the British Empire's sponsorship of slavery, and the Vietnam War. *King Leopold's Ghost*, published in 1998, was one of his most successful books. Hochschild continues to write and lecture across the world.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hochschild alludes on several occasions to Joseph Conrad's novella [Heart of Darkness](#) (first serialized in 1899, published in 1900). Conrad, who worked in the Congo as a young man, witnessed Belgian soldiers commit dozens of human rights atrocities on Congolese people. Many of these atrocities made their way into [Heart of Darkness](#), which is about a young European man, Marlow, who travels up the Congo River to investigate the life of the mysterious Mr. Kurtz, a brutal European colonialist. Hochschild suggests that Conrad partly modeled Mr. Kurtz on a real-life colonialist named Léon Rom, who—much like Kurtz in the book—was rumored to collect the heads of his Congolese victims. It's also worth mentioning Barbara Kingsolver's novel [The Poisonwood Bible](#) (1998), which takes place in the Congo, fifty years after the events of *King Leopold's Ghost* and alludes to many of King Leopold's human rights atrocities.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa
- **When Written:** 1996-1997
- **Where Written:** New York City, South Africa, the Congo
- **When Published:** Fall 1998
- **Genre:** Historical nonfiction
- **Setting:** The book is primarily set in the 19th century in the Congo, but it also takes place in parts of Europe (Belgium and England, namely) and describes some events from the

twentieth century

- **Antagonist:** King Leopold II of Belgium, imperialism, and racism could all be considered the antagonists of the book
- **Point of View:** third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Awards, awards, awards. Hochschild is no stranger to awards: throughout his career, he's either won or been nominated for the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Lionel Gelber Prize, the California Book Award, and the Duff Cooper Prize.

Don't be afraid of rejection. Though *King Leopold's Ghost* became a surprise bestseller and won a slew of major awards, it almost didn't get published! Hochschild submitted his manuscript to no less than ten different publishing houses, only one of which (Mariner Books) accepted his work.



PLOT SUMMARY

In the centuries following the discovery of the New World, the countries of Europe became very wealthy and powerful. Britain, Portugal, Spain, and France acquired new land and resources by colonizing parts of the Americas, Australia, Asia, and Africa. Belgium, as a small, relatively new European country, lagged far behind its rivals as an imperial power. In the late 19th century, King Leopold II of Belgium decided that he wanted to make Belgium a major empire by acquiring territory in Africa.

Leopold was an intelligent and ruthless man who wasn't afraid to lie or kill in order to expand Belgium's power. Throughout the 1870s, Leopold cunningly established a reputation as a great philanthropist and humanitarian who wanted to spread Christianity and civilization to Africa. Privately, however, Leopold aspired to rule over the land surrounding the Congo River in Africa, using the territory as a source of revenue for his country.

Leopold wanted Henry Morton Stanley, one of the most famous explorers of the era, to work for him in the Congo. In the late 1870s, Stanley sailed across the Congo River, becoming the first European to do so. Leopold arranged for Stanley to come to Belgium, and succeeded in charming and flattering Stanley into entering his employ. Stanley, who'd been born in a working-class Welsh household, was an intensely insecure young man who wanted to be accepted into the ranks of the European aristocracy. Stanley agreed to work for Leopold for five years, developing the Congo and building infrastructure there; he thought that doing so would help him

earn a reputation as an English gentleman, not just a great explorer. On Leopold's orders, Stanley swindled Congolese chiefs (most of whom had never seen writing before) into signing documents surrendering their lands to Leopold forever.

While Stanley worked at developing land in the Congo on behalf of Leopold, Leopold continued to offer awards and host benefits for philanthropic causes, ensuring that European elites thought of him favorably. At the same time, Leopold arranged for the government of the United States to formally recognize Leopold's landholdings in the Congo. He relied on Henry Shelton Sanford (a former American ambassador to Belgium) and Senator John Tyler Morgan (a white supremacist who wanted to send African Americans "back to Africa") to urge the American government to recognize Belgium's presence in the Congo. In part because American politicians believed that the Congo could be a future resettlement site for African Americans, the U.S. government formally recognized the Congo as a Belgian territory, which caused a domino effect whereby the major European powers had to recognize Belgium's presence in the Congo, too.

With his landholdings now secure, Leopold proceeded to develop his land. He used shockingly brutal methods to control the Congolese tribes. He also ordered his Belgian administrators in the Congo to enslave African people, first as ivory hunters and porters, and later as rubber harvesters. The work was exhausting, and anyone who tried to rebel or slack off was murdered by the Force Publique, the official army of the Belgian Congo.

Though thousands of Westerners visited the Congo in the 1880s and 90s, only a handful spoke out about the atrocities they witnessed there. An African American preacher named George Washington Williams, who had traveled to the Congo to explore the possibility of resettling African Americans there, wrote a series of scathing articles criticizing the brutality of the Force Publique. However, Williams died of tuberculosis shortly after penning his articles, which undercut his efficacy. Furthermore, Leopold's reputation as a philanthropist was so strong in America and Europe that few people took notice of the criticism.

Throughout the Belgians' time in the Congo, African tribes often rebelled against their masters' tyranny. While there were many uprisings, the Force Publique's technological advantages were enormous, and Belgian soldiers shot tens of thousands of Africans fighting for their freedom. The brutality of the Belgian regime in the Congo inspired one of the most famous books ever written, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad worked in the Congo for several years, and he may have based the character of Mr. Kurtz on a real-life Force Publique captain who was rumored to collect the heads of his African victims.

A turning point for publicity surrounding rights violations in the Congo came in the mid-1890s. A man named Edmund Dene Morel, who was working for a shipping company, realized that,

contrary to Leopold's claims, the Congo must rely on the slave labor; there was no other explanation for the imbalance of shipments in and out of the territory. Morel proved to be a formidable opponent for Leopold, since, like Leopold himself, he was a master of publicity. Morel founded a newspaper in which he criticized Leopold's cruelty in the Congo, and he assembled a large body of testimonies by witnesses to Belgian atrocity.

Morel's allies included an Irish government worker named Roger Casement, who also penned many articles condemning the treatment of Africans in the Congo. Paradoxically, like so many "liberal" Europeans of the era, Casement and Morel were shocked at the Belgians' treatment of the Congolese, but seemed not to disagree with the principle that, by and large, European countries had the right to colonize foreign territories and claim the land for themselves. Morel, it seems, took a condescending, paternalistic view of African people, even as he devoted his adult life to protecting them from exploitation.

In the early 20th century, Leopold was in his 70s. While he continued to work hard to control publicity surrounding the Congo, Morel and Casement proved too strong for him; by 1905, there was an international outcry surrounding Leopold's regime. Shortly afterwards, Leopold died, leaving his colonial properties to the Belgian government. Over time, the Belgian government announced human rights reforms in the Congo, convincing many that the "Congo question" had been solved for good.

The sad truth, however, is that although Morel and Casement accomplished a great deal, they didn't solve the problems of Western imperialism, either in the Congo or anywhere else. The Belgian administrators in the Congo continued to use forced African labor to mine for resources, for example. Furthermore, the Belgians' treatment of the Congolese, while despicable, wasn't tremendously different from the way other European colonialists treated native peoples in their own territories. The European powers joined together to condemn Belgium not just because of Belgium's unethical behavior but because Belgium was an easy target.

The legacy of imperialism continues today in the Congo. The Congolese people spent much of the 20th century under the rule of Joseph Mobutu, a U.S.-backed dictator who murdered hundreds of thousands of his own people. And just as under Leopold, billions of dollars worth of Congolese metal and rubber continue to flow out of the country and into the pockets of Western businesses. In many ways the Congo reform movement was a triumph of human rights activism, but in other ways, little has changed in the hundred years since the movement ended.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

King Leopold II – The titular figure of the book (and arguably its villain), King Leopold II was the longest-reigning monarch in Belgian history. During his reign, he amassed enormous landholdings in the African territory surrounding the Congo River. Determined to make Belgium a major international “player” (and amass a lavish fortune for himself), Leopold supported a series of policies that involved enslaving huge numbers of Congolese men, women, and children, and forcing them to gather ivory and rubber, which was then sold in Europe at an enormous profit. As Hochschild points out several times, Leopold II comes across as a Shakespearean villain rather than a real human being. He spent twenty years carefully establishing a reputation as a great philanthropist, in order to disguise his human rights abuses in the Congo. Even after he’d secured land in the Congo, he proved himself to be a master of public relations by manipulating politicians, journalists, and philanthropists to disguise any hint of wrongdoing on his part. His brutality and greed have left a horrific and enduring legacy in the Congo.

Edmund Dene Morel – An early human rights activist, and arguably the “hero” of the book, Edmund Dene Morel was one of the first Europeans to recognize the existence of slavery in the Belgian-controlled Congo and publicize his findings. While he was a young man working for a shipping company, Morel discovered a trading imbalance between the Congo and Europe: rubber and ivory flowed out of Africa, but nothing but guns and ammunition entered it. Concluding that the Belgians practiced slavery, Morel published a series of articles that galvanized the European public into action. For more than ten years, Morel recruited hundreds of journalists, statesmen, and businessmen to his cause, and this effort arguably convinced the Belgian Parliament to reform some of their practices in the Congo. Morel’s great contribution to history, Hochschild argues, wasn’t simply to “solve” the problem of human rights abuses in the Congo (in fact, human rights abuses continue there to this day); rather, his activism has provided a model for other activists for more than a hundred years.

John Rowlands / Henry Morton Stanley Henry Morton Stanley was the first European explorer to sail all the way across the Congo River. An ambitious yet intensely insecure man, he was born into a poor Welsh family and he worked hard to establish himself, first as a reporter, then as an explorer. After tracking down David Livingstone, Stanley entered the employ of Leopold II, who paid him large sums to secure landholdings in the Congo and build infrastructure there. Stanley is a complex character: he was desperate for acceptance among the English elite, and Hochschild argues that, in many ways, he worked hard throughout his life to ensure that he would receive this acceptance. At times, Stanley criticized Leopold’s cruelty toward the Congolese, but it’s also clear that Stanley himself was a cruel master to the Congolese: he didn’t shy away from using torture and intimidation when he

thought it was necessary.

Roger Casement – Irish government worker who spent many years in the Congo observing human rights abuses before joining with Edmund Dene Morel to speak out against King Leopold II and the Belgian government in the Congo. Like Morel, Casement had a talent for publicity, and he was instrumental in recruiting many famous writers and statesmen to the Congo reform cause. Casement’s life ended tragically, however, when he voiced his support for Irish independence from Great Britain. Despite having been knighted, Casement was arrested, convicted of treason, and executed at the start of the First World War.

William Sheppard – African American explorer and priest who traveled to the Congo in the 1890s and became a key opponent of the Belgian administration there. Sheppard joined forces with Edmund Dene Morel and Roger Casement to criticize King Leopold II for his human rights abuses. Later, he was tried in the Congo for supporting Congolese resistance movements. His acquittal further strengthened the Congo reform movement.

Nzinga Mbemba Affonso (Affonso I) – 15th century king who ruled near the Congo River. Affonso I was popular among the early Portuguese colonialists who visited the Congo River because he wanted to modernize his kingdom with European technology and religion and he supported a slave trade. However, Affonso I became more opposed to European colonization and slave trading toward the end of his life, by which time Portugal had already strengthened its position in the Congo.

MINOR CHARACTERS

George Washington Williams – African American journalist who traveled to the Congo in 1890 and became the first Westerner to write about the human rights abuses he saw there. While Williams died of tuberculosis shortly after publishing his first articles criticizing the Belgian administration, his work helped spark an international Congo reform movement.

Father Achte – European priest who was captured by rebel Congolese soldiers. Much to Achte’s surprise, he was treated respectfully and hospitably in captivity and was subsequently released.

Albert I – The nephew and successor of Leopold II on the Belgian throne.

Archduchess Marie-Henriette – Unloved wife of King Leopold II.

President Chester A. Arthur – American President whose administration was the first to formally recognize King Leopold II’s landholdings in the Congo, setting in motion a series of atrocities in the region.

Chancellor Otto von Bismarck – Leader and unifier of the modern German state, and one of the architects of the Berlin conference of the 1890s, which set in motion the “Scramble for Africa,” during which the European powers divided up most of the African continent.

Edgar Canisius – American state agent who worked in the Congo and gathered information about Belgian human rights abuses.

Diogo Cão – Portuguese captain who led the earliest European expedition to the Congo River.

Charlotte, Empress of Mexico – The sister of Leopold II, who went insane around the time that her husband was killed.

Joseph Conrad – The late 19th and early 20th century author Joseph Conrad (born Konrad Korzeniowski) worked aboard a ship in the Congo while he was a young man; his horrific experiences there influenced the plot of his most famous book, [Heart of Darkness](#).

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – Author of the *Sherlock Holmes* books, and an advocate for human rights during the Congo reform movement.

Emin Pasha – British-backed governor of the Sudan, who faced a sudden Muslim uprising in 1886.

William Gladstone – Prime Minister of Great Britain in the late Victorian era.

Ilanga – Congolese woman who told Edgar Canisius about her suffering at the hands of the Belgian army in the Congo.

Henry Kowalsky – American lobbyist hired by Leopold II to control the controversy surrounding the Congo reform movement, but who ultimately switched sides and told the public that Leopold was trying to bribe American politicians. This greatly damaged Leopold’s reputation.

Samuel Lapsley – American missionary who traveled to the Congo with William Sheppard.

Vachel Lindsay – Late 19th and early 20th century American poet whose lines about “King Leopold’s ghost” give the book its title.

David Livingstone – British explorer whose disappearance into the “heart of Africa” prompted an international effort to rescue him, (supposedly) culminating in Henry Morton Stanley’s famous greeting, “Doctor Livingstone, I presume?”

Louise – Daughter of Leopold II, who suffered from mental illness for most of her life.

Patrice Lumumba – The first democratically elected leader of the Congo, who was assassinated in the 1950s with the support of the American government because he made a statement suggesting that he would interfere with American business interests in the country.

Jules Marchal – Belgian diplomat who, during the 1970s,

discovered that the Belgian government had covered up its human rights abuses in the Congo under Leopold II. He published a four-volume history of the matter.

Joseph Mobutu – Dictatorial, American-sponsored successor of Patrice Lumumba.

Ludovic Moncheur – Belgian ambassador to the United States in the 1890s.

Senator John Tyler Morgan – White supremacist senator from Alabama who was instrumental in drumming up support for Belgian occupation of the Congo, and who believed that the Congo could serve as a future resettlement site for African Americans.

William Morrison – Religious minister who collaborated with William Sheppard in the 1890s to denounce the human rights atrocities in the Congo.

Napoleon III – Emperor of France, who arranged for Charlotte to become the Empress of Mexico.

Mulume Niama – Chief of the Sanga tribe in the Congo, who led a heroic but failed rebellion against the Belgian overlords.

Alice Pike – Young heiress who had a romance with Henry Morton Stanley, but eventually broke off the relationship to marry another man.

Captain Léon Rom – Captain in the Force Publique, the official military force of the Belgian Congo, who was famed for his cruelty and may have served as a partial model for Mr. Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s novella [Heart of Darkness](#).

General Henry Shelton Sanford – Connecticut-born man who served as ambassador to Belgium, became an ally of Leopold II, and was later instrumental in recruiting Henry Morton Stanley to work for Leopold.

Hezekiah Andrew Shanu – Nigerian man who risked his life to supply Edmund Dene Morel with information about human rights abuses in the Congo.

Stephanie – Middle child of King Leopold II.

Charles Stokes – White officer in the Congo whose execution, supported by the Force Publique, caused an international outcry and drew new attention to the human rights abuses in the territory.

Dorothy Tennant – Wife of Henry Morton Stanley.

Tippu Tip – Afro-Arab leader and slave-trader who briefly formed an alliance with the Belgian governors in the Congo.

Mark Twain – Famous American writer and humorist who also served as an important advocate for human rights during the Congo reform movement.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



IMPERIALISM

King Leopold's Ghost describes a period of history during which the Western powers—European countries, along with the United States—exerted an unprecedented amount of control over the rest of the world. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Western powers controlled huge territories in Asia, Africa, South America, and Australia, exemplifying a form of statecraft known as imperialism. These imperialist powers claimed to be the rightful owners of the territories they controlled, and they exploited their new territories' natural resources, vastly increasing their own wealth and power at the expense of those who already lived there. *King Leopold's Ghost* is about Belgium's attempts to build an empire for itself in the Congo, but the book simultaneously serves as a general critique of imperialism.

The right to land ownership is at the heart of the imperialist project. The Western powers of the 19th century acted as if the land of Africa, South America, and other continents was their rightful property, rather than the property of native people. Over the course of the century, the Western powers offered many different reasons for their ownership rights: they claimed they needed the territory in order to spread the Christian religion, they claimed it was their “destiny” to own the territory, they claimed that the territory was deserted (even though there were native people living there), and they claimed that they wanted to help the native peoples by teaching them about civilization. In addition to these four reasons, Belgian administrators, commanded by King Leopold II, offered a further, even more basic justification: they legally owned the Congo. In reality, Belgian colonists swindled Congolese chiefs, many of whom had never seen written documents before, into signing contracts that granted the Belgian government permanent ownership of the region. Records show that Belgian administrators knew full-well that the Congolese chiefs didn't understand legal contracts fully; there's even some evidence that they got the chiefs drunk in order to ensure that they would sign contracts. The fact that the Belgian administrators would use trickery and manipulation suggests that they didn't believe that they had any right to the Congo; they knew that the only way they could access the territory was by conning the native people.

Once Western powers had gained access to and justified their ownership of foreign land, they set to work exploiting the land's resources. In the case of Belgium, for instance, Congo administrators enslaved native Congolese people to hunt elephants for ivory and extract rubber from rubber vines. Because Belgium did not pay for labor, and because it

technically owned all of the Congo, the ivory and rubber industries yielded enormous profits at minimal cost. While Belgium was unusually brutal to the native people in the Congo, its basic procedure—gaining access to foreign land, justifying its presence there, and then using the natural resources to make money—was no different than that used by the other Western powers in their own imperialist ventures. By studying the history of Belgian imperialism and imperialism in general, Hochschild paints a bleak picture of people's capacity for dishonesty and cruelty. Furthermore, he makes it clear that the legacy of imperialism hasn't disappeared: the continued strength of Western countries in the 21st century is largely the result of 19th century imperialism and the theft of native lands and resources.



PUBLICITY AND MASS COMMUNICATION

In addition to detailing the history of imperialism, *King Leopold's Ghost* studies another important aspect of late 19th and early 20th century political history: the rise of mass communication. Throughout the 19th century, newspaper circulation grew enormously, as did the literacy rate in the Western world. Furthermore, telegraph networks connected different parts of the world, ensuring that news traveled fast. At a time when international mass communication was a relatively new invention, some, such as King Leopold II, used the media to further their immoral ends, while others, such as Edmund Dene Morel, used publicity as a force for good.

Hochschild characterizes King Leopold II of Belgium as a master of public relations who understood that it was possible to control the way the international community perceived him, thereby using his international reputation as a smokescreen for his actions. In order to craft a useful reputation, Leopold II publicized acts of humanitarianism and generosity (such as making charitable donations and organizing conferences). As a result, word of Leopold's generosity and kindness spread throughout European newspapers, until he had acquired an international reputation as a good man. The “good PR” that Leopold created for himself acted as a smokescreen for his real intentions: founding a for-profit colony in the Congo and enslaving the Congolese people in order to grow his private fortune.

Hochschild also shows how Leopold used mass communication to master another public relations technique: obfuscation (making information deliberately unclear or confusing). Leopold spent years establishing the International African Association, a group supposedly devoted to charity. Then, when he was preparing to annex the Congo, he gave his administrative group a nearly identical set of initials, which caused international confusion as to whether his intervention in the Congo was a charitable act. In general, Leopold used jargon and confusing language in order to mislead the international community and

hide the brutal facts of his tyrannical regime in the Congo. Sadistic though he was, Leopold II was decades ahead of his time: he used cutting-edge media tools to wage a full-scale PR campaign, fooling Europe into believing that a mass-murderer was a great humanitarian.

Although Hochschild is highly critical of Leopold's manipulative use of media publicity, he shows how sincere, deeply moral figures of the era used the same tools for good. Edmund Dene Morel, one of the first powerful Europeans to realize the truth about the Congo, used his own knack for publicity to wage a PR campaign against Leopold. He founded newspapers with enormous circulations and penned long articles condemning Leopold's regime. Whereas Leopold relied on obfuscation and outright lies about the Congo, Morel had an important weapon on his side: the truth. His most effective articles were clearly-written attacks on the injustices of the Belgian regime in the Congo. As with Leopold's charitable donations, Morgan's PR campaign had a "trickle down effect": it inspired other journalists and activists to join the Congo reform movement, gradually turning the tides against Leopold.

Hochschild argues that there is nothing inherently good or bad about publicity in an age of mass-communication: rather, publicity is a "neutral multiplier," which can be used as a force for good or evil. Ultimately, however, Hochschild (who has spent most of his adult life writing about human rights causes around the world for newspapers and magazines) suggests that truth is more powerful than a PR campaign based on lies. Morel's efforts to reveal and publicize the truth about the Congo resulted in some reform of the Belgian government's human rights policies. Furthermore, Hochschild's own book helps to expose King Leopold's atrocities, furthering the cause of human rights.



RACISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a time of widespread, normalized racism in Europe and America. Many of the most powerful people in the

Western world believed that the native peoples of Africa, Australia, Asia, and the Americas were second-class human beings, or not human beings at all. Even some of the liberals of the era adopted a condescending attitude (an attitude that, by 21st century standards, would seem downright racist) when discussing minorities and native peoples. The international controversy surrounding the Belgian regime in the Congo brought out the racism of Westerners on both sides of the debate. However, it also pushed many liberals of the era to become more inclusive in their thinking and embrace a doctrine of universal human rights.

As Hochschild shows in his book, the international controversy over the Congo reform movement was not a case of racists arguing with tolerant people: rather, it was a case of *extremely* racist people arguing against more subtly racist advocates (with

the perspective of the Congolese largely ignored on the international stage). On one extreme, the Congo controversy involved powerful, wealthy people, such as King Leopold II, who believed that Africans were no better than animals. Leopold, as well as many of his administrators in the Congo, saw the people of Africa as chattel, to be enslaved and put to work for his own benefit. Furthermore, Leopold was able to gain control of the Congo because he successfully manipulated the deep racism of white supremacists, such as the American senator John Tyler Morgan, who supported Leopold because he wanted the Congo to become a resettlement colony for African Americans. For many years, Leopold was able to exploit the people of the Congo, not only because he was a master of publicity and deception, but because a large chunk of the European population believed that Africans were sub-human, and had no rights worth protecting.

Even on the other side of the Congo reform movement controversy, many of the advocates for the Congolese people took a condescending, paternalistic stance on rights. For most of his career, Edmund Dene Morel (arguably the most important advocate for Congolese rights) made statements in which he treated the Congolese people like children. Furthermore, many of Morel's allies believed that the Congolese, despite deserving the basic human rights of life and liberty, lacked the intelligence to take care of themselves. In other words, these late nineteenth century liberals objected to Leopold II's cruelty, but did not question the underlying appropriateness of European imperialism. In general, even though the Congo reform movement viewed African slaves as human beings, it still thought of them as lesser human beings who needed the help and charity of sophisticated Europeans in order to survive. A famous quote from the missionary and humanitarian Albert Schweitzer epitomizes the "soft racism" of the liberal position on the Congolese: "The African is my brother, but he is my younger brother."

But even if racism existed on both sides of the Congo controversy, the debate over Congolese slavery pushed some liberals to move past some of their racism and advocate a program of universal human rights. While Morel made many condescending and racist statements about Africans in the 1890s and 1900s, his views on the matter evolved throughout his life. Toward the end of the Congo reform movement controversy, Morel regularly argued that Belgium had no right to the land of the Congo—a statement that implied that Africans had a right to their own land, not just the right to be free. At the end of his life, Morel went further, arguing that Africans and other non-Western peoples should have the right to govern themselves, instead of relying on European governance. In general, the Congo controversy inspired Morel, and many other activists of the era, to stop thinking of the Congolese as immature, second-class human beings, and start thinking of them as human beings who had the right to be free,

own property, and govern themselves. In this way, the Congo controversy was an important milestone in the history of human rights, encouraging many thinkers to push past their own soft bigotry and embrace the notion of true human equality.



INDIFFERENCE AND ACTIVISM

Throughout *King Leopold's Ghost*, Hochschild tries to answer a profound question: why did millions of educated, “civilized” people who had heard about the cruelty in the Congo sit back and do nothing? Hochschild offers many different reasons: the racism of America and Western Europe at the time, the “mythology” of imperialism, the sophisticated publicity maneuvers of King Leopold II, etc. In the end, though, Hochschild keeps coming back to the same disturbing truth: ordinary human beings have the ability to ignore the suffering of other human beings.

Hochschild shows that many people—perhaps even most—are willing to overlook cruelty if it doesn't concern them personally. Indeed, one of the most striking things about the history of the Belgian Congo is that thousands of Westerners visited the Congo in the 1880s and 90s, and almost none of them spoke out against the atrocities they witnessed. *King Leopold's Ghost* further shows how human beings can be enlisted to do evil themselves. Most of the officers and soldiers who committed human rights atrocities in the Congo were young, idealistic Europeans who thought that traveling to the Congo was a good career move. While few of them had a criminal record or any history of cruelty, the fact that their superiors were ordering them to torture and kill Congolese people was enough to convince them to obey barbaric orders (a reaction that Hochschild compares with that of the genocidal Nazis who claimed that they had only been following orders). Bizarrely, many of the officers who tortured and murdered Congolese people claimed that they didn't like hurting other people, or even said that they didn't “feel like themselves” when they hurt their victims. This might suggest that human beings have the power to “dissociate” themselves from their own acts of cruelty, in effect ignoring their own evil deeds.

Edmund Dene Morel, one of the key crusaders against King Leopold II's regime in the Congo, wasn't a particularly extraordinary man either: he was a humble, working-class business employee who decided to stand up for justice rather than simply continue to follow orders. During his years with the Congo reform movement, Morel became increasingly supportive of African property rights, and, as an older man, he fought for a variety of great humanitarian causes around the world. Furthermore, Morel's activism inspired other people around the world to stand up for human rights. This suggests that witnessing injustice can bring out ordinary people's virtue and talent, as well as their indifference. In all, the history of the Congo reform movement paints an ambiguous view of human

nature. On one hand, it is depressingly clear that human beings can be cruel and sadistic if pushed by their superiors. Furthermore, many humans will remain apathetic to cruelty, as long as the cruelty doesn't affect them directly. However, Hochschild also shows that ordinary people can summon the courage to become activists and fight for their fellow human beings. In the 21st century, the world is full of cruelty and injustice—it's up to us to choose whether we want to tolerate it or fight it.



HISTORIOGRAPHY AND BIAS

King Leopold's Ghost isn't just a work of history; it's a meditation on historiography, the study of how primary sources are interpreted, reinterpreted, and shaped into a supposedly “true” version of the past. In the course of examining the history of the Belgian occupation of the Congo, Hochschild asks a series of important questions. First, which people from the era of the Belgian occupation had the luxury of writing down their accounts of what happened? Second, which accounts of the Belgian occupation have been preserved over the last century? Finally, how might the answers to questions 1 and 2 skew our understanding of the Belgian occupation?

Hochschild emphasizes that, for the most part, only Europeans and Americans wrote accounts of the Congo before the middle of the 20th century. The Congolese people themselves had no written language at the time when they first made contact with Europeans. Furthermore, very few Congolese people learned how to write during the Belgian occupation, because Belgian authorities actively deterred Africans from educating themselves in any way. The striking absence of native Congolese voices in the history of the Congo skews our understanding of history in two important ways. First, it underrepresents the brutality of the Belgian regime in the Congo (since the people who endured this brutality rarely got a chance to tell their stories), which makes the Belgians seem somewhat more benevolent than they were. Second, it portrays the Congolese people as victims, rendering them as suffering bodies without any personality or individuality. In this way, the historical record reinforces the “soft bigotry” of the Congo reform movement (see Racism and human rights theme).

Hochschild admits that his own account of Congolese history suffers from bias, due in part to the lack of Congolese voices. However, he tries to counterbalance his historiographical problems in two main ways. First, he reads between the lines in Belgian administrators' accounts of Congolese uprisings in order to paint vivid portraits of the Congolese people who heroically resisted tyranny in their homeland. In this way, he offers a version of history that respects the Congolese for their bravery and intelligence, rather than simply depicting them as passive victims. Second, he gives a thorough, unmitigated account of Belgian cruelty in the Congo. This is possible

because many Belgian officials didn't try to censor their actions—on the contrary, they were proud of killing and torturing Africans. In order to write a thorough account of the history of the Congo, Hochschild spent years researching historical records, including documents that the Belgian government kept hidden from the public for most of the 20th century. *King Leopold's Ghost* isn't a perfectly authoritative account of what happened in the Congo (as Hochschild would be the first to admit). Nevertheless, Hochschild maintains that by understanding the main sources of bias and then working around them, it's possible to write a history of the Congo that at least approaches the truth.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



MONUMENTS AND PALACES

King Leopold II used much of the revenue from his territory in the Congo to build elaborate palaces and monuments throughout Belgium. The palaces and monuments of Belgium could be said to symbolize Leopold's hypocrisy, and, more generally, the parasitic relationship between Western prosperity and African exploitation.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *King Leopold's Ghost* published in 2005.

Introduction Quotes

☞ One problem, of course, is that nearly all of this vast river of words is by Europeans or Americans. There was no written language in the Congo when Europeans first arrived, and this inevitably skewed the way that history was recorded. We have dozens of memoirs by the territory's white officials; we know the changing opinions of key people in the British Foreign Office, sometimes on a day-by-day basis. But we do not have a full-length memoir or complete oral history of a single Congolese during the period of the greatest terror. Instead of African voices from this time there is largely silence.

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5


Explanation and Analysis

In the introduction, Hochschild discusses the scope and goals of his history of the Belgian occupation of the Congo. Hochschild intends to give a thorough, comprehensive account of King Leopold II's rule over the Congo in the late 19th and early 20th century, but there is an important historiographical problem to consider: even though the people of the Congo river basin are at the center of Hochschild's book, there are very few accounts of the Belgian occupation from the native Congolese. The reason for this is twofold: first, many of the Congolese tribes didn't use a written language, and, second, the Belgian administrators and soldiers in the Congo actively prevented the Congolese from learning how to read or write. The result is that any history of the Congo runs the risk of reinforcing the strong European bias of its sources. An example of this would be to repeat the (untrue) claim that the Congolese were passive victims of Belgian rule, rather than active resisters of a violent regime.

By stating the potential sources of bias up front, Hochschild hopes to avoid them. While it's impossible for him to "do justice" to Congolese points of view on the Belgian occupation, Hochschild makes an effort to include Africans' accounts of the occupation whenever possible. Moreover, he tries to give a sense of the different responses that different Congolese tribes had to the Belgian invasion. In all, Hochschild shows in this passage that he is conscious of Eurocentric bias in the history of the Congo. While he can't entirely circumvent these forms of bias, he makes an effort to at least be up front about the methodological issues that are affecting his ability to represent the past as he believes it should be represented.

Prologue Quotes

☞ For Europeans, Africa remained the supplier of valuable raw materials—human bodies and elephant tusks. But otherwise they saw the continent as faceless, blank, empty a place on the map waiting to be explored, one ever more frequently described by the phrase that says more about the seer than the seen: the Dark Continent.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

When Western Europeans first began to explore sub-Saharan Africa in search of land, slaves, and raw materials (like gold or ivory) for their own societies, they did not yet have the technology to explore much of inland Africa. The

mystery of the interior of Africa coupled with the danger and promise associated with exploring for resources meant that the European view of Africa became a romanticized one, encapsulated by the phrase “the Dark Continent.” In addition to alluding to the mystery and danger that, for Europeans, characterized the African continent, the phrase “the Dark Continent” also became part of a moral alibi for colonialism.

As Hochschild strongly implies here, it’s hardly a coincidence that Europeans began to conceive of Africa as a barbaric land around the same time that they began stealing from Africans. The European theft of African property—not to mention African people—necessitated some kind of religious or moral justification, which came in the form of portraying Africa as an uncivilized place. In doing so, Europe created the illusion that Africans were incapable of governing themselves or using their own resources, which suggested that Europeans had a right to rule over Africans and take ivory and gold for themselves. Ultimately, the phrase “the Dark continent” reflects the European attempt to excuse its own theft: Europeans told themselves that Africans were barbaric and altogether incapable of taking care of their own land and resources. Therefore, European rule could provide the service of bringing light and civilization to the “Dark Continent”—the extraction of resources, then, could be framed as mere compensation for a good deed.



between 19th century European economics and values. In other words, he shows how European imperialists used concepts like civilization and Christianity as justifications for their theft of African property.

For many centuries, Europeans colonized the African continent, stealing ivory, gold, and other valuable goods, and enslaving African people. But in the 19th century, Hochschild argues, the rate at which Europe stole from Africa accelerated, reflecting the beginning of the modern industrial era. Europeans needed African gold, iron, and rubber to build their steam engines and cars. Not coincidentally, Hochschild implies, it was during the 19th century that Europeans became more confident that their colonial projects were actually *benefitting* the people of Africa. They claimed that imperialism brought culture, religion, and enlightenment to the “barbaric” African tribes.

The passage suggests that evangelism and enlightenment were smokescreens for Europe’s real priority—robbing Africa of its natural wealth. However, Hochschild is *not* saying that every European who colonized Africa in the 19th century was a liar. There were many Europeans who sincerely believed that they had a moral duty to baptize Africans, teach them how to read and write, etc. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Christianity and civilization, regardless of their legitimacy as ideas, functioned as convenient justifications for the European imperialist project.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● Underlying much of Europe's excitement was the hope that Africa would be a source of raw materials to feed the Industrial Revolution, just as the search for raw materials—slaves—for the colonial plantation economy had driven most of Europe’s earlier dealings with Africa. Expectations quickened dramatically after prospectors discovered diamonds in South Africa in 1867 and gold some two decades later. But Europeans liked to think of themselves as having higher motives. The British, in particular, fervently believed in bringing “civilization” and Christianity to the natives; they were curious about what lay in the continent’s unknown interior; and they were filled with righteousness about combating slavery.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hochschild gives a sense of the relationship

Chapter 2 Quotes

●● Before the guests dispersed to their respective countries, they voted to establish the International African Association. Leopold magnanimously volunteered space in Brussels for the organization headquarters. There were to be national committees of the association set up in all the participating countries, as well as an international committee. Leopold was elected by acclamation as the international committee’s first chairman.

Related Characters: King Leopold II

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In the early chapters of the book, Hochschild shows how cleverly Leopold II manipulated international opinion in order to position himself as a benevolent philanthropist. In private, Leopold wanted to make Belgium a major colonial



power, rivaling France and England. However, he recognized that, if he tried to seize land in Africa, other European powers would stop him right away. So Leopold tried another approach—he hosted lavish international conferences on evangelism and philanthropy in Africa, strongly implying that he was interested in educating and civilizing the people of Africa rather than making himself rich.

As the passage suggests, Leopold’s public relations measures were wildly successful. He invited hundreds of rich, powerful people to Belgium, and succeeded in fooling them into thinking that he was a sincere humanitarian. The passage is an especially clear example of how Europeans of the 19th century used evangelism and charity as alibis for their real mission—making themselves wealthy. In a sense, Leopold’s plan to strengthen his country while pretending to be a “do-gooder” could be said to encapsulate the actions taken by much of Western Europe throughout the Industrial Revolution.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛☛ By the time Stanley and others working for the king were done, the blue flag with the gold star fluttered over the villages and territories, Stanley claimed, of more than 450 Congo basin chiefs. The texts varied, but many of the treaties gave the king a complete trading monopoly, even as he placated European and American questioners by insisting that he was opening up Africa to free trade. More important, chiefs signed over their land to Leopold, and they did so for almost nothing.

Related Characters: John Rowlands / Henry Morton Stanley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

In the 1880s, Leopold II worked hard to secure territories for himself in the area of Africa surrounding the Congo River. In order to do so, he sent Henry Morton Stanley, one of the most famous explorers of the era, to the Congo to secure legal agreements with hundreds of Congolese tribal chiefs. Leopold’s goal was to give himself legal ownership of the Congo river basin. His plan proved wildly successful: within a few years, Stanley had succeeded in making “agreements” with almost every Congolese chief.

The truth, of course, was that Stanley had conned most of the Congolese chiefs into surrendering their people’s land


without knowing it. Most of the Congolese chiefs had never seen written language, let alone a legal document, in their lives. They didn’t fully understand what they were doing when they signed the documents. Furthermore, Stanley used bribery and the offer of alcohol to ensure that tribal chiefs complied with his demands. Finally, it’s quite likely that the tribal chiefs were frightened of Stanley and his armed men, and signed the legal documents to avoid violence.

In short, Hochschild makes it clear that Leopold II was able to gain “legal” ownership of the Congo because he used bribery, manipulation, and intimidation. The same could be said of almost any Western imperialist project in the 19th century—around the world, European and American empire-builders reached questionable “agreements” with native peoples, providing a sketchy legal basis for their subsequent theft and colonization and undercutting the moral claims they made on behalf of their actions.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☛☛ As he was winning congressional support for Leopold’s claim to the Congo, Sanford discovered an unexpected ally. Senator John Tyler Morgan of Alabama, a former Confederate brigadier general, was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Like most white Southern politicians of the era, he was frightened by the specter of millions of freed slaves and their descendants harboring threatening dreams of equality ... Morgan fretted for years over the “problem” of this growing black population. His solution, endorsed by many, was simple: send them back to Africa!

Related Characters: General Henry Shelton Sanford, Senator John Tyler Morgan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hochschild describes how Leopold II was able to get international recognition for his landholdings in the Congo. He sent one of his allies, Henry Shelton Sanford, to the U.S. to persuade Senator John Tyler Morgan to recognize the Congo under Leopold. Morgan, a white supremacist in an era when many American politicians were openly racist, was a strong supporter of the “back to Africa” movement—the proposal that African Americans move to African resettlement colonies, rather than continue living in the U.S. Sanford was able to use Morgan’s desire to send African Americans out of the country as leverage for



Leopold's own interests. Morgan believed that by supporting Leopold II now, he would have a place to send African Americans later on.

The passage shows how diabolically clever Sanford was in finding support for Leopold's landholdings in Africa. In general, Leopold was a master of public relations and politics: he knew how to persuade other people that their interests aligned with his own. Furthermore, the passage shows that Leopold II cannot be scapegoated for the human rights atrocities of the Congo: Leopold only succeeded in gaining control over the Congo because of the enthusiastic support of the international community, including racist American politicians such as John Tyler Morgan.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ The king raised some money through selling bonds, although far less than he had hoped. He wrote to the Pope, urging the Catholic Church to buy Congo bonds to encourage the spread of Christ's word.

Related Characters: King Leopold II

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

King Leopold was a skillful politician, and he knew how to manipulate his allies on the international stage to further his interests. Here, Hochschild shows how Leopold used his connections to the Catholic Church to convince the Pope to support his ambitions in the Congo. Leopold claimed that he was trying to spread Catholicism to the people of the Congo; therefore, the Pope believed it was his duty to buy Leopold's Congo bonds and support the Belgian presence in Africa.

The passage is an especially striking example of how King Leopold managed to be "all things to all people." A master politician, as well as an amoral tyrant, Leopold had no qualms about lying to the Pope about his intentions in the Congo; rather, he said whatever needed to be said to get the Pope on his side. Throughout his long reign, Leopold charmed hundreds of powerful religious and political leaders into supporting him; he could never have maintained control over the Congo if he hadn't been such a charismatic liar.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ By the time he went to the Congo in 1890, close to a thousand Europeans and Americans had visited the territory or worked there. Williams was the only one to speak out fully and passionately and repeatedly about what others denied or ignored. The years to come would make his words ever more prophetic.

Related Characters: George Washington Williams

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 114


Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 7, Hochschild discusses George Washington Williams, one of the first Westerners to criticize the Belgian administration of the Congo. Williams witnessed Belgian officers beating Congolese women and children, and he also saw Congolese adults being forced to work as slaves. As Hochschild notes, hundreds of Westerners had visited the Congo and seen the same things as Williams—however, none of them spoke out about what they'd seen.

Why was Williams the first Westerner to criticize the Belgians in the Congo? In part, Hochschild suggests, he did so because he was in a special position to sympathize with the Congolese. He was African American, and, therefore, he knew first-hand what it felt like to be treated as a second-class human being. In an era when many Westerners (even liberals) were openly racist and considered Africans to be subhuman, Williams was a steadfast believer in the humanity and dignity of the Congolese people. However, Hochschild also suggests that Williams spoke out about what he'd seen because he was a particularly daring, single-minded person. Disturbingly, most human beings choose to remain silent about human rights abuses when authorities sanction those abuses; Williams, however, was the rare kind of person who speaks out about injustice instead of passively accepting it.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ Few Europeans working for the regime left records of their shock at the sight of officially sanctioned terror. The white men who passed through the territory as military officers, steamboat captains, or state or concession company officials generally accepted the use of the chicotte as unthinkingly as hundreds of thousands of other men in uniform would accept their assignments, a half-century later, to staff the Nazi and Soviet concentration camps.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hochschild analogizes the state of the Congo under Belgian occupation to the state of Nazi concentration camps during World War II. There were tens of thousands of young, idealistic Europeans working in the Congo in the 1890s; for the most part, these Europeans followed their orders and killed and tortured the Congolese people without question. In much the same way, many of the people who became Nazis in the 1930s and 40s were young, ordinary-seeming Germans who nonetheless proceeded to beat, torture, and kill Jews because their commanding officers told them to do so.

Hochschild's point, in short, is that obedience to authority can be a dangerous thing. Few human beings would independently choose to hurt other people. However, many human beings would—and do—agree to hurt other human beings when they're ordered to do so. Historians and philosophers have argued that atrocities such as the Holocaust and the Belgian occupation of the Congo would never have occurred had it not been for humans' ability to obey without question.

☛ In 1887, the king asked him to serve as governor of the colony's eastern province, with its capital at Stanley Falls, and Tippu Tip accepted; several relatives occupied posts under him. At this early stage, with Leopold's military forces spread thin, the bargain offered something to both men. (The king also contracted to buy the freedom of several thousand of Tippu Tip's slaves, but one condition of their freedom, these "liberated" slaves and many others quickly discovered, was a seven-year enlistment term in the Force Publique.) Although Leopold managed for most of his life to be all things to all people, the spectacle of this antislavery crusader doing so much business with Africa's most prominent slave-dealer helped spur the first murmurings against the king in Europe.

Related Characters: Tippu Tip, King Leopold II

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the 1870s, Leopold II gained a reputation as a great humanitarian, and a firm opponent of slavery. Leopold



was able to gain such a reputation because he contrasted his own beliefs with those of "Afro-Arab slavers." Arab slave traders were a convenient bogeyman, which Leopold used to give a sense of urgency to his "civilizing" project in the Congo—he claimed that he wanted to protect the Africans from falling under Arab control.

However, as the passage shows, Leopold II clearly didn't believe that Afro-Arab slave traders were the enemy, as he'd always claimed in public. On the contrary, Leopold was 1) willing to enslave the Congolese people, and 2) willing to cooperate with Arab slave traders, such as Tippu Tip. For several years, Tip, one of the most prominent slave traders in sub-Saharan Africa, was Leopold's loyal servant—a clear reminder of Leopold's moral hypocrisy.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☛ We do not know whether Rom was already acting out any of these dreams of power, murder, and glory when Conrad passed through Leopoldville in 1890 or whether he only talked of them. Whatever the case, the moral landscape of [Heart of Darkness](#) and the shadowy figure at its center are the creations not just of a novelist but of an open-eyed observer who caught the spirit of a time and place with piercing accuracy.

Related Characters: Joseph Conrad, Captain Léon Rom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

In this short chapter, Hochschild discusses the life and career of Joseph Conrad, one of the most famous writers of the early 20th century. As a young man, Conrad worked in the Congo driving a steamship. As such, Conrad witnessed human rights atrocities—he saw Belgian soldiers beating and killing Congolese women and children. Later in his life, Conrad wrote a novella, *Heart of Darkness*, in which a man named Marlow travels to the Congo and witnesses human atrocities against the Congolese. Hochschild argues that Conrad's novella, despite being a work of fiction, was based on actual events that Conrad witnessed during his time in Africa. For example, the character Mr. Kurtz, often considered the antagonist of the novella, may have been based on a real-life Belgian officer, Captain Léon Rom. Rom was known to be an especially cruel, sadistic man, even by the standards of the Belgian occupation. He was said to enjoy collecting the heads and hands of murdered Congolese people—a trait that Conrad gave to Kurtz in his book. In all, Hochschild stresses the point that, although

Heart of Darkness is often praised for its otherworldly, nightmarish tone, Conrad didn't have to invent very much—most of the grisly passages in his book are based on real-life events.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☞ For Leopold, the rubber boom was a godsend. He had gone dangerously into debt with his Congo investments, but he now saw that the return would be more lucrative than he had ever imagined. The world did not lose its desire for ivory but by the late 1880s wild rubber had far surpassed it as the main source of revenue from the Congo.

Related Characters: King Leopold II

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

In the late 1880s, Western industry developed a need for rubber. The popularization of the bicycle created a need for rubber tires, and soon, manufacturers used rubber for wheels, steam engines, and other important machines. The international demand for rubber was a boon to Leopold II, because there was plentiful rubber in the Congo territory. Rubber sap, collected from rubber vines, could be converted into strong, firm rubber, and sold to European manufacturers for a hefty profit.

The passage is important because it conveys the relationship between Western industrialization and Belgian human rights atrocities in the Congo. The Belgians forced Congolese slaves to work long hours in inhuman conditions to harvest rubber that would feed Europeans' "addiction" to industry. Much like the profits of the Congo funded Leopold's **palaces and monuments** in Belgium, the profit motive fueling the rubber industry incentivized using slave labor in order to make Europeans' lives more luxurious. While it's easy to demonize Leopold II and personally blame him for the horrors of the Congo, the truth is much more disturbing: Leopold II was only able to enact horrific policies in the Congo because Western capitalism incentivized slave labor and Western economies turned a blind eye to the source of their raw materials.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ Due to the missionaries, from the mid-1890s on Leopold had to deal with scattered protests, like Sheppard's articles, about severed hands and slaughtered Africans. But the critics at first captured little attention, for they were not as skilled at public relations as the king, who deployed his formidable charm to neutralize them.

Related Characters: William Sheppard, King Leopold II

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

As early as the 1890s, Western writers and journalists had spoken out against the Belgian administration of the Congo. However, as Hochschild notes here, it took a long time before anyone took these writers' claims particularly seriously.

Why did it take so long for the Western world to heed the warnings of people like William Sheppard and George Washington Williams, both of whom visited Africa in the 1880s and witnessed the Belgian army's cruelty to the Congolese people? In part, it took a long time because Sheppard wasn't very good at public relations—he didn't do a good job of reaching out to powerful people and telling them what he knew about the Congo. By contrast, Leopold II was a master of public relations; he'd spent more than a decade currying favor with Europe's elite, so he had a lot of credibility with powerful people. Thus, when Sheppard denounced Leopold in print, few people took Sheppard seriously. It wasn't until Edmund Dene Morel began criticizing Leopold II in the late 1890s that the Congo reform movement was able to build enough good publicity to turn the international tide against Leopold. In other words, in this instance it was more important to be savvy and well connected than to be right.

With great fanfare they were brought by train to Brussels's Gare du Nord and then marched across the center of the city to take the tram for Tervuren. There, in a park, they were installed in three specially constructed villages: a river village, a forest village, and a "civilized" village. A pair of Pygmies rounded out the show. The "uncivilized" Africans of the first two villages used tools, drums, and cooking pots brought from home. They danced and paddled their dugout canoes around a pond. During the day they were on exhibit in "authentic" bamboo African huts with overhanging thatched roofs. European men hoping to see the fabled bare breasts of Africa went away disappointed, however, for the women were made to wear cotton dressing gowns while at the fair. Clothing, a local magazine observed, was, after all, "the first sign of civilization"

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Hochschild describes the 1897 Belgian world's fair, which was attended by rich, powerful people from around the world. At the world's fair, Belgian officers displayed a group of African slaves, supposedly from different tribes of the Congo. According to signs, most of the Africans were "uncivilized," though a few showed some early signs of civilization. Hundreds of thousands of visitors to the world's fair saw the Africans in their cages and thought nothing of it.

For most of his book, Hochschild has suggested that the international community of the late 19th century didn't speak out against Belgian atrocities in the Congo because they didn't know about them. However, this passage suggests a much more disturbing possibility: in large part, Europeans and Americans didn't speak out against human rights abuses in Africa because they didn't regard Africans as full human beings. As the racist signage on the cages at the world's fair suggests, many Europeans at the time thought of Africans as subhuman, and therefore not worthy of much kindness or respect. The passage helps us understand why hundreds of people visited the Congo in the 1880s and 90s and said nothing about the cruelty they witnessed—because they didn't think of Africans as human beings, they didn't think it was worthwhile to protest the torture or murder of African people.

Chapter 14 Quotes

Significantly, Morel's humanitarian political ancestors, unlike his socialist contemporaries, had firmly believed that improving the lot of downtrodden people everywhere was good for business ... Such humanitarians never saw themselves as being in conflict with the imperial project—as long as it was British imperialism. ... This was the tradition in which Morel felt at home, and it was a tradition that perfectly suited his organizational talent.

Related Characters: Edmund Dene Morel

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Hochschild talks about the personality of Edmund Dene Morel. Morel was an undeniably important figure in the Congo reform movement: he was a master publicist, and knew how to turn the tide against Leopold II. However, Morel wasn't perfect by any means: although he was sympathetic to the Congolese slaves suffering under tyrannical Belgian imperialism, he seemed not to object to the principle of imperialism itself. Indeed, Morel made many statements throughout his lifetime in which he praised British imperialism.

Unlike his socialist peers, then, who were interested in dismantling capitalism to create a radical vision of economic equality, Morel was interested in fixing important humanitarian problems without fundamentally changing the status quo. In other words, Morel was able to recognize that the exploitation of the Congo and the abuse of the Congolese people was a crisis, but he was not willing or able to identify and attack the political and economic structures that underlay this exploitation. Thus, by 21st century standards, Morel's ideas about imperialism and race seem highly naïve. In all, Hochschild refuses to look at Morel through "rosy glasses"—although he has a lot of respect for Morel's achievements as a humanitarian, he does not try to disguise Morel's intellectual and moral flaws.

Because Shanu was a British subject, the Congo authorities did not want to risk an international incident by arresting him. Instead, they harassed him unremittingly, even rescinding the medal he had been awarded for his work for the state. They then ordered all state employees not to patronize his businesses. That guaranteed that these would fail. In July 1905 Hezekiah Andrew Shanu committed suicide.

Related Characters: Hezekiah Andrew Shanu

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

As Hochschild made clear in the prologue to his book, there is a temptation, when writing a history of the 19th century Congo, to emphasize the achievements of white Europeans and to marginalize the contributions of Africans. One reason this temptation is so strong is that the vast majority of the written accounts of the 19th century Congo come from Europeans (whereas many native Africans at the time had no written language, or were forbidden from writing about their experiences under colonial rule).

In this passage, however, Hochschild writes about the important contributions of Hezekiah Andrew Shanu, a Nigerian man who risked his life to pass information about Belgian human rights abuses to Edmund Dene Morel. For many years, Shanu sent reports on the Congo to European journalists; however, it was eventually discovered that he was an ally of Morel. Afterwards, the Belgian army in the Congo intimidated and harassed him, ultimately playing a major role in his suicide in 1905. The life of Shanu is an important reminder that white Europeans weren't the only (or even primary) people who fought for Congolese rights in the 19th century; arguably the most energetic and important human rights crusaders of the era were the Congolese slaves themselves (many of whom died fighting for their freedom), followed by other African figures, such as Shanu, who risked their lives to inform journalists like Edmund Dene Morel of the truth.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☛☛ Just as he had done in Britain, Morel smoothly shaped his message for different American constituencies. Most of his allies were progressive intellectuals like Mark Twain, but he was willing to sup with the devil to help his cause. He made shrewd use of Senator John Tyler Morgan, the former Confederate general who had helped to engineer U.S. recognition of Leopold's Congo twenty years earlier. Morgan, still thundering away about sending blacks back to Africa so as to make an all-white South, wanted the abuses in the Congo cleaned up with no delay. Otherwise, how could black Americans be persuaded to move there?

Related Characters: Mark Twain, Senator John Tyler Morgan, Edmund Dene Morel

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hochschild shows that Edmund Dene Morel, much like his nemesis, Leopold II, was a master of publicity—indeed, many of his political maneuvers mirrored those of Leopold himself. For instance, Morel was able to enlist the aid of Senator John Tyler Morgan of the United States, just as King Leopold had done ten years earlier. Morgan had previously supported Leopold's occupation of the Congo under the supposition that the Congo could serve as a resettlement colony for African Americans. Now, Morel, knowing full-well that Morgan (a white supremacist) supported the “back to Africa” movement, persuaded Morgan that the only way to ensure that African Americans could be resettled in Africa would be to improve the human rights situation in the Congo.

While Morel didn't agree with Morgan's white supremacist views, he was able to convince Morgan that their needs aligned. In the end, Morel was able to manipulate Morgan into fighting on behalf of the Congo reform movement, demonstrating that Morel was a shrewd manipulator and a first-rate politician. It's also worth noting that the pervasive and convoluted racist ideologies of the time created bizarre alliances. Senator Morgan's white supremacist inclinations led him to support Leopold's “humanitarian” work in the Congo, as well as Morel's attempts to correct Leopold's wrongs, all in service of his desire to have a place to resettle African Americans. This speaks volumes to the ethical knots that racism and colonialism created, and the difficulty of untangling genuine humanitarianism and cynicism or bigotry.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☛☛ Despite the report's critical conclusions, the statements by African witnesses were never directly quoted. The commission's report was expressed in generalities. The stories were not published separately, nor was anyone allowed to see them. They ended up in the closed section of a state archive in Brussels. Not until the 1980s were people at last permitted to read and copy them freely.

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hochschild offers a particularly clear example of European bias in the history of the Congo. In the early 20th century, King Leopold II made a huge tactical error: knowing that the tide was turning against him and his Congo regime, he assembled an international team of judges and invited them to study the administration of the Congo. Leopold gambled that the judges' language barrier would prevent them from learning much about the Congo; however, the judges spoke to many Congolese slaves, who told them about the horrors they'd witnessed under Belgian rule. Horrified, the team of judges compiled a lengthy report criticizing the Belgian occupation of the Congo in very strong language.

The problem with the judges' report on the Congo, however, was that it included no first-person accounts by Congolese slaves. Instead of discussing individual victims of the Belgians' authority, the judges preferred to speak in "generalities." As Hochschild suggests, the judges' report exemplifies the subtle racism of the Congo reform movement. Although the judges clearly wanted to help the Congolese people (and they clearly believed that the Belgians' use of force was unjust), they seemingly didn't trust or respect Africans enough to include their testimony in their report. Ultimately, the internal judges' report confirms the point that Hochschild made in introduction to his book: it is difficult to write a history of the Belgian occupation of the Congo because the surviving written sources marginalize the stories of the native peoples of the Congo.

☞ "I realized that I was looking at this tragedy [in the Congo] with the eyes of another race of people once hunted themselves."

Related Characters: Roger Casement

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

Roger Casement, who collaborated with Edmund Dene Morel in the Congo reform movement, wrote that he felt an especially strong connection with Congolese slaves because he, too, belonged to a race of "hunted people."

It's not entirely clear that Roger Casement meant when he referred to himself as being hunted. It's possible that

Casement was referencing his Irish heritage; and indeed, Irish people were often discriminated against in England during Casement's lifetime. Moreover, the island of Ireland could be considered an imperial territory—during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, England colonized Ireland by force, converting Ireland into a part of Great Britain. Later in life, Casement fought for Irish independence from Great Britain, eventually going to jail for doing so.

Another possibility is that Casement was referencing his homosexuality. During Casement's lifetime, homosexuality was a serious criminal offense. Casement's homosexuality would eventually come back to haunt him—after he was arrested for supporting Irish independence it was revealed that Casement was a homosexual, which discredited him in the eyes of many of his former allies. Left with few powerful advocates, Casement was sentenced to death for treason, and he was executed shortly thereafter. Regardless of what he meant, this quote underscores the point that the most vocal critics of Belgian rule in the Congo tended to be those who understood personally what it meant to be systematically mistreated by a society or empire.

☞ Morel was locked in a double race against time: against the inevitable British recognition of the Congo as a Belgian colony, which finally came in 1913, and against the waning fervor of his supporters. Even Casement felt that "the break-up of the pirate's stronghold [was] nearly accomplished" and urged Morel to declare the campaign over. Despite some doubts voiced in his private correspondence, Morel decided to publicly claim victory. "I do not wish to paint the present in roseate hues. The wounds of the Congo will take generations to heal. But . . . the atrocities have disappeared. . . . The revenues are no longer supplied by forced or slave labor. The rubber tax has gone. The native is free to gather the produce of his soil. . . . A responsible Government has replaced an irresponsible despotism." The one major goal not achieved, he acknowledged, was African ownership of land.

Related Characters: Edmund Dene Morel

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hochschild discusses the aftermath of Leopold II's death for the Congo reform movement, which had cast Leopold as its sole villain. Emphasizing Leopold's role in the Congo proved to be a tactical error, in that the reform movement found itself without momentum to fix the

still-present atrocities once Leopold was gone. Morel recognized the truth—that the Congo reform movement needed to continue fighting for Congolese rights—but the public was convinced that, with Leopold gone, the troubles were over. In this instance, PR got the best of Morel—there was no way to undo the way he had, for decades, been framing the situation in the Congo as Leopold’s fault alone. Ultimately, the Belgian parliament responded to the Congo reform movement by introducing *some* reforms in its colonial holdings. However, as Morel clearly recognized, these reforms were far from enough. Life in the Congo remained harsh for the native Congolese: they had to work long hours to support their families, and decades of Belgian cruelty had torn apart once-thriving families and tribes. Perhaps most importantly of all, the Belgian Parliament’s reforms didn’t address the root cause of the human rights atrocities in the Congo: the unjust ownership of Congolese land by European imperialists.

Morel’s frustration with the Belgian parliament suggests that, throughout his career as a human rights crusader, he’d become more radical in his thinking. Earlier in his career, Morel seemed not to object to the basic notion of European ownership of African land. By this point, it appears, he strongly supported African control of African land. Nevertheless, Morel decided to celebrate the Congo reform movement’s short-term victories, rather than continuing to press for more.

question, “What did the Congo reform movement really accomplish?”

To begin with, Hochschild makes it clear that the Congo reform movement didn’t end human rights abuses in the Congo, though it may have improved the human rights situation somewhat. Belgian administrators continued to control the native Congolese, shipping massive amounts of rubber, ivory, metal, and uranium out of the country and into the hands of European and American industrialists. Worse, the native Congolese continued to work in squalid conditions to support Western industry. The Congolese were paid for their work—but not very much. In all, the Congo reform movement succeeded in mitigating Belgium’s human rights atrocities in some important respects; nevertheless, it failed to address the root cause of the problem—European imperialism. This should be tied, in the reader’s mind, to the failure of many of the leaders of the reform movement to identify imperialism as the engine of human rights atrocity. Perhaps, had these reformers tried to treat the cause rather than the symptom, the twentieth century history of the Congo could have been different.

☛ When these other mass murders went largely unnoticed except by their victims, why, in Britain and the United States, was there such a storm of righteous protest about the Congo? The politics of empathy are fickle. Certainly one reason Britons and Americans focused on the Congo was that it was a safe target. Outrage over the Congo 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.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☛ With the start of the Second World War, the legal maximum for forced labor in the Congo was increased to 170 days per man per year. More than eighty percent of the uranium in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs came from the heavily guarded Congo mine of Shinkolobwe. The Allies also wanted ever more rubber for the tires of hundreds of thousands of military trucks, jeeps, and warplanes. Some of the rubber came from the Congo’s new plantations of cultivated rubber trees. But in the villages, Africans were forced to go into the rain forest, sometimes for weeks at a time, to search for wild vines once again.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 18, Hochschild discusses the century following the Congo reform movement, and attempts to answer the

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

Hochschild hypothesizes that the Congo reform movement attracted international attention for the simple reason that Belgium was an easy target. Although there were many Western countries engaged in brutal imperialist ventures around the world, most of these countries eventually joined together to denounce Belgium. Belgium was a relatively new and weak European country, which meant that England, France, Germany, and the United States could safely denounce Belgian foreign policy without any serious threat to their own economies or foreign policies. Considering that the economic interests and foreign ventures that these Western powers wanted to protect



included some colonialist atrocities of their own, this move to criticize Belgium should remind readers of Leopold II's criticism of Arab slave traders, which served to distract from his own slave trading. In this way, the international humanitarian outcry (which did result in some tangible positive effects on conditions in the Congo) could also be seen as a cynical mechanism by which Western powers sought to pacify the public while preserving other human rights violations occurring simultaneously around the globe.

survive today. Because of this, the Congolese chiefs knew more about the history of rubber extraction than the Belgian ambassador to the Congo, who failed to understand even the basic facts of this history.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ "When I arrived in the Congo in 1948, my very first job was to go around and distribute medals to the village chiefs, who had gathered rubber for the government during the Second World War. You know they made everyone go back into the forest then, and tap wild rubber. I had to give decorations to about a hundred chiefs. I had a corporal and six or seven soldiers who went to all the villages with me. The corporal, he said to me, 'The rubber this time, that was nothing. But the first time, that was terrible.' only thirty years later did I understand what he was talking about."

Related Characters: Jules Marchal (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 299



Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jules Marchal, the former Belgian ambassador to the Congo and a noted historian of the Belgian occupation, remembers an episode from his early years as an ambassador. At the time, Marchal—like most people in Belgium—was almost entirely ignorant of his own country's long history of human rights abuses in Africa.

The passage is a powerful reminder that Belgium took the initiative to destroy many records of its time in the Congo, preserving the illusion that King Leopold II had been a benevolent humanitarian, just as he'd always claimed. For decades, Belgian students grew up reading about their country's incredible generosity to the people of the Congo. Marchal, however, discovered hidden documents in the Belgian archives that exposed the human rights abuses of the Belgian administrators. The passage is interesting because it suggests that, in many ways, the Congolese were *better* record keepers than the Belgians, despite their lack of a written language. While Belgian administrators worked hard to conceal their crimes, the Congolese tribes passed on oral records of the Belgians' crimes, many of which

☝☝ It is an oversimplification to blame Africa's troubles today entirely on European imperialism; history is far more complicated' And yet, consider Mobutu again. Aside from the color of his skin, there were few ways in which he did not resemble the monarch who governed the same territory a hundred years earlier. His one-man rule. His great wealth taken from the land. His naming a lake after himself. His yacht. His appropriation of state possessions as his own. His huge shareholdings in private corporations doing business in his territory. Just as Leopold, using his privately controlled state, shared most of his rubber profits with no one, so Mobutu acquired his personal group of gold mines—and a rubber plantation.

Related Characters: King Leopold II, Joseph Mobutu

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hochschild discusses the history of the Congo during the 20th century, arguing that the Belgian occupation of the Congo in the early 20th century set the country on a path of violence, chaos, instability, and economic depression that continues to this day. For example, in the 1950s, the Congo fell under the control of a U.S.-backed dictator named Joseph Mobutu, who ruled his country with an iron fist. He tortured those who opposed him, killed many of his political rivals, and robbed the Congolese people of their rubber, metal, and ivory.

Hochschild seems to be implying that Mobutu wouldn't have risen to power, and ruled his country so cruelly, had it not been for the legacy of King Leopold II. First, it's possible that Mobutu was directly inspired by King Leopold—Leopold was a role model for the young, megalomaniacal Mobutu. Second, it's possible that the Western countries (including the United States) would not have been so willing to support Mobutu's murderous policies had King Leopold II not already set a precedent for cruelty in the Congo.

Hochschild doesn't have enough time to explore his hypothesis seriously. Nevertheless, he argues that King

Leopold II's legacy has been to weaken and fragment the Congo, paving the way for dictatorship.

●● 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.

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

Hochschild concludes his book with a powerful reminder of the importance of fighting for human rights in the 21st century. Although King Leopold II lived a long time ago,

there are many powerful people alive today who, like Leopold, want to deprive other people of their rights in order to increase their own fortunes. Thus, instead of thinking of Leopold as a figure of the distant past, we should think of him as a highly relevant, modern figure (indeed, Hochschild has made an effort to portray Leopold as being exceptionally “modern,” both in terms of his public relations manipulations and his economic policies).

By the same token, Hochschild suggests that readers can learn from the achievements of people like George Washington Williams and Edmund Dene Morel, respecting both their strengths and weaknesses as human rights crusaders. Above all, Hochschild doesn't want us to think of the Belgian occupation of the Congo as a distant, trivial historical curiosity; instead, he encourages us to learn from people like Williams and Morel and use the lessons to fight people like Leopold II in our own societies.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a young British businessman in the late 1890s. He's a cocky, articulate person, even if he hasn't been to the best schools. His name is Edmund Dene Morel, and he works for a Liverpool shipping line, a subsidiary of which controls all the cargo transportation in and out of the so-called Congo Free State.

Like most Europeans, Edmund Dene Morel knows that the Congo Free State is owned by King Leopold II of Belgium. Leopold is a popular, even beloved ruler, praised for being a great philanthropist and humanitarian. Journalists praise him for spreading Christianity to Africa, defeating slave-traders in the Congo, and spending huge sums of his own money on public works for Africans.

Morel, who speaks fluent French, goes between Britain and Belgium to supervise cargo transportation from the Congo. Over the years, Morel begins to notice things. He realizes that Belgium ships huge quantities of ivory and rubber from the Congo, but never seems to ship anything back. There is, in short, no trade between the Congo and Belgium. Morel concludes that this can mean only one thing: Belgium relies on Congolese slave labor.

Within just a few years, Edmund Dene Morel has become one of the most important human rights activists in the world. He travels around the world, enlisting politicians, religious leaders, and writers in his cause: protesting Belgium's use of slavery in the Congo. He succeeds in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of powerful people against King Leopold.

The book begins with a description of a fairly ordinary-seeming person, Edmund Morel. Morel, like thousands of other young professionals, did work that put him in contact with people in the Congo. But unlike the thousands of other people in his position, Morel had the courage to recognize the injustice right in front of him, and speak out against it.



For most of the late Victorian era, Leopold II was an internationally acclaimed philanthropist and humanitarian. In reality, Leopold was a cruel, greedy monarch who used his reputation as a smokescreen to disguise his imperialist ventures in the Congo.



Morel didn't travel to the Congo, but he knew enough about business to recognize the truth: the only way that a country could import large amounts of ivory and rubber without exporting very much of anything would be for the country to rely on slave labor.



Morel's discovery of the slave labor in the Congo led him to launch a vast, international campaign against the Belgian regime in Africa.



The Belgian intervention in the Congo is one of the great forgotten crimes of the 20th century. As many as ten million Congolese people may have died in slavery under King Leopold. Adam Hochschild, the author of this book, has been fascinated and horrified by Western intervention in the Congo for most of his adult life. When he was in the Congo in 1961, he overheard a CIA agent boasting about the recent assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the Congo's first democratically elected Prime Minister. Hochschild realized that the Western powers had been interfering in the Congo for hundreds of years. Furthermore, he realized that his main source of information about Congolese history was Joseph Conrad's fictional novella, [Heart of Darkness](#). Frustrated, Hochschild resolved to learn the truth about the Congo.

Hochschild brings up an important problem with studying the history of Western intervention in the Congo: almost all the history of the matter was written by Western historians. The Congolese had no written language when Europeans arrived there, meaning that 19th century Congolese history is almost always seen through Western eyes. It is striking that, in many memoirs about the Congolese slave trade, the authors are proud of the death and carnage that Belgium caused in the Congo—they boast about how many slaves died farming rubber and ivory. Thus, even if our understanding of Congolese history is somewhat biased toward a European perspective, we can still learn a lot about the horrific cruelty of Belgian colonialism from Belgian sources, because the Belgian colonialists themselves didn't try to hide it. To begin our story, we must go back 500 years, to some of the earliest interactions between Europeans and Africans.

PROLOGUE

For centuries, Europeans have fantasized about the land that lies south of the Sahara Desert. Writers told stories about the exotic, wealthy civilizations south of the Sahara, and the brutal, "savage" African kings who ruled them. But it wasn't until the middle of the 15th century that Europeans had the maritime technology to travel south along the coast of Africa. In the 1480s, a Portuguese captain named Diogo Cão led an expedition down the coast of Africa. He was amazed to see that the sea itself was changing color—eventually, it turned a dark, brownish-yellow. Cão had stumbled upon the mouth of a huge, silt-rich river—the Congo River. He led his expedition through the mouth of the river, and landed a few miles inland. Cão claimed the land surrounding the river—soon to be known as the Congo—in the name of Portugal.

King Leopold's *Ghost* isn't just a book about the Belgian occupation of the Congo in the late 19th century; it's about the legacy of the Belgian occupation, and the legacy of Western imperialism in general. Hochschild ties the death of Patrice Lumumba in the twentieth century to a history of (often violent) Western intervention abroad that stretches back centuries. This highlights the connection between the colonial era and the present day, in which many countries in Africa continue to suffer from political instability and economic depression as a legacy of colonial occupation. This passage also nods to the fact that historical writing must provide accountability for Western actions in the Congo—accountability that fictionalized sources, such as Joseph Conrad's books, can't give.



Right away, Hochschild brings up some of the historiographical issues involved in writing a book about the Belgian occupation of the Congo. Although few Congolese people of the era had a way of writing down their observations about the occupation, Hochschild will make an effort to depict the occupation from a Congolese perspective. As Hochschild suggests here, the tragedy of the Congo is that it wasn't particularly secret—many of the Belgian officers who worked in the Congo murdered Congolese people in broad daylight, and bragged about their cruelty.



The late 15th century marked the dawn of the modern age of European imperialism. Armed with unbeatable weapons—guns, cannons, swords, etc.—and maritime technology, Europeans had a huge advantage over the native peoples of Africa and the Americas. For a thorough explanation of why Europeans developed these technologies first (and a thorough refutation of the old, racist lie that white Europeans are superior to other people), consult Jared Diamond's book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.



Cào soon discovered that there were people living in the Congo. As many as three million subjects lived under a king, who greeted the Portuguese warmly. It has been suggested that the king at the time, Nzinga Mbemba Affonso, welcomed Cào's expedition because he wanted Cào to help him subdue a rebellion in his kingdom. In the following years, the Portuguese helped Affonso subdue his own people, and began building schools and churches in the Congo.

The Portuguese learned about Congolese culture. They discovered that the people of the Congo practiced polygamy, and had their own system of slavery. In Congolese slavery, slaves often earned their freedom within a few years, and it wasn't uncommon for slaves and free people to marry. When the Portuguese arrived in the Congo, however, they found that the Congolese king was willing to sell them thousands of slaves. Within a decade, slavery had become the primary reason for the Portuguese presence in the Congo. Portugal sent people to the Congo to build schools or teach religion or language to the Congolese—but these people (even some Portuguese priests) quickly realized that they could make more money buying slaves. When European explorers arrived in the Americas it created a vast new market for Congolese slaves. Many of the slaves from the Congo were shipped to the Americas, especially the American South, Brazil, and the West Indies.

Affonso I, as the Congolese king came to be known, played a decisive role in the history of the Congo. He cooperated with Portuguese colonialists, studied Portuguese language, and even agreed to be baptized as a Christian. He wanted to use European science and technology to strengthen his country, and thought that cooperating with explorers was the best way to do so. His efforts at Europeanizing the Congo were selective, though: for example, he tried to keep European legal tradition out of the Congo.

Affonso I was a slave-owner, but he seemed not to have realized how profoundly the European slave trade would reshape his kingdom. Late in his life, he wrote about being horrified by the sight of tens of thousands of his people being kidnapped and taken away from their country. Affonso I tried to end the slave trade by sending emissaries to speak with the Pope in Rome, but Portuguese soldiers prevented his emissaries from reaching Rome when they landed in Lisbon.

Hochschild emphasizes the seemingly trivial detail that Cào noticed millions of people living in the Congo. As we'll see later on, Cào's observations about the population of the Congo contrast with the attitude of later European colonizers, who sometimes pretended that there were no native peoples whatsoever in the Congo.



It wasn't long before Portugal introduced an international system of slavery to the Congo. It's important to recognize that the Congo already had a slave trade—as, indeed, did many of the territories of sub-Saharan Africa. However, as Hochschild explains, slavery in sub-Saharan Africa was very different from slavery as the Portuguese practiced it. Before Portugal's colonization, Congolese slaves often gained their freedom after a few years, and didn't have to contend with the racial and moral stigmatization of being a slave. Portuguese slavery, by contrast, was harsh, race-based, and lasted a lifetime. Portuguese colonialists needed lifelong slaves to work in the Americas.



Affonso is a tragic character in many ways. He was a talented, intelligent man, but he committed a huge tactical error by thinking that he could be selective in Westernizing his kingdom. Affonso tried to import European science but preserve his own royal power over his people—within a few decades, however, the Portuguese had taken all the power in the region, ending the monarchy forever.



Affonso I could never have realized how greatly the Portuguese slave trade would change Africa. Like most Congolese people, Affonso I seems to have thought of slavery as a temporary, non-racialized practice. The Portuguese quickly began to conduct lifelong, racialized slavery on a massive scale, which altered the face of the Congo forever.



After Affonso I's death, the Congolese state quickly lost its power. Other European powers, such as Britain, France, and Holland joined the slave trade. In 1665, the Congolese king assembled an army in a desperate attempt to defeat the Portuguese forever. The army was defeated, though, and the king was executed, spelling the end of the Congolese state.

Affonso I's letters and speeches are some of the only surviving writings about early Congolese slavery from the perspective of the Congolese themselves. However, 20th century Congolese oral historians describe the Congolese people's fear of the early European explorers. 16th century Congolese people seem to have been obsessed with the idea that the Portuguese were cannibals—much as, later on, Europeans became obsessed with the notion of African cannibalism.

Although European powers continued to kidnap Africans and sell them into slavery in the Americas, it would be more than 400 years before European colonialists ventured up the Congo River toward the center of the African continent. The river flowed outward into the ocean at a rapid rate, and the land surrounding the river was steep and rocky, which meant that sailors had no easy way to explore the central African interior. In the 19th century, however, the invention of the modern steam engine gave Europeans the power to travel upriver. In 1816, some of the earliest English explorers to attempt to travel up the Congo coined the phrase "the Dark Continent" to describe Africa. This phrase says more about the English than about African people.

The Portuguese colonial experience set a strong precedent for Western imperialism. Inspired by Portugal's example, and its new economic power, other European countries, such as England and France, participated in slave trading as well. The power vacuum that destroyed the Congolese state after Affonso's death also echoes many conflicts to come.



Hochschild makes an effort to include African accounts of the imperial experience whenever possible. Affonso's descriptions of the Portuguese colonialists (and the descriptions that have survived in oral history) suggest that the Congolese viewed the Portuguese as frightening, intimidating figures.



For a long time, Europe lacked the technology to explore the inner parts of Africa, so Portuguese colonialists and their successors restricted their movements to the coastal areas of the continent. To Europeans, then, the mystery of the interior of Africa coupled with their imaginary ideas about the strange, exotic, and even dangerous (cannibalistic) Africans, led them to coin the phrase "the Dark Continent." Clearly, this phrase has everything to do with European ignorance and mythology about Africa, and nothing to do with the African experience of Africa.



CHAPTER 1

The first Englishman to travel far up the Congo River was John Rowlands. Rowlands was born into a poor Welsh family, and his parents weren't married—a major taboo at the time. He grew up in a workhouse, where he, like other young unwanted children, was forced to work in a factory. In spite of the harsh living conditions, Rowlands distinguished himself as a student in his Sunday school classes. At the age of 15, he left the workhouse and became a sailor aboard a merchant ship traveling to Louisiana. He lived in New Orleans for many years, working for a cotton factor (a kind of businessman who specialized in selling Southern cotton to international buyers). Around the time he turned 18, he gave himself a new name: Henry Morton Stanley. Throughout his adult life, Stanley distorted the details of his early life, sometimes presenting himself as heroic leader who led a mutiny in his workhouse (despite all the evidence that nothing of the kind ever happened). One detail about Stanley's life is clear, however—he was confused and intimidated by women, and seems not to have had any sexual experience with them.

Stanley fought as a Confederate in the Civil War, but switched to the Union side after being captured. Later, his good memory and penmanship led him to a position aboard the frigate *Minnesota*. After the war, he lived in St. Louis and became a successful newspaperman. He traveled to India to report uprisings against the British Empire, and later covered the Abyssinian War, which was the “scoop” that made him successful. By the time he was 27, Stanley was a regular foreign correspondent for the *New York Herald*, one of America's most popular newspapers. While stationed in London for the *Herald*, Stanley learned about the so-called “Scramble for Africa”—the competition between the European powers to colonize the interior of the African continent. At the time when Stanley was writing for the *Herald*, African exploration was a subject of great fascination for Europeans and Americans. Indeed, some of the first truly international celebrities were African explorers. Africa fascinated European politicians, too, because Africa represented a source for resources that could feed the Industrial Revolution: rubber, metal, and slaves.

Right away, Hochschild conveys a sense of Stanley's insecurity about his identity and social status. In a time when class and social status were all-important in Britain—to the point where it was almost impossible to marry or take a job outside one's own social rank—Stanley was born to a working-class family. He spent much of his adult life trying to gain enough success and fame to become an upper-class English gentleman. Because he was eager to forget his working-class past, Stanley frequently distorted the truth about himself. While Hochschild doesn't try to “psychoanalyze” Stanley to excess, he does (somewhat dubiously) link Stanley's ambition and his confusion with his insecurities surrounding women.



Stanley's ability to lie about his own past may have helped to make him a successful newspaperman—at the time when Stanley was reporting in India, “yellow journalism” was common in newspapers—journalists regularly exaggerated stories in order to attract and entertain more readers. Notice, also, that Stanley was a “hired gun” for most of his adult life—he regularly switched sides and allegiances in order to find a good job, which suggests a lack of internal moral conviction. This section also details the stew of reasons for the Western fascination with Africa: the need for resources, political competition (the stakes of which were power and reputation), and an appetite for sensationalist news, which Africa could provide aplenty.



By the middle of the 19th century, many European countries, including Britain and France, had abolished slavery. However, they had only done so after many hundreds of years of using slavery to build up their own empires. For the most part, British and French anti-slavery leaders didn't use their influence to denounce European countries that practiced slavery; instead, they directed their furor at "safe" non-Western targets, such as the slave traders of the Arabian peninsula. Furthermore, many anti-slavery activists in Britain and France continued to believe that European countries had the right to colonize Africa and farm the land for raw materials. Many of these activists were pious Christians who believed that European explorers had a duty to spread the gospel to Africa, even as they extracted rubber, ivory, and gold from the continent.

In many ways, the life of the explorer David Livingstone exemplifies the complex British attitude toward Africa in the mid-19th century. Livingstone was Christian, hated slavery, yet believed in Britain's right to claim raw materials from Africa. Livingstone explored many different areas of the African continent, preaching Christian doctrine wherever he went and becoming a national hero in the process. In 1866, Livingstone went missing in the midst of an expedition, prompting an international investigation. The *New York Herald* sent Stanley to Africa to find Livingstone. Over the next four years, Stanley, a savvy self-promoter, traveled south from Zanzibar, sending dramatic telegraph cables about his exciting expedition to find Livingstone. In private, Stanley sent other telegrams to a young Welsh woman he'd been wooing. At the end of his journey, Stanley claims to have greeted Livingstone with the famous words, "Doctor Livingstone, I presume?" The story of Stanley's journey to find Livingstone quickly became a legend.

Stanley's account of the Livingstone expedition is revealing in the frank way he talks about Africans. He describes how he and his soldiers flogged Africans for deserting the expedition, and notes, again and again, that Africa was largely empty ("unpeopled") and ripe for European colonization. Although Stanley's accounts of the expedition were popular in France and America, he was disliked in Britain for being a "working-class Welshman," and not a "real English gentleman." Stanley was greatly disappointed by his reception in England; additionally, the young Welsh woman with whom he'd communicated throughout his time in Africa married someone else. Furious, Stanley resolved to return to Africa.

Hochschild conveys some of the hypocrisy of social activism in Britain and France—Britain claimed to be a moral leader because it abolished the slave trade, but Britain only did so after many hundreds of years of profiting from slavery. Hochschild will show a similar kind of hypocrisy in the international Congo reform. Also, notice that the rise of Christian evangelism coincided with European industrialization and imperialism. In effect, Christianity provided a perfect "alibi" for colonial invasion: colonists could always claim to be spreading the gospel to the native peoples rather than exploiting resources. This is not to say that there weren't some sincere, Christian evangelists among the European colonialists; however, it's undeniable that evangelism was a convenient excuse for imperialism.



David Livingstone was one of the most famous British people of the 19th century: his "heroic" exploration of Africa brought honor and renown to the British Empire. Therefore, when Livingstone disappeared in the course of one expedition, his disappearance sparked an international outcry. The famous story that Stanley greeted Livingstone with the words "Doctor Livingstone, I presume?" is possibly apocryphal, but it proves that Stanley had a knack for self-promotion, and knew how to spin a memorable story for the newspapers.



Here, Hochschild introduces a disturbing theme of the book: the open, almost banal way that Europeans of the late 19th century talked about inflicting pain on African people. At the time, many Europeans believed that Africans were sub-human, little better than animals. But even as Stanley looked down on Africans, the entire English establishment looked down on Stanley for being a working-class Welshman rather than a real English aristocrat. Stanley was hungry for acceptance, which is partly why he wanted to continue exploring Africa.



CHAPTER 2

One of the many people who had followed Stanley's expedition to find David Livingstone was King Leopold II of Belgium. Leopold was the new king of Belgium, which had only become an independent nation in 1830, after many years of war in Europe. Belgium was a small country, most of whose people spoke French. Though Leopold had an older brother, Leopold's parents clearly preferred him, and, as a result, he studied politics and government from an early age in preparation for ascendance to the throne of Belgium. Leopold's childhood was cold and austere—for example, he rarely saw his father. From an early age, Leopold struck people as a shrewd, cunning man. As an adult, he perfected his talents for deception and double-dealing, simultaneously serving as the king of a small, democratic country (Belgium had a monarchy as well as an elected Parliament) and as the totalitarian ruler of a vast African empire.

Leopold married the Archduchess Marie-Henriette; their marriage was, by all accounts, very unhappy. Leopold and Marie-Henriette hated each other, and seemed to have had nothing in common. Though they eventually had a child, Leopold spent more time focusing on his personal ambitions than tending to his family. In private, Leopold often described Belgium as a "small country, full of small people"—clearly, he wanted more power. He traveled through the Middle East, intending to buy land that could make him a rich emperor. At the age of twenty-six, Leopold traveled to Seville, where he researched the profits that Spain had made in the West Indies in the 16th and 17th centuries. The experience proved enlightening, because it put him in contact with a English lawyer and financier who offered him further advice on empire-building and land economization. For most of his twenties, Leopold invested in land in Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East, determined that "Belgium must have a colony." Unlike many of the other empire-builders of the century, Leopold was uninterested in spreading Christianity or democracy to the "uncivilized races" of the world—his only goal was to make Belgium rich and powerful. In the meantime, Leopold invested large sums in Belgian building projects: he built **beautiful parks, monuments, and palaces**, modeled off of the great structures of France.

Leopold II is the primary antagonist of the book. Indeed, as Hochschild portrays him, Leopold II was so sadistically and diabolically evil that he seems more like a Shakespeare villain than a real human being. Leopold II was, in many ways, a very modern villain—he knew how to use the media and public relations to deceive other people into liking him. In general, Leopold was an intelligent, cunning man, and the fact that the Congo reform movement didn't properly begin until the tail-end of the 19th century is a testament to Leopold's talent for deception.



Leopold came of age in a time of rampant imperialism, but, because Belgium was a relatively new country, it "missed out" on the empire-building of the 15th, 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. Thus, by the time Leopold ascended to the throne, he found that there was little land outside of Europe that hadn't been claimed by a European power already, which required his imperial ambitions to be creative and shrewd. This also nods to the toxic competition for power and reputation among European states that was played out at the expense of the African continent. Also, notice that the monuments of Belgium—its palaces and museums, for instance—were paid for with Congolese slave labor. Indeed, the palaces of Belgium could be considered a symbol for the hypocrisy and deceptiveness of European imperialism in general—on the surface, they're beautiful and majestic, but underneath, they're morally repugnant.



Leopold had a sister, Charlotte, who later married a duke and was installed by Napoleon III as the Empress of Mexico. France's "Mexican Empire" quickly fell apart, and Charlotte's husband was executed. Charlotte, stationed in Europe at the time, became mentally unstable in the years leading up to her husband's death, and Leopold arranged for her to be kept in a luxurious chateau, out of public life. Charlotte continued to believe that her husband was alive, serving as Emperor of Mexico. In spite of his brother-in-law's experiences with empire-building, Leopold continued to try to build an empire of his own.

In the 1870s, Leopold learned of Henry Morton Stanley, who was then traveling through Africa to find Livingstone. Leopold realized that Stanley's expeditions had become enormously popular in large part because Stanley had filled his dispatches with lurid descriptions of the "barbaric" Arab slave traders of Africa. If Belgium were to gain an empire of its own, Leopold realized, he would have to present its expansion in humanitarian terms, suggesting that Belgium was colonizing Africa for the Africans' own good. Thus, in 1876, Leopold began to present himself as a great philanthropist. He met with priests and missionaries, and cultivated relationships with powerful aristocrats and politicians in London. Around this time, he learned about a large, unwanted area of land near the Congo River.

In September 1876, Leopold held a Geographic Conference with explorers and missionaries from across Europe. At the time, Stanley was still in Africa, but the conference formally recognized his work. Leopold flattered his guests by awarding them all the "Cross of Leopold" and housing them in a gorgeous palace. When Leopold delivered the welcoming address at his conference, he stressed that he had no ambitions of building an empire—his only concern, he claimed, was to encourage cooperation between European explorers and humanitarians. He also claimed that he wanted his guests to share their information about travel routes in sub-Saharan Africa, in order that Europeans could work together to end slavery in Africa. At the end of the conference, the guests voted to establish an International African Association (IAA) in Belgium, with Leopold as the chairman.

For the next few years, wealthy philanthropists and humanitarians sent large donations to the new IAA while Leopold prepared to claim the Congo for himself. Over the past decade, he had learned that it was difficult to claim African land using military force alone.; by claiming to be a great humanitarian, acting in the interests of the people of Africa, however, he realized that he could colonize the Congo with the full support of the European powers.

Evidently, Leopold got very little pleasure from his family life; his real pleasure in life was empire-building. Leopold was a cruel, callous person, and he seems to have had no sympathy whatsoever for his sister, even after she became more mentally unstable. His arrogance is also apparent in his refusal to learn a lesson from the death of Charlotte's husband.



Leopold developed a diabolical scheme for advancing his colonial interests: he would present himself as a great humanitarian, whose only interests in colonizing Africa were charitable. Leopold also demonized the Afro-Arab slave trade in order to emphasize the "purity" of his own interest, and to convince other European powers to support his colonial interventions. Finally, Leopold realized that he would need a first-rate explorer, such as Henry Morton Stanley, to control Belgium's new territory.



Leopold made clever use of public relations: he invited dignitaries and philanthropists from around Europe to the conference in order to give the impression that he was a great humanitarian. Leopold knew that impressing powerful people in other European countries could create a trickle-down effect: his powerful guests would tell their friends that he was a good man. Leopold's "performance" as a do-gooder was so convincing that he succeeded in gaining valuable information about the geography of sub-Saharan Africa for free.



Leopold used his reputation as a charitable, kind-hearted monarch to disguise the truth: he just wanted to control the Congo in order to build his fortune and strengthen his country.



CHAPTER 3

On the evening of August 5, 1877, a small group of black men arrived at the town of Boma, located near the Congo River. The men carried a note from Henry Morton Stanley, explaining that his expedition was on the brink of starvation and they desperately needed food. By dawn, the note had reached Portuguese traders, who arranged to send Stanley rice, potatoes, and fish. The traders, some of whom were familiar with Stanley's travels, realized that Stanley had traveled all the way across Africa, from east to west. This suggested that he was now the first European to chart the course of the Congo River from start to finish.

After finding David Livingstone, Stanley had set out on another expedition through Africa, sponsored by the *New York Herald* and the London *Daily Telegraph*. Before leaving, Stanley signed a marriage pact with a young heiress named Alice Pike. He then left with a team of almost 400 people, traveling into central Africa. As Stanley traveled west, he and his men killed countless innocent people with the latest rifles and elephant guns. In his dispatches, Stanley wrote that, on more than one occasion, he ordered his men to open fire on Africans because he thought they were mocking him. Some humanitarians criticized Stanley for his cruelty and pettiness, but many Europeans and Americans celebrated Stanley's brashness and courage.

Reading Stanley's memoirs, one is struck by how much of his expedition was spent measuring and surveying African land, as if measuring it for future conquest. Stanley also describes himself giving inflated speeches to his men—speeches which, in all likelihood, he never gave. The expedition travelled down the mouth of a huge river, known as the Lulaba, and some on the expedition guessed that this river would eventually turn out to be the Congo River. For months, Stanley and his crew traveled down the river, noting the rich flora and fauna nearby. Frustratingly, there are no records of African responses to Stanley's expedition—only Stanley's interpretations of Africans exist in archives. However, other European travelers later heard descriptions of Stanley's expedition, passed between many different people. In some of these descriptions, Stanley is described as a frightening, jeering, one-eyed man.

In the final stages of the expedition, Stanley and his crew faced starvation and—thanks to the rapid currents of the river—drowning. Furthermore, men were dying of malaria, dysentery, and other diseases common to the area. In the end, it took Stanley two years to travel to the west coast of Africa. By the time he arrives, his betrothed, Alice Pike, had married someone else.

The chapter opens at the tail-end of Stanley's expedition across Africa. Stanley was the first European to cross the Congo River—an undeniably heroic achievement that, tragically, paved the way for the brutal Belgian intervention in the Congo. Notice, too, that Stanley's survival depended on the African men who brought his note to the Portuguese traders. Over and over again, good deeds done by Africans only invite more exploitation.



Stanley continued to crave social respectability—perhaps explaining why he signed a marriage arrangement with an heiress. Also, notice that Stanley didn't try to hide his cruelty to African people; there were plenty of people in Europe (maybe even most of them) who celebrated Stanley for his racism and sadism. Leopold II succeeded in colonizing the Congo partly because he convinced powerful Europeans that he would treat the Congolese benevolently; however, the disturbing truth is that many powerful Europeans didn't care how Leopold treated the Congolese.



The passage reemphasizes Stanley's talent for self-promotion and exaggeration, as well as his cruelty to the African people (and to his own men). While no written records of African impressions of Henry Morton Stanley have survived into the 21st century, oral tradition tells of Stanley as a monstrous, intimidating beast, which suggests that he wasn't kind to the native people he encountered. This imbalance of sources (many written records from the European perspective, but none from African perspectives) sheds light on the difficulty of reconstructing the stories of colonialism.



Throughout history, diseases have prevented different civilizations from interacting with one another. In this case, the presence of tropical diseases like malaria delayed Stanley in traveling across the Congo River. Alice Pike's broken engagement characterizes Stanley as a somewhat pathetic character—he struggled for social recognition that continued to elude him, even as he continued to grow more and more famous.



In the months leading up to the end of the expedition, Leopold had learned a lot about Stanley. He read countless articles about Stanley's travels, and decided that Stanley had the temperament to lead Leopold's conquest of the Congo. Leopold sent Stanley a telegram of congratulations, and arranged for General Henry Shelton Sanford, a former American ambassador to Belgium, to invite Stanley to Belgium. Sanford was born into a wealthy Connecticut family, but lost vast sums of money on foolish business ventures throughout his adult life. After his tenure as Belgian ambassador ended, Sanford decided to stay in Belgium, and he became heavily dependent on Leopold for money. Thus, when Leopold instructed Sanford to find a way to bring Stanley to Belgium, Sanford worked hard to do so. After a few false starts, Sanford succeeded in getting Stanley to accept Leopold's invitation.

It was Stanley's violent and cruel accounts of his voyage across Africa that drew Leopold to him; this undermines the possibility that Leopold was at all sincere in his professed humanitarian ambitions. Leopold recognized that he would need Henry Morton Stanley in order to colonize the Congo; thus, he enlisted the aid of Henry Shelton Sanford to persuade Stanley to travel to Belgium. As a savvy (and ruthless) politician, Leopold knew how to manipulate people into doing his bidding—indeed, he used Henry Sanford as a pawn, recognizing that Sanford was almost entirely dependent on him for his income.



CHAPTER 4

Henry Morton Stanley traveled to meet King Leopold in June of 1878. At the time, Stanley was Europe's leading expert on the Congo River, having traveled through it over the course of two years. Leopold understood that, by controlling the Congo River, he could control the passage of European ships across Africa, thereby making huge sums of money.

By the late 1870s, Leopold had a definite plan for the Congo: having satisfied Europe's power elite that he was a benevolent figure, he needed to colonize the Congo before another European power claimed it.



When Leopold finally met with Stanley, Leopold was 43 years old, and a shrewd, experienced monarch. Stanley, thirty-seven, was famous across Europe and America, but still wildly insecure about his status in the eyes of Europe's elite. Perhaps sensing this, Leopold flattered Stanley, giving him luxurious gifts and praising his bravery and ingenuity. Stanley accepted a contract of 50,000 francs a year (the equivalent of about 250,000 dollars) to lead an expedition to the Congo.

Leopold was a shrewd judge of character: he recognized that Stanley, in spite of his vast fame, was hungry for praise and recognition from the aristocracy. Thus, Leopold was careful to flatter Stanley in addition to offering him large sums of money in return for doing his bidding.



What did Leopold expect to find in the Congo? In no small part, he was excited by the prospect of ivory, which was seen as a luxury good throughout Europe. However, as before, he took great pains to appear to be a benevolent humanitarian. He established a new organization, the International Association of the Congo (IAC). Leopold evidently wanted people to confuse the IAC with the IAA; indeed, the two organizations even had the same flag. Leopold publicized the information that the IAC would be traveling to "the Congo"—a phrase which now referred to an area of land, not just the Congo River—in order to build "hospices" to protect and benefit the African peoples. As before, donations poured in from Europe's greatest humanitarians. Leopold even claimed that he was sending Stanley to investigate the possibility of building "free negro republics" around the Congo, whose presidents would live in Europe and rule with King Leopold's help. Privately, however, Leopold assured Stanley that there would be no "negro republic" in the Congo—white people would have all the power.

Leopold had studied the imperial histories of France, England, and Germany, so he must have known that his territory in the Congo was likely to make him fabulously wealthy. However, he also recognized that he would need to keep his fortune secret; otherwise, he would lose his reputation as a philanthropist, thereby becoming a political and economic rival to the other Western powers. Notice that, from the very beginning, Stanley was aware that Leopold was a liar—he'd heard Leopold's talk of a resettlement colony, and had been informed by Leopold himself that there would be such a resettlement colony. While Stanley would go on to protest some of Leopold's bolder deceptions, he was content to participate in Leopold's lies for the time being.



For the next five years, Stanley worked diligently on behalf of King Leopold. His men, some of whom were white Europeans, some of whom were Africans who lived near the river, spent two years building infrastructure. During this time Stanley brutally punished anyone thought to be shirking hard labor. In his letters to Leopold, Stanley criticized his workers for being lazy and weak-minded. On one occasion, Stanley nearly died of malaria, but he remained loyal to his mission and to King Leopold throughout his illness. Meanwhile, Leopold carefully used his political influence to spread the message that his intervention in the Congo was economically disinterested; at the same time, however, he instructed Stanley to gather as much ivory as possible, and claim the territory surrounding the Congo River.

During Stanley's expedition, other European powers began exploring the area surrounding the Congo. Afraid that he would lose his colonial holdings, Leopold instructed Stanley to work as quickly as possible to secure his Congolese landholdings. Stanley, backed by a private army of thousands, negotiated treaties with dozens of African chiefs who lived along the river. Though Stanley wanted to leave the chiefs some sovereignty over their own land, Leopold pressured Stanley to arrange for treaties granting Belgium total control over the land. In reality, many of the African chiefs didn't realize they were signing "treaties" at all—many had never seen written words before, and didn't understand that they were surrendering their land forever. Also, Stanley was shrewd in using alcohol to persuade African chiefs to agree to give up their lands; he would offer the chiefs gin in return for their cooperation.

What do we know about the societies that existed along the Congo River before Stanley's arrival? To begin with, societies along the Congo were incredibly diverse. Some of the Congo River societies were seminomadic; they wandered along the river in pursuit of big game. Other Congolese societies were more sedentary, and had sophisticated arts and sciences. Congolese baskets, mats, masks, and woodcarvings played a major role in inspiring the Cubist artwork of Pablo Picasso. But for now, Europeans didn't stop to notice the beauty of Congolese art. Finally, many of the societies along the river had strong spiritual traditions—for example, one society elected its leaders via a compromise between the society's elders, the spirits of their ancestors, and wild animals.

Stanley was a brutal colonial ruler. Like many of the most notable empire-builders of the era, Stanley's job was to intimidate his men into working long hours in horrible conditions, so that the future generations of European visitors could have roads, buildings, and telegraph lines. Leopold and Stanley proved to be an effective team: while Stanley worked his men hard, Leopold continued to give the general public the impression that he was interested in charity and nothing more.



Throughout the 19th century, European countries colonized and developed territories of Africa, America, Asia, and Australia. In many cases, the European colonists claimed that they had a legal right to do so. However, the European powers' legal claim to the land was highly questionable, because the native people with whom they made the deals didn't always fully understand what they were signing—for example, many of the African chiefs who "agreed" to give up their land didn't understand what a contract was. The fact that Stanley worked quickly and used the lure of alcohol to close deals suggests that he must have known that his behavior was unethical.



Although there is relatively little information about the societies that lived along the Congo River before Stanley's arrival, it's important to try to understand them. To begin with, notice that Hochschild doesn't characterize the Congolese tribes as monolithic—they were very different from one another (some were nomadic, some more sedentary, etc.). By celebrating the tribes' art, culture, and religion, Hochschild refrains from portraying the Congolese as mere victims (as Edmund Dene Morel and his colleagues tended to do).



By June of 1884, Stanley's work in the Congo was done. He'd arranged for hundreds of treaties granting the Belgians control over Congolese land, and he'd built sturdy roads and buildings. Stanley complained more than once about Leopold's greed, even though it was Stanley himself who allowed Leopold to realize his greedy ambitions. By this time, the scramble for Africa had truly begun: the great powers of Europe were busy organizing expeditions to explore and colonize various parts of the African continent. Leopold, meanwhile, was trying to find a way to get other nations to recognize his newly secured landholdings in the Congo.

Leopold seized land in the Congo at the time when many European powers were "scrambling" to claim as much of Africa as possible. Because Belgium had no other imperial landholdings, Leopold needed to find a way to set a precedent for Belgian imperialism—in other words, he needed to convince another Western country to formally recognize his territory. Moreover, Leopold needed to do so while still seeming to be a generous humanitarian.



CHAPTER 5

In the spring of 1883, President Chester A. Arthur traveled to Florida as the guest of General Henry Shelton Sanford, still the loyal servant of King Leopold II. Sanford was a longtime supporter of the Republican Party to which Arthur belonged, and Leopold believed that he could use Sanford to convince Arthur to formally recognize his claims to Congolese land. In the fall of 1883, Sanford met with Arthur in the White House, where he praised Leopold for his great humanitarian work. Shrewdly, Sanford compared Leopold's work in the Congo to the American project to resettle slaves in Africa—a project which had been driven by private societies and which had resulted in the creation of the independent country of Liberia. Sanford also claimed that Leopold's colonial holdings in the Congo would thwart the ambitions of "barbaric" Arab slave-traders in the region.

In this section, Hochschild shows that Leopold II, in addition to being a racist himself (given that he was willing to enslave Congolese people), was skillful at manipulating other people and catering to their political and ideological leanings. Thus, he used Sanford to convince Chester A. Arthur that the Congo would become "the next Liberia"—a place where former slaves could live in peace. The "back to Africa" movement, which originated in America in the late 19th century, proposed sending millions of former slaves back to Africa. The idea had very broad-ranging support, including from white supremacists, supporters of African American equality, and President Chester A. Arthur. The strange bedfellows of the back to Africa movement and Belgian imperialism show just how convoluted Western ideas about Africa were.



Throughout 1884, Sanford continued his work as a Washington lobbyist for Leopold's cause. He wined and dined American politicians and businessmen, and found a powerful ally in John Tyler Morgan, a white supremacist senator from Alabama who had supported a plan to send former slaves (many of whom had lived their whole lives in the United States) "back" to Africa. Sanford convinced Morgan that, by recognizing the existence of Leopold's Congo landholdings, the U.S. would have a way to establish economic connections between itself and Africa, perhaps opening up a new market for Alabama's cotton surplus. Morgan introduced a Senate resolution recognizing Leopold's Congo claims, and in April 1884, the U.S. became the first country to officially recognize King Leopold II's claim to the Congo. The Secretary of State made a statement in which he confused the IAC and the IAA, showing that Leopold's strategy had worked perfectly: America couldn't be sure if Leopold's landholdings were philanthropic or colonial.

John Tyler Morgan was a white supremacist senator at a time when many prominent American politicians were openly racist. Morgan was an active supporter of the "back to Africa" movement—he despised African Americans, and wanted to expel them from their own country. Sanford effectively convinced Morgan that, by supporting Belgium in the Congo, he would have a resettlement colony for African Americans in the decades to come. The passage also shows how Leopold used confusion, jargon, and obfuscation to further his ends—by using acronyms and confusing terminology, he was able to trick people into thinking that his philanthropic organizations and his imperialist ventures were one and the same. Therefore, many believed that his colonies in the Congo must be humanitarian.



U.S. recognition of the Congo immediately strengthened Leopold's position in Africa. Leopold scored another victory when he convinced France to formally recognize his landholdings, as well. In order to accomplish this, Leopold launched a journalistic campaign, paying writers to pen long stories praising his humanitarian work in the Congo. The French government wasn't concerned about Belgium threatening France's power in Africa; in fact, France believed that, by recognizing Belgium's colonial holdings, it stood a better chance of buying those holdings at some point in the future. American and French recognition launched a domino effect—within a few years, a long list of countries recognized Leopold's claim to the Congo. Leopold's greatest challenge was convincing Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of Germany to recognize the Congo. Von Bismarck immediately doubted that Leopold would establish an independent state in the Congo. However, he eventually agreed to recognize Leopold's claims to the Congo because he was worried that, if he did not, Britain or France would claim the territory for itself.

In 1884, von Bismarck hosted the famous Berlin Conference, in which the leaders of Europe's great powers met to discuss the division of Africa. King Leopold did not attend the conference, because, officially, the Congo was under the control of the IAC, which was a private society. However, many of Leopold's followers were present at the conference, including Sanford (acting as ambassador from America), and Stanley. Leopold instructed his allies to include Belgium in a series of trade agreements, further cementing the Congo's status as a legitimate territory.

On May 29, 1885, Leopold, now fifty years old, officially declared his landholdings to be the Congo Free State. In spite of the changed name, the land remained under Leopold's private control.

CHAPTER 6

During his years securing Congolese lands, Leopold's family life fell apart. He had a series of affairs, and then married his daughter, Louise, off to an older nobleman; within a few years, Louise had become caught up in an adulterous romance of her own. Much later, Louise, who probably suffered from depression, would be sent to an insane asylum, where she spent most of her time buying lavish dresses. Around the same time, Leopold married off his middle daughter, Stephanie, to an Austro-Hungarian prince who already had a mistress of his own. Leopold's greatest source of pleasure was his African colony, never his family.

Notice how cunningly Leopold pitted the countries of Europe against one another: he frightened them into thinking that, unless they protected Belgium now, another European power would be able to annex the Congo in the near future. One could even make the argument that Leopold was able to control the Congo largely because of the greed of the other European nations (and, furthermore, the racism of American politicians). Hochschild argues that it would be wrong to blame Leopold alone for the atrocities in the Congo. Cruel though he was, Leopold only succeeded in enslaving the indigenous Congolese because he had the cynical backing of the most powerful people in the Western world.



Leopold continued to use well-placed agents and allies to further his interests—at the Berlin Conference, for instance, he ensured that the European powers would officially recognize Belgium's holdings in the Congo through trade, which cemented the political legitimacy of Belgium's claim to the Congo.



Tragically, the name "Congo Free State" proved inappropriate: there was nothing "free" about Leopold's landholdings in Africa. On the contrary, they comprised a slave state.



Leopold concentrated on running the Congo, rather than taking care of his wife, sister, or children. Indeed, the chaotic, scandalous nature of his life in Belgium suggests that Leopold was callously indifferent to his family.



Leopold took advantage of European technology to secure his newly-official landholdings. He purchased steamships to travel down the Congo River and guns to punish anyone who challenged his authority. He was quickly running out of money, though, so he borrowed funds from banks throughout Europe, and even asked the Pope to encourage all loyal Catholics to buy Congo bonds to ensure “the spread of Christ’s word.”

In 1889, Leopold was asked to become the honorary president of the Aborigines Protection Society (APS), a British human rights organization. Delighted, Leopold arranged for the society’s headquarters to be based in Belgium. There, he continued to denounce the Arab slave-trade, and claimed that he would spread Christianity and civilization to the Congo. Leopold convinced other members of the APS to donate funds to build steamships, railways, and other forms of infrastructure needed to defend the Congo from slavery. He also amended free trade agreements in order to allow him to levy duties on trade out of the Congo—supposedly so that he could support a campaign against slavery. This angered many of Leopold’s former allies, including Sanford, who had wanted to keep the Congo open for duty-free trade.

In the early 1890s, Leopold made an important deal with the Belgian parliament. While continuing to claim to be a philanthropist in public, Leopold privately claimed that, if Parliament loaned him money now, he would leave control of the soon-to-be-lucrative IAC to Parliament in his will. Leopold did, indeed, leave the IAC to Parliament, though in his will he made it seem that he was doing so out of generosity, not because of a secret business deal.

After Stanley finished securing the Congo for Leopold, Leopold kept Stanley as a consultant, for fear that Stanley would go to work for the English. He promised to make Stanley the director general of the Congo, but secretly promised the French government (which resented Stanley for besting French explorers) that Stanley would never go to the Congo again. For years, Stanley lived in Belgium, believing that he’d one day be sent back to the Congo. In the meantime, he courted several women, but, as before, did not marry.

In 1886, there was a sudden uprising of Muslim fundamentalists in the Sudan, which was then controlled by Britain. Emin Pasha, the British-backed governor of the region, asked for European support to defend the Sudan from fundamentalist rebels. Stanley begged Leopold for permission to travel to the Sudan to fight alongside Pasha. Leopold, sensing a great opportunity, agreed, under the condition that, if Stanley reached Emin, he would ask Emin to continue as governor of the same territory—but now as a province of the Congo.

Leopold continued to manipulate the public into thinking that he was a great man. He even conned the Catholic Church into asking loyal Catholics to buy Congo bonds, which suggests that Leopold had as little respect for religion as he did for his own family.



Now that his power over the Congo had been recognized by the European nations, Leopold could afford to betray some of his old friends, such as Sanford. Leopold had no intentions of opening up the Congo for free trade; his plan was to steal the Congo’s resources for himself and charge all other countries heavy tariffs to conduct business there. Notice that Leopold continued to use the Afro-Arab slave trade as distraction from his own plans: European powers were so focused on denouncing Arab slaving that they failed to notice the rise of a European-backed slave state in the Congo.



Leopold didn’t have unlimited funds, and in the 1890s he was so desperate for more money that he had to bequeath the Congo to his Parliament. This suggests an important point: the Belgian Parliament knew very well that the Congo was a for-profit colony, not a charitable venture. Parliament, therefore, was somewhat complicit in Leopold’s crimes in the Congo.



Leopold had little loyalty to his agents and allies—once he no longer needed them, he treated them poorly. Despite Leopold’s promises to Stanley of future power (while nevertheless privately betraying him), Stanley continued to seek power, status, and acceptance.



Leopold thought that he could use Stanley to further expand Belgium’s colonial holdings. By offering aid and support to Emin Pasha, Belgium could perhaps convince Emin to become a Belgian agent, thereby converting the Sudan into a Belgian colony.



Stanley assembled an armed expedition to take to the Sudan. However, he feuded constantly with his men, and over the course of the expedition, more than half died of disease. By the time Stanley and his remaining men reached Emin, the expedition was exhausted and nearly starving. Stanley offered Emin ammunition, but little else. Humiliatingly, Emin turned down Stanley's offer that Emin become governor of the new Congolese province. Leopold's attempt to double his African landholdings had failed.

Stanley failed to provide the necessary support to Emin Pasha, and therefore, Belgium failed to expand its colonial holdings in Africa. As a result, Leopold continued to devote most of his attention to the administration of the Congo.



CHAPTER 7

At the end of the 19th century, few Europeans thought of African colonization as an act of theft; in fact, they behaved as though Africa were an empty continent, ripe for industrialization and urban development. One of the few exceptions to this rule was George Washington Williams, an African American journalist who traveled to the Congo in 1890.

It is striking to compare the claims of Portuguese explorers in the 15th century with the claims of 19th century imperialists. The Portuguese didn't deny that Africa was densely populated, whereas many 19th century European explorers tried to claim that there were almost no native people. This fiction was developed, in part, to bolster their countries' rights to the land.



Williams was born in Pennsylvania, and fought in the Civil War on the Union side. He later fought in the American cavalry against Native Americans living on the Great Plains. Later on, he studied at Howard University, where he proved himself to be a great speaker and writer. Williams then founded a national black newspaper in Washington D.C., and, in 1882, he published a massive history of the African American experience. During an 1883 visit to the White House, Williams was introduced to Henry Shelton Sanford, then lobbying for U.S. recognition of Leopold's landholdings in the Congo. Sanford convinced Williams that the Congo could be a home for African Americans.

George Washington Williams was a gifted preacher and public speaker; he was also a committed advocate of African American rights. It might sound odd that Williams would have supported an African American colony in the Congo (especially considering that white supremacists like John Tyler Morgan supported an almost identical plan). However, Williams believed that African Americans should have the right to govern themselves and be free of stigmatization and prejudice—life in the Congo, he believed, offered such an opportunity.



Williams next traveled to Belgium to write articles about the possibility of an African American colony in the Congo. He interviewed Leopold, and was dazzled with what he perceived as Leopold's magnanimity and Christian piety. Inspired by Leopold, Williams made a deal with a Belgian company to travel to the Congo and write a book about the territory. Thanks to funds provided by an American railway baron, Williams traveled down the coast of Africa, eventually arriving in the Congo.

At first, Williams believed that Leopold was a generous, pious monarch. It's a testament to Leopold's deviousness that he managed to fool even Williams, who would later go on to be one of Leopold's most important opponents on the international stage.



In Williams's earliest letters to Leopold, sent from the Congo, it is already clear that Williams is disturbed by the state of affairs in Leopold's territory. He criticizes the white administrators in the Congo for using superior technology to trick African people into thinking that white men are magical. He also notes that Stanley's name provokes shudders among the Africans. Williams points out the absence of schools or churches in the Congo, and notes the murder and torture that took place under Stanley's rule. Williams concludes that the Congo is currently a slave state, in which white soldiers use guns, torture, and intimidation to force African people to work for nothing. Three months after penning his first letter to Leopold, Williams sends a letter to the American secretary of state, arguing that the Congo state was guilty of "crimes against humanity."

Williams's letters on the Congo were published in the *New York Herald*, Stanley's former employer. Leopold was furious with Williams, and told his contacts in Europe that Williams was a liar. While some Belgian newspapers treated Williams as a fraud, others presented his findings as the truth. In Parliament, representatives vigorously debated the truth of Williams's letters. Then, very suddenly, Williams died of tuberculosis. His death was celebrated in many Belgian newspapers, though other writers treated him as a martyr for the Congolese cause. Williams's letters represent some of the first Western criticism of Leopold's Congo territory—before Williams visited the Congo, almost a thousand Americans and Europeans had visited Leopold's Congo, and not a single one had spoken out against it.

CHAPTER 8

The capital of the new Congo state was Boma. By the 1890s, Boma had luxurious houses for its administrators, a whites-only hospital, and a trolley. The governor general of the Congo lived in a luxurious mansion, yet didn't have very many responsibilities—more than any other European colonies, the Congo was governed directly from Europe. European officials in the Congo were usually unmarried, though they took on multiple African wives during their time in the Congo.

By the 1890s, King Leopold personally controlled all the land in the Congo, thanks to Stanley's intimidation policies in the previous decade. As a result, Leopold acted as a kind of venture capitalist, leasing out his property to private companies. But unlike a venture capitalist, Leopold had his own private army, which he used to protect his territory and consolidate his control over the ivory trade. Throughout the 1890s, Leopold continued to claim that he had no interest in making money in the Congo. Rather, he claimed to be interested in enlightening the people of the Congo and teaching them about Christianity.

Williams immediately noticed the injustices of life in the Congo. He criticized Stanley's use of torture and intimidation, and attacked Leopold himself for supporting a slave state in the Congo. Williams was clearly a bold, courageous man, who didn't respect authorities like Leopold simply because they were monarchs. Williams took a bold step by going out of his chain of command and sending a letter directly to the American secretary of state. Even more strikingly, Williams attacked Leopold for "crimes against humanity"—suggesting that Williams, unlike many of the major humanitarians of the era, believed in a set of universal human rights.



Leopold was lucky that Williams died so soon after sending out his first letters; had Williams lived much longer, it's entirely possible that he would have done more to popularize the Congo reform movement. However, it's a mark of Leopold's talent for publicity and media control that he was able to undermine Williams's campaign by relying on his allies in politics and journalism. Perhaps the most stunning thing about Williams's story is that, before his visit, many hundreds of Westerners had witnessed atrocities in the Congo and said nothing about them.



Life in the Congo was rigorously segregated; for example, European-built houses and hospitals were usually "whites only." Congo administrators behaved hypocritically—they claimed to have come to Africa to preach Christianity, and yet some of them entered into multiple marriages, plainly disobeying the rules of Christianity.



Leopold made most of his fortune by leasing out his properties to other companies, and then collecting his share of the profits. Thus, he opened up the Congo to rubber and ivory companies, and made a large fortune in doing so. Leopold's behavior utterly contradicted his claims of being interested in philanthropy. His practices also contradicted the claims of free trade that he had made to Sanford in the 1880s.



The white colonialists in the Congo enslaved the people of the Congo and forced many of them to work as porters. Porters were forced to carry heavy supplies across the territory, and they were horribly beaten if they failed in any of their assignments; as a result, most porters died quickly. The sight of black children—some no older than seven or eight—being whipped and beaten in broad daylight was not at all unusual in the Congo in the 1890s. For the most part, Europeans who came to work in the Congo didn't keep records of their shock at the sight of so much cruelty. Rather, the white people who worked as judges, steamboat engineers, and soldiers tended to view whipping and beatings as necessary means of controlling the disobedient people of the Congo.

How was it possible that educated, “enlightened” Europeans thought nothing of the cruelty they witnessed in the Congo? To begin with, many Europeans didn't consider Africans to be true human beings; even if they did, they often considered Africans to be lazy, stupid, and uncivilized. Second, the cruelty of the Congo had been approved by the highest Belgian authorities—thus, to be against whippings and beatings was to be against Belgium itself. Finally, as psychologists have confirmed again and again, human beings have the disturbing ability to get used to cruelty and horror very quickly. Indeed, the colonialists of the Congo seemed to think that being cruel and unsympathetic to the people of the Congo was a sign of maturity and machismo.

The official military force of the Congo was the Force Publique, troops of African mercenaries commanded by mostly white officers. In spite of the strength of the Force Publique, there were many Africans in the Congo who chose to fight back rather than submit to tyranny. The Sanga tribe, led by the chief Mulume Niama, attacked the Force Publique and then took refuge in caves. The Force Publique retaliated by filling the caves with smoke, suffocating the entire tribe. Afraid that the sight of the dead bodies would make martyrs of the Sanga tribe, the Force Publique blocked the entrance to the caves so that nobody would be able to see what had happened. Other tribes targeted Belgian roads, trolleys, and state buildings; one tribe managed to conduct raids on the Belgians for more than five years before the Force Publique wiped them out.

Conditions in the Congo were brutal: Africans were treated as disposable, and were no more respected than animals. Perhaps most disturbingly, the Belgians' human rights crimes in the Congo almost always occurred in broad daylight: over the years, many thousands of people witnessed soldiers and guards beating children and murdering innocent people, but did nothing to stop these atrocities. In part, Western visitors to the Congo ignored the cruelty around them because they thought of Africans as sub-human, and therefore undeserving of basic human respect.



In part, Western visitors tolerated cruelty to the Congolese because they were “products of their era”—in other words, at a time when many educated people believed that Africans weren't fully human, Westerners were willing to tolerate human rights atrocities. But Hochschild brings up a second, much more disturbing possibility: the ability to be indifferent to cruelty is timeless, and may even be a part of human nature. Whether in the 1890s or the 2010s, people get used to cruelty, and find ways of tolerating it.



In this important passage, Hochschild discusses a Congolese tribe that refused to go willingly into slavery. The Sanga tribesmen fought heroically against the Force Publique, eventually dying horrific deaths by asphyxiation as punishment for doing so. Nor were the Sanga unique—many other Congolese tribes rebelled against Belgian tyranny, risking their lives in doing so. By describing the brave actions of Congolese people, Hochschild offers an account of history that doesn't entirely marginalize the Congolese, or portray them exclusively as victims.



While the Force Publique brutally suppressed African tribes' resistance, there were also uprisings in the Force itself. In 1897, a huge mutiny broke out, in which porters and members of the Force Publique joined together against the Belgian governors. The fight lasted more than three years. During this time, a European priest named Father Achte was captured by members of the rebellion. While some of the rebels wanted to kill Father Achte immediately, the group decided not to hurt him, since he was unarmed, preached religion, and had tended to wounded Africans in the past. To Father Achte's amazement, the rebels fed him goat, brewed him fresh coffee, and released him.

Throughout the 1890s, as Leopold issued edicts officially banning slavery, not one American or European visitor besides George Washington Williams stated the obvious truth: the Congo depended on slave labor. Administrators in the Congo were careful to speak of "volunteer workers," rather than admit that these workers were slaves. Many of the slaves that the Belgians acquired for the Congo came from Arab slave-traders—the very people whom Leopold had demonized throughout the 1870s. One such trader, Tippu Tip, became so powerful in the eastern Congo that Leopold asked him to serve as the governor of the area—an offer that Tippu Tip accepted. While Tippu Tip and Leopold parted ways shortly thereafter, Leopold continued to appoint Arab slavers to administrative positions in the eastern Congo.

Few African voices had the luxury of describing slavery in the Congo, since African slaves weren't taught how to read or write, and tended to die early deaths due to their owners' cruelty. However, one slave, named Ilanga, told her story to an American state agent named Edgar Canisius. Ilanga explained that she had once lived in a tribal village far away. One day, the Force Publique came to the village; frightened, the tribe decided to offer the soldiers food and gifts in the hopes that they would move on. The soldiers did, but they soon came back and they used their guns and knives to capture Ilanga, as well as many other Africans. The Force Publique marched Ilanga and her peers for five days, during which they gave the Africans no food. Many Africans died during the five days march—when this happened, the Force Publique marched on.

Leopold ordered that African children should be put to work in the Congo. He donated large sums to Catholic missionary groups, which, unlike most of the Protestant missionary groups in the area, were Belgian and intensely loyal to Leopold. Leopold wanted the missionary schools to indoctrinate African children and train them for a life of obedient slavery. Many of the children were trained to be soldiers in the Force Publique.

This passage is important for two reasons. First, it establishes that the Force Publique, in spite of being a brutal private army, wasn't particularly well-organized; many soldiers in the Force were angry with King Leopold, despite their ostensible allegiance to him. Second, contrast the chivalry and magnanimity of the tribesmen who spared Father Achte's life with the sadism of the Force Publique—Hochschild suggests that the Congolese rebels, despite being characterized as "savages," were actually far more honorable and "civilized" than their European colonizers.



By 21st century standards, it might seem unbelievable that none of the Europeans or Americans besides Williams spoke out against cruelty in the Congo. In part, visitors may have kept quiet about what they saw because they didn't want to offend Leopold, or because they considered Africans to be sub-human. But perhaps they chose to remain quiet because people—then and now—are often indifferent to the pain of others. Also, notice that Leopold had no qualms about allying with Tippu Tip, in spite of his decades of rhetoric against Arab slave-traders.



Ilanga's story is one of the few surviving first-person accounts of specific Congolese people. While Ilanga didn't write her own story, she spoke to Edgar Canisius, who recorded her report. While it's important to consider possible sources of bias when examining the historical record, it seems likely that Canisius and Ilanga were telling the truth—Ilanga had no clear incentive to lie to Canisius about the Force Publique's behavior, and the forced march that she described to Canisius is in keeping with the character of the Force's other actions in the late 19th century.



Leopold didn't just try to enslave the Congolese population; he wanted to indoctrinate some of the Congolese and turn them into loyal soldiers. Put another way, Leopold tried to tear children away from their parents and neighbors, destroying the structure of Congolese society itself.



Around the same time, Leopold faced problems with his own family. His daughter, Stephanie, had married an Austro-Hungarian prince who had turned out to be an alcoholic. In 1889, the prince killed himself, and Leopold used the outpouring of sympathy for his daughter to raise funds for the colony in the Congo. Later on, Stephanie married a count, of whom Leopold didn't approve, and for the rest of his life Leopold refused to speak to Stephanie. At the same time, Leopold's sister, Charlotte, was becoming increasingly mentally unstable. She spent her time talking to dolls, and continued to believe that she was the Empress of Mexico. Leopold's main source of happiness, it seems, was running his colony in the Congo.

Throughout Belgium, there were young, ambitious men who aspired to travel to the Congo to make their fortunes. Going to the Congo was widely seen as an excellent career move. Furthermore, young men often spoke of the Congo as a place with "no rules." Many people who had already had unsuccessful careers in Belgium traveled to the Congo hoping to start over.

Leopold seems to have shown no affection for his daughters—instead of concentrating on his family life, he concentrated on running his colony in the Congo.



The fact that young ambitious Belgians thought of the Congo as the "wild west" suggests that, on some level, they knew that they could travel to Africa and commit acts of cruelty without punishment. In general, Belgian cruelty persisted because many Europeans were eager to inflict harm on African people or celebrate other people for doing the same.



CHAPTER 9

In 1890, there was a young Polish officer in the Congo whose name was Konrad Korzeniowski. Korzeniowski had had a difficult time making a living in Europe; he'd fallen into debt and failed to find work as a marine. He decided to go to the Congo in order to find a way to start over, and he ended up spending six months learning how to drive a steamship. Like most of the Europeans who came to the Congo in the 1890s, Korzeniowski initially believed that the Belgians were hard at work "civilizing" the Congolese people. Many years later, Korzeniowski would change his name to Joseph Conrad and become a writer. During his sixth months in the Congo, Conrad suffered from malaria; even so, it's clear (based on his vivid descriptions in [Heart of Darkness](#)) that he saw a great deal of the Congo. In [Heart of Darkness](#), a man named Marlow travels to the Congo and meets Mr. Kurtz, a charismatic but brutal European leader. English professors talk about Conrad's novella in literary terms, but the book is also important historically because of the account it gives of conditions in the Belgian Congo.

Joseph Conrad was one of the greatest writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His novels and novellas continue to attract a lot of interest and attention in the 21st century. In this short chapter, Hochschild will study [Heart of Darkness](#), Conrad's most famous book, from a historical perspective, since many of the novella's most famous literary ideas were based on real events from Conrad's time as an officer. It's a matter of historical record that Conrad was stationed in the Congo for many months, although he spent most of the time sick (and therefore not participating in or witnessing the worst atrocities of the Force Publique). Previously, Hochschild characterized King Leopold II, (a real person), as resembling a literary villain. Conversely, in this chapter, he talks about the real-life inspiration for [Heart of Darkness](#), a literary work.



In [Heart of Darkness](#), Marlow experiences many horrific events: he sees the dead bodies of African men and women lying by the river, and notices that ivory and rubber are constantly being shipped out of the area and back to Europe. It's likely that Conrad based Mr. Kurtz on a few real-life figures. Perhaps the most important model for Kurtz was Captain Léon Rom of the Force Publique. Like Kurtz, Rom was said to collect the heads of his African victims. There is even some evidence that Conrad met Rom in the Congo in August of 1890.

[Heart of Darkness](#) is one of the most scathing critiques of imperialism in English literature. But, though Conrad seems to have despised Belgian imperialism for “going too far,” he admired the British Empire greatly. Some critics have argued that [Heart of Darkness](#) is a racist book, portraying Africans as grunting, monolithic “brutes.” While there may be some truth in these criticisms, Conrad is insightful about the contradictions and ironies of imperialism. He notes that Kurtz was a murderous colonialist, but also an accomplished writer, who submitted a long treatise on “the suppression of savage customs.” Like Kurtz, Henry Morton Stanley was extravagantly praised for his books on Africa. Similarly, Captain Léon Rom published a book on Africans in the Congo, in which he spoke condescendingly of Africans, criticizing them for their laziness and stupidity. In all, it's important to remember that, in spite of the fact that [Heart of Darkness](#) is a work of fiction, it was inspired by horrific, real-life events in the Congo.

CHAPTER 10

On July 12, 1890, Henry Morton Stanley finally got married. His bride was a high-society woman named Dorothy Tennant, to whom he had sent letters during his expedition to the Sudan. However, Stanley remained intensely insecure around women. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that he and Tennant never consummated their marriage. Nevertheless, the marriage brought Stanley a new level of respect in Britain. A wealthy man, he traveled the world to give speeches and interviews, and to receive honorary degrees. Eventually, he was knighted.

Shortly after Stanley got married, an African American man named William Sheppard traveled to the Congo. Sheppard was an explorer and an intensely religious man; he believed that by journeying to the Congo, he could inspire other African Americans to join him, creating a resettlement colony. The racist Senator John Tyler Morgan had supported Sheppard's expedition, since he liked the “back-to-Africa” plan, too.

Throughout the history of the Belgian occupation of the Congo, we encounter real-life human beings who seem to have stepped out of novels and plays. For example, Léon Rom seems to have been so diabolically, sadistically evil that he belonged in a novel. It's easy to forget that [Heart of Darkness](#), despite being a fictional work, was inspired by some horrifying but real-life events.



Notice that Hochschild never claims that [Heart of Darkness](#) is an ethical, open-minded book. In fact, many critics, such as the writer Chinua Achebe, have convincingly argued that, by modern standards, [Heart of Darkness](#) is a highly offensive, racially insensitive book.. Hochschild is careful not to fall into Conrad's trap in his own book: he portrays Congolese people with subtlety, showing how they transcended their status as victims by rising up against the Belgian administration. Conrad's condescending, implicitly imperialist view of the Belgian occupation reflects the political ideology of the Congo reform movement—like Conrad, the leaders of the movement opposed some imperialist ventures, but not all, and treated the Congolese people like children.



The chapter begins with a quick update on Stanley's life. Stanley, in spite of his world-fame, was eager to ingratiate himself with European high society, and Hochschild strongly implies that Stanley married a wealthy heiress in part because he thought it would help raise his social standing.



Amazingly, the “back to Africa” proposal, popular in the U.S. in the late 1800s, had backing from both African American activists and white supremacists. William Sheppard's activism in the Congo was, in part, inspired by his own experience as a black man in the U.S. at a time of widespread prejudice—he was sympathetic to the Congolese in part because he knew what it was like to be treated as sub-human.



Sheppard was born in 1865, and distinguished himself as a theological student and a minister. In the late 1880s, he started a petition to travel to Africa as a missionary; after two years of trying, he set out with a young white missionary named Samuel Lapsley. Lapsley and Sheppard arrived in the Congo, along the Kasai River, in May of 1890, and immediately began plans to build a mission station. In 1892, Lapsley decided to travel to Boma alone, leaving Sheppard in charge of operations on the Kasai River. Afterwards, Sheppard began to bond with members of the Kuba tribe. Though he sometimes thought of the people of the Congo as ignorant and heathen, Sheppard wrote that he was glad to be around “my people.”

Toward the end of 1892, the Kuba tribe took Sheppard to visit their king. While, at first, the king was furious that his subjects had helped a foreigner, he relaxed when he saw that Sheppard was black and could speak some Kuba. Sheppard remained at the king’s court for months, learning about Kuba society and politics. Shortly after his visit, Sheppard left the Congo for London, where he was celebrated for his lectures on the Kuba. He was later made a fellow of the Royal Geographic Society.

In the eight years following Sheppard’s visit to the Kuba, rubber became a central part of the European economy. The invention of the rubber bicycle wheel in 1890 launched a worldwide “bicycle craze,” and suddenly European corporations needed rubber for factory equipment, creating a huge demand for the rubber vines that flourished in the Congo. By the mid-1890s, rubber had surpassed ivory as the Congo’s main source of revenue. The sale of rubber made Leopold huge profits because he paid nothing for the labor of Congolese slaves. But harvesting rubber was extremely difficult work—it involved the Congolese slaves smearing rubber sap on their bodies, waiting for it to harden, and then tearing it off their skin. While Leopold officially denied that he used slave labor to make rubber, he privately instructed his governors in the Congo to torture and intimidate the Africans into harvesting rubber. Léon Rom wrote a book in which he gave tips for how to take hostages and coerce Africans into obedience. Thus, by the late 1890s, there were thousands of slaves wandering through the forests of the Congo, harvesting the sap from rubber vines. If they failed to meet their daily quota, they’d be beaten or shot.

In part, Sheppard identified with the Congolese people on racial grounds; he considered the Congolese to be “my people.” In general, it’s important to notice that many of the earliest advocates for Congolese rights were African Americans who had experienced racism and prejudice in the United States, and therefore were in a unique position to sympathize with the Congolese.



Again, Hochschild emphasizes the civility and honor of the Congolese people—the Kuba tribe, for example, didn’t try to hurt Sheppard, even though he was working on behalf of European and American sponsors. Hochschild notes that the Kuba tribe respected Sheppard in part because he was black, suggesting that Sheppard’s racial identification with the Kuba tribe was mutual—both Sheppard and the Kuba felt that they belonged to the same “people.”



The rise of rubber as a major industrial resource was ruinous for the people of the Congo, and highly lucrative for their Belgian overlords. King Leopold II personally made huge sums of money by forcing the Congolese to work at extracting sap from rubber plants. The Force Publique and the governors in the Congo territory clearly didn’t care about working conditions or the well-being of their slaves—they wanted to maximize their profits in as little time as possible.



William Sheppard returned to the Congo in 1899, and immediately set out for the Kuba kingdom. When he arrived, he was stunned to find bloodstained ground and burning villages. A Force Publique officer showed Sheppard a severed human hand, explaining that, when soldiers executed a slave, they were required to cut off the dead slave's hand to prove that they'd really done the deed. Sheppard went on to write articles about the carnage he'd witnessed in the Congo, which were reprinted and widely quoted in Europe and the U.S.

William Sheppard's experiences in the Congo led him to pen a series of articles in which he criticized the Force Publique and the Belgian occupation of the Congo. One of the most notorious aspects of the Belgian occupation was the Force Publique's tactic of cutting off Congolese people's hands—in fact, several years ago, a Congolese activist group cut off the hand of a statue of King Leopold II, alluding to his sadistic policies.



CHAPTER 11

Even after he failed to annex the Sudan, King Leopold II continued to fantasize about building an African empire for Belgium. He spoke with William Gladstone, the prime minister of England, about leasing Uganda, while still claiming to be interested in Africa for purely humanitarian purposes. He even proposed sending “humanitarian armies” to Greece and Armenia to protect the people. While none of these schemes succeeded, Leopold continued to extract huge sums of money from his Congo territory; with his fortune, he built **museums, palaces, and monuments**. In 1895, he was sixty years old, and still trying to grow the Belgian empire. He invested some of his Congolese profits in a Chinese railway, and made another fortune with the deal. This allowed him to buy a small patch of land in China, in the name of the “Independent State of the Congo.”

King Leopold II devoted enormous attention to his Congolese colony; however, he also wanted to expand his African territory. It's important to remember that the European powers blocked him from expanding his territory, not because they objected to his cruelty, but because they didn't want Belgium to become a dangerous political and economic rival. However, Hochschild begins to suggest here that King Leopold might have succeeded in expanding further into China had there not been an international outcry against his cruelty in Africa.



Leopold ordered the building of a new railroad in the Congo for shipping rubber. The project required new slave labor; after eight years of work, it's estimated that 1800 Africans died in the construction of the railroad. During this time, Leopold had to fend off the criticisms of missionaries like William Sheppard, who had seen first-hand the state of the Congo. However, Sheppard wasn't a public relations master like Leopold or Stanley, and he wasn't able to tell many powerful people the truth about the Congo.

In this section, Hochschild makes an important distinction between telling the truth and being good at public relations. It's wasn't enough for Sheppard to write articles about the cruelty of the Congo—in order to threaten Leopold's regime in the Congo, he would have had to do more to popularize his articles and influence powerful people in Europe and America.



In 1895, Leopold faced his first real public relations challenge: reports of a Congo state officer who had executed a white officer, Charles Stokes. Stokes had married an African woman and sold arms to Arab merchants; for these crimes, the Force Publique hanged him. This proved to be a huge mistake. When news of the hanging reached England, journalists pointed out the truth: if the Congo's army hanged white officers, "think what it must do to the natives." Journalists began paying more attention to reports of Congo atrocities. In response, Leopold created a Commission for the Protection of Natives (CPN), and sent it to monitor the situation in the Congo. However, CPN representatives were never sent to rubber harvesting areas—they weren't allowed to see the true atrocities of the Congo. Leopold's strategy proved effective; for the most part, European elites continued to regard him as an honest, kind-hearted ruler.

In 1897, Belgium hosted the world's fair. One of the most talked-about exhibits was a celebration of the Congo, featuring 267 black men, women, and children, "imported from the Congo." Speakers claimed that the Africans of the Congo were uncivilized, crude, and barbaric. Local journalists wrote articles about how "dangerous" the 267 Africans were.

In the mid-1890s, Edmund Dene Morel, a young, hardworking man, began working for a company called Elder Dempster, a Liverpool shipping line that carried all cargo in and out of the Congo. Morel, who spoke French and English, worked in both France and England, supervising Congo shipments and interacting with some of the top Congo executives. Quickly, Morel realized that European companies regularly shipped huge quantities of guns and ammunition to the Congo. He also discovered that someone was skimming profits: the total wealth produced in the Congo was much greater than the profits that the Belgian government claimed. Finally, Morel realized that there was a trade imbalance: the Congo was shipping out ivory and rubber, but nothing was going into the territory except for guns. He gradually realized the truth: the Congo relied upon slave labor. As Morel realized this, "King Leopold II acquired his most formidable enemy."

CHAPTER 12

At the time when Morel realized what was going on in the Congo, few Europeans had spoken out about the truth of King Leopold's territories. Most people simply praised Leopold for his generosity and greatness. From Morel, however, Leopold faced a huge challenge. Morel, who was young and business-savvy, knew all the facts and figures of Leopold's business. He also had a knack for publicity.

The fallout from Charles Stokes's execution wasn't immediately harmful to Leopold's reputation; Leopold had done such a good job of currying favor on the international stage that many continued to think of him as a philanthropic giant. Still, the execution represented an early "chink" in Leopold's armor. It's important to note that after decades in which the Force Publique murdered hundreds of thousands of innocent Congolese people, the death of one European man sparked an international outcry. This is another clear reminder of the racism of Western society at the time.



Hochschild suggests that Belgium continued to rule the Congo because it concealed its own actions. But in part, he also implies, Belgian tyranny in the Congo persisted because many Westerners accepted and even welcomed racism against African people, since they believed that Africans were crude and sub-human.



The first part of the book ends with a description of Edmund Dene Morel, arguably the most important figure in the Congo reform movement of the 1890s and 1900s. Morel was only a young man working for a shipping company when he realized that King Leopold was a corrupt man who used slave labor to further his own interests. Morel's single-minded commitment to justice and human rights, combined with his refusal to take bribes or respond to threats, led him to found an international movement to stop Belgian tyranny in the Congo.



Edmund Dene Morel's attack on cruelty in the Congo seems utterly uncontroversial to most 21st century readers. But at the time, Morel was seen as a radical, "disrespectful" young man who dared to attack King Leopold, one of the most beloved people in Europe.



Morel began by telling his superiors what he'd learned. Elder Dempster had a lucrative deal with the Belgian government, and if Morel exposed what he'd learned, then the company could go bankrupt. Thus, Morel's superiors offered him a handsome raise and a promotion as a bribe for his silence; Morel refused. In 1900, he began writing attacks on Leopold, which he sent to British newspapers. Then, in 1903, he founded his own newspaper, *West African Mail*.

What kind of man was Morel? He grew up in a working class home, and was a member of the Church of England (though, it seems, he wasn't especially religious). Morel seems to have had a deep sense of indignation, and a strong moral compass—the two qualities that led him to become the “greatest British investigative journalist of his time.” His writing was clear, yet emotional, and he had an appetite for diligent research. In the course of his early investigations, Morel learned about the treaties that Stanley had negotiated with the African chiefs—treaties that were designed to rob entire tribes of their ancestral homes.

As Morel became better known for his denunciations of the Congo, other people approached him with leaked information. Gradually, he assembled evidence that the Force Publique was taking hostages in order to force slaves to harvest rubber, and he published interviews with some of the British and Swedish missionaries who'd witnessed human rights atrocities in the territory. Morel seems to have genuinely respected the people of the Congo; he published the names of Congolese victims, and regularly expressed his sympathy for Africans.

Leopold II, furious with Morel, arranged for one of his representatives to meet with Morel and offer him a bribe to stop writing about the Congo altogether. Morel proudly turned down the offer. Shortly afterwards, he published one of his strongest attacks on the administration of the Congo. After speaking with Edgar Canisius (the American state agent who'd spoken with Ilanga), Morel published Canisius's report of a six-week forced march in the Congo, during which 900 African men, women, and children died.

By the end of 1903, Morel had succeeded in creating a national outcry. British politicians, missionaries, and humanitarians wanted to solve the “Congo Question.” This alarmed Leopold, since Britain was the world's leading superpower. For the time being, however, Morel couldn't do anything to topple Leopold's regime in Africa.

Morel could have accepted the bribery of the company and taken a promotion. However, he refused the bribe, and continued to denounce Belgium. Evidently, Morel was an exceptionally single-minded man—even though he needed money, he was more committed to human rights causes than to his own fortune.



Morel's behavior was so atypical for the time that it prompts an obvious question—on a personal level, how was Morel different from his contemporaries? It's important to note that Hochschild doesn't attempt to “psychoanalyze” Morel extensively, as he did with Leopold and Stanley. Morel seems to have had no particular neuroses or family troubles that might have inspired him to crusade for human rights—perhaps the best answer to the question is that Morel was born a uniquely moral, fair-minded person.



Morel, much like his nemesis, King Leopold, was a master of publicity. Just as King Leopold used powerful allies to disseminate propaganda across Europe, Morel used his journalistic contacts to gather useful information about the Congo and then send it around the Western world in newspaper articles. Compared with many members of the Congo reform movement, Morel seems to have had genuine respect for African people; he didn't just think of them as passive, interchangeable victims (which, Hochschild argues, made him different from many of the other humanitarians of the era).



Edgar Canisius was an important figure in the Congo reform movement because he passed on Ilanga's personal story to Morel. So even though Morel hadn't spent any time in the Congo, he used his sources to extract first-person accounts of Belgian cruelty in the territory. As before, Morel proved himself to be immune to offers of bribery.



It would take a long time before Morel succeeded in turning the public against Leopold for good. For the time being, however, Morel tried to undo some of the damage that Leopold had done; he tried to turn Great Britain, the world's leading superpower, against Belgian imperialism.



CHAPTER 13

After Morel succeeded in popularizing the “Congo Question,” the British Foreign Office ordered representatives to travel to the Congo to make their own reports. One representative was an Irishman named Roger Casement, who had first traveled to the Congo in 1883, and had then worked there for a number of years running a supply base. According to his superiors, Casement had a reputation for being “too kind” to the Congolese. In 1892, he went to work for the British in Nigeria; there, he witnessed human rights abuses, and sent a letter to Britain’s Aborigines Protection Society. Then, in 1900, he was asked to establish a British consulate in the Congo. Before traveling to the Congo again, Casement dined with King Leopold, who asked Casement to tell him if he heard of any human rights abuses. Casement reported not being charmed by Leopold.

Casement was frustrated during his time at the British consulate in the Congo. He had ambitions to be a poet, but published almost no verse. He was also gay at a time when homosexuality was considered “gross indecency.” Casement seems to have been aware that he would be open to blackmail for his sexual behavior; despite this, he kept a detailed diary of his homosexual experiences. He continued to send frequent reports from the Congo, describing the atrocities he’d witnessed, and in 1903, he was glad to receive an assignment to explore the rubber-producing areas of the territory.

In the rubber-producing areas of the Congo, Casement continued to send vivid reports of the horrors he’d witnessed. His reports reached the British government, as well as the Italian consulate in the Congo. At the end of 1903, he returned to England, where he gave many interviews describing the Congo. It was there that he first met Morel. Together, Casement and Morel formed the Congo Reform Association (CRA). By early 1904, the CRA had held meetings with more than a thousand attendees.

Morel and Casement were sincere people who genuinely believed in the human rights of the Congolese. It’s important to keep in mind, however, that they were “white men trying to stop other white men from brutalizing Africans.” There were hundreds of thousands of unremembered Africans who fought the Force Publique and died.

Roger Casement was, along with Edmund Dene Morel, one of the key voices in the Congo reform movement. Like many of the key opponents of the Belgian occupation of the Congo, Roger had experienced discrimination throughout his life—like many Irishmen working in England at the time, he was seen as a second-class citizen, and not a “real” Englishman. Casement, unlike many of the reformers of the era, reports disliking Leopold from the very beginning. Furthermore, Casement fought for human rights causes in many different places, not just the Congo (later on, Hochschild will talk about how Casement supported Irish independence on the eve of the First World War).



Casement kept diligent records of many of his experiences—both his sexual encounters with other men, and his observations about the cruelty of the Belgian soldiers in the Congo.



Casement saw the worst parts of the Congo: the rubber production areas. There, he witnessed thousands of slaves being tortured and beaten for minor infractions, and he saw how hard the Congolese slaves had to work every day. Like Morel, Casement had a talent for publicity; by 1903, he was traveling around England, alerting Englishmen to the atrocities he’d seen.



Though Morel and Casement were important figures, Hochschild doesn’t want to give the impression that they were alone in their struggle against Belgian tyranny. We shouldn’t forget the thousands of Congolese people who heroically fought for their own freedom from Belgium. In general, it’s important to remember that Africans weren’t passive during the Congo reform movement—they fought for their own liberation, rather than depending on Morel and Casement to liberate them.



CHAPTER 14

Morel's newly-created CRA proved highly influential. He worked long hours writing articles for his newspaper and meeting with influential politicians and missionaries. Morel was a passionate advocate for the Congolese, but he wasn't perfect. Like so many Europeans of the era, he believed that African men were dangerous to white women; in general, he seems to have thought of Africans as "noble savages." And while Morel was outraged with King Leopold's human rights abuses, he was silent, throughout his life, on his own country's moral crimes: most strikingly, the use of forced labor in British colonies. Like many of Britain's greatest 19th century humanitarians, Morel believed in protecting human rights, but he also believed in the greatness and morality of the British Empire. He criticized Leopold's policies in the Congo, but seems not to have seen any moral problem with the principle of imperialism itself.

In spite of the limitations of his political and racial views, Morel campaigned vigorously against King Leopold's policies in the Congo. He enlisted businessmen in his cause, convincing them that Leopold's monopolistic, tariff-heavy system was harmful to British industry. He also spoke with many Christian luminaries of the era, convincing them that the Africans should be treated well and taught the principles of Christianity. Lastly, Morel mobilized key journalists at major British newspapers, causing news of the atrocities in the Congo to spread at an exponential rate. Missionaries held public rallies in which they denounced Leopold and his territory; some audience members were so moved that they immediately offered their jewels to support the humanitarian cause.

While Morel spread information about Leopold throughout Britain, Leopold began to monitor the situation in the Congo more carefully. He instructed his soldiers and governors to keep tabs on potential informants. One of these informants was a man named Hezekiah Andrew Shanu, a Nigerian man who had lived in Belgium and worked as a schoolteacher before coming to the Congo to work as an organizer. While Shanu began as a loyal ally to the Force Publique, he eventually had a change of heart and began to supply Morel with information about human rights abuses, endangering his own life in the process. Tragically, another man in the Congo (whom Morel believed to be an ally) betrayed Morel and exposed Shanu as Morel's collaborator. Furious, the Force Publique prevented Shanu from leaving the country and began harassing him constantly. In 1905, Shanu committed suicide.

Hochschild doesn't hide the truth about Edmund Morel; in spite of his sincere commitment to Congolese rights, he had some pretty offensive beliefs about African people, and about Western imperialism in general. It's important to recognize the truth, "warts and all," about Morel. At the same time, Hochschild also shows that Morel evolved on many human rights issues—later in his life, for example, he seems to have abandoned some of his former, racist beliefs. Furthermore, Morel transcended many of his prejudices about European imperialism, and went on to be one of the first Europeans to advocate for Africans' rights to land ownership.



Morel was more than just a great human rights activist; he was a great politician. Much like Leopold, he knew how to get people to do what he wanted by convincing them that their interests coincided with his own. For example, Morel seems not to have been particularly Christian, but he was able to convince Christian activists to support his cause by citing Christian rhetoric. Furthermore, Morel was a talented fund-raiser; he was able to speak emotionally and movingly, persuading audience members to part with their possessions and donate to the Congo reform movement.



Hochschild recognizes that Morel was only able to speak out against Leopold II because he had excellent sources, many of whom risked their lives and safety to give Morel information. One of these sources was Shanu, who eventually killed himself, in part because he'd been exposed as Morel's ally. In all, Shanu's story is an important reminder that human rights activism doesn't emanate from the achievements of a couple "great men"; it requires many thousands of unsung heroes working together, and it often demands huge risks.



Around the same time that Morel was attacking Leopold in the press, a scandal came to light: Leopold, aged 65, had been having an affair with a 16-year-old girl. The combination of the news of the scandal and the news of Belgium's human rights abuses destroyed Leopold's reputation as a great man. Nevertheless, Leopold continued pursuing his affair with the young woman; after his wife died, he began inviting her to stay with him in his palaces. Leopold's popularity plummeted still further when Belgium entered a period of economic depression. Though Leopold had always claimed to live modestly, his propensity for building **huge palaces and monuments** now infuriated his people. Leopold was incensed by his new unpopularity in Europe.

One of the most decisive setbacks for Leopold had nothing to do with the Congo; news got out that Leopold had a much younger mistress. In this way, Leopold's greatest enemy arguably wasn't Morel; it was Leopold himself. It's also important to recognize that Leopold, despite being a monarch, was living in a democratic nation, in which the people had some government representation. As a result, the people used Parliament as a weapon for attacking Leopold when the economy took a turn for the worse.



CHAPTER 15

It is time to ask a sobering question: what was the death toll in Leopold's Congo territory? It's difficult to answer such a question, because King Leopold's policies continued for a long time after his death. It's also important to keep in mind that, while the death toll in the Congo was enormous, the killing in the Congo was not, technically speaking, a genocide. Leopold was not trying to wipe out one particular ethnic group; he was trying to exploit African people for labor.

In this disturbing chapter, Hochschild estimates how many Congolese people died unnecessarily under Belgian rule. While the Belgian occupation of the Congo wasn't a genocide, the effect was similar: soldiers murdered a huge chunk of the native population, and entire Congolese tribes vanished.



In order to calculate the death toll in the Congo, we should begin by counting the number of murder victims. Murder wasn't the leading cause of death in the Congo, but it was the most clearly documented. Force Publique reports discussed the organized killings of hundreds or thousands of Congolese people over the course of six months to a year. When the Congolese resisted or tried to rebel against the Force Publique, the rebels were executed, and other Africans were murdered to send a message. Another major cause of death in the Congo was starvation and exhaustion. Soldiers burned Congolese villages, forcing the residents to wander through the jungles and starve to death. Also, the Force Publique marched thousands of Africans to rubber facilities, during which many of the marchers collapsed from malnourishment.

One of Hochschild's most challenging duties as a historian of the Belgian occupation of the Congo is to write clearly and dispassionately about highly disturbing things—here, for example, he writes about socially accepted murder in the Congo. Taken together, the human rights atrocities of the Belgian occupation of the Congo stand as some of the most appalling events in recorded history. The fact that more people don't know about the Belgian occupation suggests the need for books like Hochschild's—historians have a responsibility to tell the truth, especially about historical events that are this unpleasant.



Disease also decimated the Congo. Together, smallpox and “sleeping sickness” (a parasitic disease spread by the tsetse fly) killed far more Africans than bullets did—for instance, it’s estimated that half a million Congolese people died of sleeping sickness in 1901 alone. While smallpox and sleeping sickness had existed in Africa for centuries, they didn’t cause major epidemics because the different people of the Congo were largely isolated from one another. Belgian rule in the Congo moved different tribes together, spreading disease at a much faster rate. While it’s probable that the Belgians in the Congo didn’t realize that their actions were causing an epidemic, it’s also true that the Congolese became more susceptible to disease because they were being worked to death. A final cause of death in the Congo was the plummeting birth rate. Because many Congolese women were starving, exhausted, or imprisoned, they gave birth to few children.

In all, it’s difficult to estimate the death toll of the Belgian occupation of the Congo. However, some Belgian government officials in 1919 estimated that the total population in the Congo was “reduced by half” in the years following Henry Morton Stanley’s colonization. The estimate has been supported by contemporary historians, who cite information from missionaries, oral tradition, genealogical maps, etc. So it’s possible that King Leopold’s Congo regime claimed ten million African lives.

It’s time to ask another unpleasant question: why did Leopold allow such brutal practices? Isn’t it bad business to kill one’s own workers? In fact, many Belgian businessmen worried about losing money because of a shortage of slave labor. However, it’s also true that “mass murder had a momentum of its own” in the Congo: the soldiers of the Force Publique were given a lot of freedom over the Congolese, and they took advantage of their enormous power. Some of the soldiers seem to have enjoyed torturing Africans and thinking of elaborate killing methods. One soldier, for instance, killed a man by lighting a fire underneath him and cooking him to death. Hochschild concludes, “the list is much longer.”

CHAPTER 16

In the early 20th century, Henry Morton Stanley was in poor health. After a lifetime of traveling through jungles and down rivers, he was weary and slow-moving. In public, when asked about the atrocities in the Congo, he continued to support King Leopold. He died in 1904, before the attacks against Leopold became really vitriolic.

Belgian administrators can’t be blamed entirely for the deaths from smallpox and sleeping sickness in the Congo. However, they are indirectly to blame, since overworking made the Congolese people more susceptible to sleeping sickness and smallpox, among other diseases. Much the same is true of the birthrate in the Congo—the constant toil and fatigue of slavery made Congolese women very unlikely to have children.



It’s very difficult to estimate the total death toll of Belgian imperialism—as we’ll see, this is partly true because Belgian administrators destroyed some of the records of their own actions, making it difficult for historians like Hochschild to do their jobs. However, it’s possible to estimate the death count. Furthermore, even if the “real” number were a quarter of what Hochschild guesses, the Belgian occupation would still rank as one of the worst human rights atrocities of modern times.



Hochschild hypothesizes that soldiers tortured and killed Congolese people because they enjoyed doing so—the torture served no practical purpose (and was, in fact, extremely unpractical). As the history of the Nazis has shown, ordinary people have the capacity to hurt and kill other people without showing any apparent signs of guilt or shame.



In the second part of the book, Henry Morton Stanley isn’t a particularly important character—indeed, after he helped to colonize the Congo in the 1880s, his usefulness to King Leopold largely disappeared. However, his continued support for Leopold might suggest his loyalty, or his continued need to ingratiate himself with his aristocratic patron.



By 1905, the backlash against Leopold had become truly international. Members of the Swedish Parliament signed a statement supporting Morel's CRA, and human rights groups protesting Leopold appeared in many European countries. In response, Leopold launched a counterattack, criticizing the human rights abuses of the British Empire. He found information about atrocities in China, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Australia. He launched smear campaigns against some of his more vocal opponents, and paid writers to draft books and articles defending his administration in the Congo.

In spite of Leopold's efforts, the criticism of his regime in the Congo spread quickly, eventually reaching the writer Mark Twain. Twain lobbied against Leopold in Washington, D.C., causing other politicians and writers to join the cause. Morel visited the U.S. and met with John Tyler Morgan, who still supported a "back to Africa" movement. Morel convinced Morgan, a white supremacist, that, unless the human rights situation improved, African Americans could never be convinced to leave the U.S.

In America, Leopold tried to get powerful politicians and businessmen on his side. He met with congressmen and offered their districts concession rights (i.e., the right to conduct business out of the Congo without paying tariffs) in the Congo if the congressmen supported him publicly. The plan worked, and Leopold was able to prevent the White House from appointing a consul general to the Congo. Leopold, a Catholic, also managed to convince several cardinals of the Vatican that he was the victim of a Protestant smear campaign.

Leopold made a huge blunder by hiring a man named Henry Kowalsky as his lobbyist in the U.S. Kowalsky was a charismatic speaker, and a successful lawyer in the western United States. But when he moved to Washington, D.C. to begin his lobbying, he immediately infuriated the Belgian ambassador to the U.S., Ludovic Moncheur. Moncheur, afraid that Kowalsky would overshadow him in D.C., kept Kowalsky out of the loop. Frustrated, Kowalsky switched sides and went to the press, claiming that Leopold was trying to use bribery to influence the U.S. government's policy on the Congo. In all, the tide was turning against Leopold throughout Europe and America.

Morel was an effective international campaigner; he enlisted the help of missionaries, politicians, businessmen, and other human rights activists to denounce the Belgian occupation. However, Leopold continued to fight back against Morel, using his own considerable talent for public relations. In no small part, Leopold continued to attract good press by buying it; he literally paid people to write nice things about him.



Mark Twain was an important ally in the Congo reform movement because he was a great writer and speaker, as well as an enthusiastic campaigner. Twain, a popular public figure in the late 19th century, inspired many Americans to rise up against Belgian imperialism. Morel scored a major victory by convincing Morgan to turn on Leopold, his former ally. This suggests that Morel, in spite of his commitment to human rights, wasn't afraid to cooperate with a white supremacist like Morgan for the greater good of protecting the Congolese.



Leopold had one huge advantage over Morel: he had been campaigning for control of the Congo for decades before Morel became a journalist. Therefore, Leopold had a much larger network of allies and political supporters; he used some of these allies to prevent the American government from taking decisive action on the Congo question.



Leopold made a huge tactical error when he set Kowalsky adrift. The disgruntled lobbyist immediately spoke out against his former employer; as a result, Leopold gained an unwanted reputation in America as a con artist and a corrupt politician. Due to Kowalsky's unwanted publicity, Leopold lost many of the friendships and alliances he'd cultivated over the last thirty years.



Leopold tried to launch a new commission, the Commission of Inquiry. He sent three judges to the Congo to make a report on the state of human rights there. Leopold gambled that the judges' inability to speak any African languages and their cooperation with the authorities in the Congo would result in a positive report. However, his gamble failed when the three judges met with witnesses to the Force Publique's cruelty. The Commission of Inquiry released a 150-page report attacking the state of the Congo. In response, Leopold arranged for an organization called the West African Missionary Association to send a heavily censored "summary" of the report to various newspapers; the plan worked, and newspapers published the less critical, less specific summary.

Leopold made another huge tactical error by giving impartial judges direct access to the Congo. In the past, Leopold had been careful to control all information flowing in and out of his territory; now, he blundered by letting judges see the atrocities first-hand. However, Leopold was able to mitigate some of the damage by circulating a bland summary of the judges' report—showing, once again, how Leopold used obfuscation and confusion to prevent the shocking truth about the Congo from getting out.



CHAPTER 17

The testimony gathered by the Commission of Inquiry finally caught King Leopold II "naked." King Leopold himself had sent the three judges to the Congo, so he couldn't plead that their findings were biased or unfair. And the witnesses who spoke to the three judges couldn't have been lying, since many of them described the same horrific events. The three judges had heard the testimony of African slaves who'd been tortured and beaten by the Force Publique with the full support of the Congo administration. But, amazingly, their 150-page report, which condemned the Congo administration, didn't include any direct quotations from Africans. Indeed, the Africans' testimony remained unread until the 1980s, when it was discovered in an archive in Brussels.

The impartial judges' report on the state of the Congo is a striking example of the "soft" racism of the Congo reform movement. While the judges who compiled the report seem to have had the interests of the Congolese people in mind, they didn't include first-hand Congolese testimony in their report—an implicitly racist decision, since it suggests that they believed that Congolese people couldn't be trusted, exaggerated the truth, or were otherwise unreliable. Hochschild takes great effort to avoid making the same mistake as the "impartial" committee: throughout the book, he includes first-hand testimony from Congolese people who lived under the Belgians.



In spite of Leopold's efforts, news of human rights violations in the Congo had reached America and Europe, causing an international outcry. Leopold decided to sell his territory in the Congo, though he had already planned to bequeath it to the people of Belgium. While Parliament was furious that it had to buy a territory it had been promised for free, it recognized that buying the land now was the only way to ensure that it wouldn't end up in the hands of the British or the French. In 1908, Leopold finalized a plan to sell the territory to the Belgian Parliament for 45.5 million francs and the absorption of his vast personal debts.

Leopold failed to control the public relations crisis surrounding the Congo in the early 20th century; as a result, he had no choice but to sell his territory to the Belgian Parliament (despite the fact that he'd already arranged to bequeath it to Parliament). Even when he had a major publicity crisis on his hands, Leopold was a savvy negotiator, and managed to make a huge fortune reselling the territory.



At the end of 1908, the Congo formally became the property of the Belgian Parliament. William Sheppard, whose article ten years before had launched an international backlash against Leopold, argued that the sale of the Congo changed nothing—the local administrators would continue to exploit their slaves. Sheppard worked with another minister, William Morrison, to continue denouncing the state of the Congo. Sheppard and Morrison made many trips in and out of the Congo, updating the international community on the state of affairs there.

The sale of the Congo to Parliament marked a major milestone in the Congo reform movement. King Leopold II was such a famous figure that, in many ways, he'd become the central target for the Congo reform movement. Since Leopold was now out of the picture, it was much more difficult for the Congo reform movement to focus the public's attention. Nevertheless, Sheppard and Morrison (and, during the same period, Morel) continued to campaign, knowing that they needed to make sure that conditions improved in the Congo under the Belgian Parliament.



Meanwhile, at the end of 1908, the Kuba tribe rose up against their colonial overlords. In the ensuing fight, Belgian forces slaughtered tens of thousands of unarmed Kuba tribesmen, and William Sheppard penned a long article praising the Kuba for their heroism. The chaos in the Congo, combined with the international criticism of the Belgian colony, caused a major drop in the international rubber market. The primary Belgian rubber company, Kasai, retaliated by filing a libel suit against Sheppard, whose article, Kasai claimed, had caused their business to fail. Sheppard, together with Morrison (who had published the article) traveled to Leopoldville in the Congo, where they stood trial. Sheppard and Morrison's trial began with the court dropping charges against Morrison on a technicality. Thereafter, the defense persuasively argued that Sheppard had been motivated by a genuine humanitarian impulse, and a desire to protect the exploited peoples of the Congo. The trial made Sheppard even more famous, and newspapers in New York and Boston called Sheppard a hero. In the end, the judge found Sheppard innocent, and ordered the Kasai company to pay the court costs.

Although William Sheppard had been unsuccessful in raising awareness of the Belgian atrocities in the 1890s, he was now at the center of an international controversy surrounding the Congo reform movement. His victory in the trial marked how quickly the international tide had turned against Belgium. Where once Belgium had been praised for its philanthropy and humanitarianism, it was now seen (rightly) as a brutal imperialist power. The William Sheppard trial is also notable because it revolved around the idea of human rights: William Sheppard's motivation for supporting the Kuba, the defense successfully argued, was a desire to protect his fellow human beings from harm and preserve their liberty.



In December of 1909, King Leopold, 74 years old, fell very ill, probably with cancer. He died a few days later, unloved by his people. His successor was his nephew, Albert I, who proved highly popular with his Belgian subjects. Leopold's death was hailed as the end of an era of cruelty in the Congo; the American poet Vachel Lindsay wrote, "Listen to the yell of Leopold's ghost / Burning in Hell for his hand-maimed host." In fact, "the battle over how Leopold and his works would be remembered had only begun."

The international response to King Leopold's death suggests the strengths and weaknesses of the Congo reform movement. For many years, the movement depicted Leopold as the central villain of the Congo controversy; therefore, when Leopold died, many activists foolishly assumed that there was no longer a problem in the Congo at all (though, in fact, very little changed in the Congo for quite some time).



Beginning in 1906, Roger Casement worked as a British consul in Brazil. He continued to write about the Congo, however, once noting that he, like the Congolese, belonged to a “race of people once hunted themselves.” Perhaps Casement meant that he was an Irishman, or a homosexual—two groups that had been persecuted in the past and continued to face prejudice during Casement’s lifetime. Word of a human rights atrocity in the Amazon River basin, orchestrated by the Peruvian Amazon Rubber Company, reached Casement, and the British Foreign Office sent him to investigate further. In the Amazon, Casement repeated his achievement in the Congo by reporting clearly and precisely about the cruelty of the Peruvian Amazon Rubber Company. In private, Casement continued to keep a diary of his homosexual encounters.

In 1910, Casement returned to the Congo cause, reuniting with his old ally Morel and enlisting the help of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the famous author of the *Sherlock Holmes* books. Doyle published articles criticizing the ongoing cruelty of the Congo regime under the Belgian Parliament.

It was difficult for Morel, Doyle, and Casement to mobilize the public against the Belgian Parliament for three main reasons. First, Morel had done such a thorough job of tying Leopold to the cruelty in the Congo that, now that Leopold was dead, he had to work hard to convince people that the problem was ongoing. Second, many powerful British politicians and journalists were worried that Morel’s attacks on the Belgian colonial administration could be used to attack British imperialism. Morel’s claim that the Congolese owned their own land clashed with the basic premise of British imperialism: claiming foreign land in the name of the Empire. Third, the Belgian colonial ministers announced major reforms in the Congo, to be instituted over the next three years. While the Congo remained under the control of European colonialists, British inspectors reported “immense improvement” in the African population. Thus, whether or not the Congolese human rights crisis really had been solved for good, the European public was quickly coming to believe that it had. In 1913, the Congo Reform Association held its last meeting, and then dissolved—marking the end of the first major international human rights movement of the 20th century.

Hochschild suggests that Casement found the inspiration to fight for Congolese rights because he was both a homosexual and an Irishman—two minority groups that were frequently discriminated against in early 20th century England. Perhaps Casement sympathized with the people of the Congo because he knew, first-hand, what it felt like to be treated like a second-class human being.



Morel and Casement continued to fight against the Belgian occupation in the Congo, enlisting the help of famous writers, such as Arthur Conan Doyle.



One challenge that the Congo reform movement faced was that it had “bet the farm” on Leopold II—it had positioned Leopold at the center of the international controversy. Thus, when Leopold died, people concluded that Belgian tyranny was dead, too. While the Belgian Parliament introduced some reforms in the Congo in the years following Leopold’s death, the Congolese continued to live under foreign domination, be treated as subhuman, and face punishment for petty or nonexistent crimes. Morel’s Congo reform movement could be considered a great success or a great failure. On one hand, he succeeded in drawing international attention to the Congo atrocities; on the other hand, the “solutions” to the problem that emerged from the controversy were limited and, in many ways, superficial. Morel may have succeeded in banning specific cruel practices in the Congo, but (partly because of the strength of the British Empire, and partly because of his own political biases) he didn’t really attack the root cause of the problem—imperialism itself.



CHAPTER 18

The death of King Leopold II was widely seen as marking the end of an era of cruelty in the Congo. But his influence on Belgium and Africa persisted for a long time. It was quickly discovered that he'd left a vast fortune, which he wanted to be spent on future **monuments and palaces** (diverting inheritance from his daughters). The Belgian Parliament spent years trying to transfer Leopold's fortune to the public purse; Parliament eventually discovered that Leopold had stolen money from his sister, Charlotte, who was still alive, and mentally ill. Historians estimate that Leopold personally made a billion dollars (in today's money) from his Congo territory. Nobody in Belgium argued that this money should be returned to the Congolese people.

Another unpleasant question: did the European/American Congo reform movement do any lasting good? On one hand, it seems clear that the achievements of Roger Casement, George Washington Williams, and Edmund Dene Morel were not in vain: they led the Belgian government to reform conditions in the Congo and protect African lives. But, although there were fewer cases of torture and execution under the Belgian Parliament's Congo territories, the Belgian administrators continued to use forced labor. During the First World War, for instance, the Belgians forced thousands of Africans to fight in a battle in which they had no stake. And under Belgian authority, the people of the Congo were still deprived of their right to their own land, as well as the enormous wealth of that land. As late as World War II, Congolese people were forced to work in harsh conditions in mines, usually for insultingly little pay.

Another question: why, out of all the imperialist ventures in Africa, did the Congo finally attract the attention of powerful Europeans? There were, after all, hundreds of cases of European powers depriving Africans of their land rights and forcing them to work and fight. In the early 20th century, in the German-controlled territory of Namibia, German administrators killed and tortured a comparable number of Africans of the Herero tribe. And in the Philippines, around the same time, the U.S. tortured tens of thousands of Filipino prisoners and burned villages full of women and children. Why, then, was there no major protest against U.S. colonialism in the Philippines, or German colonialism in Namibia?

The aftermath of Leopold's death exposes some of the limitations of the Congo reform movement. Leopold's death marked the end of one era of tyranny, but that era was succeeded by another era of tyranny in which the Belgian Parliament inherited a lot of Leopold's money, but didn't bother to return it to the Congolese (the rightful owners of this wealth). And, tragically, the Belgian Parliament continued many of Leopold's policies (and had been aware of these policies for decades, as Hochschild has shown).



Hochschild has no illusions about the Congo reform movement: he respects some of its humanitarian concerns, but also recognizes the short-sightedness of its aims. The Congo reform movement focused on specific human rights abuses in the Congo, but didn't really condemn the principle of imperialism itself. Partly as a result, Belgian rule in the Congo continued for decades to come. During this time, the Congolese people faced miserable living conditions. European politicians and businesses continued to control the natural wealth that rightfully belonged to the Congolese people themselves.



The hypocrisy of the Congo reform movement is stunning: powerful people throughout Europe and America ganged up against Belgium, but refused to take responsibility for their own countries' imperialist atrocities. Even Joseph Conrad and Edmund Dene Morel, two of the most important critics of Belgian imperialism, made statements supporting British imperialism, despite the fact that the history of the British Empire is full of human rights abuses (including the first use of concentration camps in history, during the Boer War).



One simple reason that the Congo aroused such outrage in Europe is that it was a safe target. The Congo was controlled by one small and relatively new European country, while most of the large European powers, such as Britain and France, had no economic or political interest in the Congo. Powerful British, American, and French figures criticized the state of affairs while turning a blind eye to the atrocities of their own countries' colonies.

In 1913, Roger Casement, now a knight of the British Empire, retired from consular service and devoted himself to fighting for Irish independence from Great Britain. Casement tried to buy guns and raise an army to fight against British forces in Ireland; he even proposed sending Irish troops to Egypt to help the Egyptians fight for their own independence from the British Empire. Casement was eventually arrested and tried for high treason. The case prompted an international outpouring of sympathy for Casement, but, nevertheless, he was found guilty and sent to prison. When the police discovered his diary, full of evidence of his homosexuality, they made copies and distributed them to the newspapers, essentially ending any possibility that Casement could appeal his sentence. Casement was executed for his treason.

In 1914, Morel entered a new phase of his life when he became one of the most famous people in Britain to protest World War I. Morel's decision made him extremely unpopular, and many of his old friends and allies deserted him instead of tarnishing their own reputations by association. Morel's position on World War I now seems ahead of its time: not only did he protest the pointlessness of the war, but he argued, after the war ended, that harsh peace terms for Germany could lead to another world war. Morel was imprisoned for protesting the war, in the same prison in which Casement had been executed one year previously.

When Morel was released from prison in 1918, he was surprised to find himself a hero to the British Labor Party (which had gradually become more and more opposed to the war). He was elected to Parliament in Dundee, Scotland, and he was one of the party's most important voices on foreign policy in the early 1920s. In 1924, records now show, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize; tragically, he died the same year. He was mourned at enormous memorial services in Dundee, London, and New York

The other countries of Europe sanctimoniously criticized Belgium for exploiting the people of the Congo, while simultaneously exploiting the native peoples of other countries in much the same way.



Although the international reaction to the Belgian occupation was characterized by a lot of hypocrisy and ignorance, many of the figures of the Congo reform movement continued to fight for humanitarian causes for the rest of their lives, showing that their commitment to universal human rights was deeply sincere. Roger Casement, for example, supported Irish and Egyptian independence. However, Casement's political positions led him to be arrested for treason. When it was revealed that he was a homosexual, he lost almost all of the powerful allies he'd made in the 1900s. As a result, he was sentenced to death and executed.



Some of Morel's ideas about the Congo were condescending, short-sighted, or even "softly" racist. However, he continued to fight for human rights causes for the rest of his life, suggesting that he was sincerely committed to helping other people. In many ways, Morel seems to have been ahead of his time—while the notion that World War I was a foolish, avoidable conflict is utterly uncontroversial by modern standards, such an idea would have sounded outrageous to most people in 1914.



Morel wasn't a perfectly moral figure; however, his life is an important example of how even ordinary people can choose to devote themselves to human rights causes. Furthermore, Morel's life shows how people can "evolve" on human rights issues: over time, Morel's views seem to have grown more tolerant and open-minded.



CHAPTER 19

In the city of Brussels, there is still a Royal Museum for Central Africa, in which one can find a huge collection of Africana, almost entirely stolen from the Congolese during the reign of Leopold II. Nowhere in the entire museum is it stated that millions of Congolese people were murdered and tortured during Belgium's occupation of the Congo. The entire city of Brussels is full of relics of Belgium's time in the Congo: even the beautiful buildings and archways were paid for with funds stolen from Africa.

In short, "the Congo offers a striking example of the politics of forgetting." Leopold, and many of his successors in Belgian politics, worked hard to erase the records of human rights abuses in Africa. In 1908, the Belgian government spent eight full days burning records of the Belgian occupation of the Congo.

In the 1970s, a man named Jules Marchal was the Belgian ambassador to Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. He recalls a day when, walking down the street in Liberia, he noticed a newspaper story reporting that, under Belgian rule, 10 million people had died in the Congo in the early 20th century. Marchal was genuinely shocked—he immediately telephoned his superiors in order to fix the slanderous accusation, and asked for some historical information about the Congo. Marchal never received the information, so he began to research the history himself. He tried to get into the Foreign Ministry of Brussels to look over old records of the Congo administration, but he was refused entry. After he retired, Marchal devoted himself to researching Belgium's behavior in the Congo full-time. In the end, he composed a four-volume history of the Belgian occupation of the Congo. The book was praised throughout Europe, but never reviewed or discussed in Belgium.

In part, Marchal decided to devote himself to studying the Belgian occupation of the Congo because, as a younger man, he'd worked for the Belgian diplomatic service in the Congo and had known nothing of Belgium's horrific past. In 1948, he was sent to award medals to village chiefs who'd served in World War II. Once, he awarded a medal to a chief who'd collected large quantities of rubber to donate to the war effort; when the chief accepted his medal, he told Marchal, "The rubber *this* time, that was nothing. But the first time, *that* was terrible." It took Marchal thirty years to understand what the chief was talking about.

The legacy of the Belgian occupation of the Congo survives into the 21st century. As has often been the case, the Belgian government was slow and reluctant to officially acknowledge the country's history of human rights atrocities, or take any concrete steps to apologize. (By the same token, many people have criticized the American government for not taking further steps to apologize for its role in slavery, or provide reparations for the descendants of slaves.)



The Belgian government, seemingly well-aware of the brutality of its regime in the Congo, tried to hide its atrocities from the public.



Marchal is an important figure for historians of the Congo—indeed, if it weren't for Marchal, very few people would know that Belgians murdered and tortured the Congolese people. Furthermore, the fact that zero Belgian publications discussed Marchal's important book suggests the ongoing racism of Belgian society: it would seem that, by and large, the country isn't willing to confront its own shameful history. The same could be said for many other countries that participated in imperialist ventures in the 19th and 20th centuries—including, it must be said, the United States.



For most of this book, Hochschild has argued persuasively that European records of the Belgian occupation are far more authoritative and accurate than African records, since Congolese tribes didn't always have a written language for recording history. The irony of this passage is that, in spite of the Belgians' record-keeping, the Congolese chief knew more about Belgian history than Marchal, the Belgian ambassador.



Both in Belgium and in the Congo, Belgians wrote the school textbooks—for decades, Belgian and Congolese children grew up believing that Leopold II was a great leader. In many Congolese villages, however, the truth about Leopold II survived. Over time, a legend arose that Leopold had not died, but had been transformed into a Catholic bishop and had come to live in the Congo. But, of course, even without this legend, Leopold had left his mark on Congolese history.

For the rest of the 20th century, the Congo fared badly. The Belgian administrators hadn't built many schools for the Congolese, nor had they tried to train Africans for elite administrative jobs. In the 1950s—the decade when the Congolese independence movement gained significant strength—there were fewer than thirty African university graduates in the entire Congolese territory, and there were no trained Congolese doctors or engineers. The new democratically-elected leader of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba, promised to restore the people's control over their own country's resources—a claim that frightened many Western powers, who had major stakes in Congolese rubber, copper, gold, and zinc. Two months after Lumumba's election, the CIA authorized his assassination, arguing that Lumumba "couldn't be bought" and needed to be eliminated to protect American business interests. Lumumba was imprisoned, beaten, and shot.

Lumumba's U.S.-backed replacement, Joseph Mobutu, remained the dictator of the country for thirty years. He accepted more than one billion dollars of military aid from America, in return for which he allowed American business to continue mining the area for resources. Mobutu murdered and tortured his political opponents; American presidents praised him as an honorable, reasonable leader. In many ways, Mobutu resembled King Leopold II: he was a tyrant, obsessed with money and power, and capable of incredible cruelty.

To return to a previous question—what, in the end, was the legacy of the Congo reform movement? First, and most obviously, Morel, Williams, and Sheppard succeeded in preserving a huge amount of information that the Belgian authorities would otherwise have censored and erased from history. But second, and more importantly, the Congo reform movement succeeded in keeping alive “a human capacity for outrage at the pain inflicted on another human being, no matter whether that pain is inflicted on someone of another color, in another country, at another end of the earth.” Morel changed the structure of humanitarian movements by focusing not only on the specific acts of cruelty in the Congo but also the fundamental violation of rights implicit in the Belgians' theft of Congolese land.

The Belgian administrators in the Congo took great pains to rewrite history to present themselves in a favorable light. Indeed, Congolese schoolchildren grew up, generation after generation, believing that the Belgians were benevolent colonial masters. This is an important transitional passage because it suggests how Leopold's legacy “carried on” in the 20th century.



One reason that the Congo fared badly throughout the 20th century was that Western imperialists in the 19th century didn't treat the Congolese people with dignity. In spite of their claims to be spreading Christianity and civilization to the Congo, the Belgians didn't pass along much of their language or technology. Partly a result, Congolese politics has been fragmented and, at times, disorganized. Instead of being led by educated, arguably more reasonable people (Congolese doctors, lawyers, or professors), Congolese politics has mostly been controlled by generals and tyrants. But another, more direct reason why the Congo fared badly in the 20th century is that the Western world continued to interfere. The U.S. murdered a charismatic Congolese leader and allowed Western powers to rob vast amounts of natural wealth from the Congo, with the support of a U.S.-backed dictator.



Hochschild suggests that Mobutu may have been inspired by Leopold in some ways—perhaps he modeled his cruel tyrannical regime off of Leopold's. Hochschild doesn't explore this point in very much depth; however, even if it's not true, it's a fact that Leopold's colonial legacy set a dangerous precedent for corruption and cruelty.



Although Hochschild is critical, in some ways, of the Congo reform movement, he respects it in its historical context. Thus, even if Morel may have been too limited in the scope of his thinking, the Congo reform movement advanced the cause of human rights itself, inspiring human rights advocates in future decades to risk their safety for the greater goods of freedom and equality. And, in some ways, Morel was a radical figure—he was one of the first Europeans to argue that the Congolese didn't just deserve their freedom—they deserved control over their own land.



The Congo reform movement has provided inspiration to human rights activists around the world, encouraging them to fight against all odds for peace and freedom. Overall, we need to remember that, “at the time of the Congo controversy ... 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.”

In this final section, Hochschild addresses another important question—why is it important for us to learn about the history of the Congo? It’s important to do so, he implies, because the evils engendered by the Belgian occupation haven’t gone away. Even in the 21st century, powerful countries continue to steal natural resources from weaker countries, promote instability in order to strengthen their own political position, and violate other peoples’ right to self-determination. In short, we shouldn’t only focus on what happened in the Congo a century ago—we should learn from Hochschild’s book and fight for justice and equality in the 21st century, too.





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