

# Belgium's Colonial Crimes in the Congo: A Duty to Remember



## Historical context of the colonization of the Congo

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, over a hundred years before the Congo was colonized by Leopold II, the thirteen British colonies in North America, were liberated from the British crown after fighting a war of independence. As a result the United States of America was created in 1776. In other parts of the globe such as South-East Asia and India the British Empire reinforced its colonial grip, which it maintained into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Dutch reinforced their domination over Indonesia. Liberation movements were not limited to recently arrived colonists of European stock. The courageous people of Haiti, direct descendants from Africans, won their independence from French domination in 1804. Over the following twenty years Latin America went through a phase of wars of independence led by revolutionaries such as Simon Bolivar, who succeeded in defeating the Spanish troops who were dominating much of the continent. At that time Sub-Saharan Africa was hardly colonized by the Europeans even if it was subjected to the effects of the colonizations on the other continents, being the principal victim of the triangular trade and slave transportation.

Between the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tens of millions of Africans were pressed into slavery and

transported to the Americas. It was in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Sub-Saharan Africa fell under the boot of European colonization: mainly British, French, German, Portuguese and in the case of the Congo, Belgian.

## **Léopold II, second King of the Belgians wanted his country to have a colony too**

When Leopold II came to the throne of Belgium in 1865 he wanted his country to have a colony too, just like the others. Before becoming King, Léopold II had seen how colonialism worked in many regions: in Ceylon, India, Burma, Indonesia and he had particularly liked how it was done in Java, Indonesia by the Dutch, this became his guiding example, an example based on forced labour.

He had considered colonizing a part of Argentina and then looked at the Philippines but the price that Spain asked was too high. Finally he decided to get hold of the Congo basin. To do this he had to be crafty so as to avoid conflict with the other European powers that were already present in the area and might not favorably view a new arrival wanting a piece of the cake.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Europeans justified their colonial policies with arguments of Christianizing the pagans, introducing free trade (still a current discourse) and in Sub-Saharan Africa, putting an end to the Arabs' slave trade.

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In 1876, Leopold II organized in Brussels an International Geographical Conference with an objective that was quite

coherent with the spirit of the time "To open up to civilization the last remaining region of the globe where it has yet to penetrate, to throw back the shadows still enveloping entire populations, is, I dare to say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress (...) It seems to me that Belgium, a central and neutral state, would be the right place to hold this reunion (...) Must I reassure you that when I called you all here to Brussels I was not motivated by Selfishness? No, gentlemen, Belgium may be a small country but it is happy and contented with her condition: my sole ambition is to serve it well". He goes on to explain to the great explorers that he had gathered there that the objective of the International Geographical Conference was to build roads to reach the hinterlands, and to set up pacifying medical and scientific stations which would be the means of abolishing slavery and of creating harmony between Chiefs as they brought just and unbiased arbitration. That was the official discourse

Shortly afterwards he engaged the British explorer Henry Morton Stanley, who had just crossed Africa from East to West by following the Congo River to its estuary / embouchure.

## **The Berlin conference and the creation of the Congo Free State (CFS)**

In 1885 at the Berlin conference, after much diplomatic manoeuvring, Léopold II obtained authorization to create an independent Congolese State which became known as the Congo Free State. In his closing speech to the conference Chancellor Bismark said "The new state of the Congo will one day be a prime example of what we wish to achieve, and I express my deepest wishes for its rapid development and the realisation of the noble desires of its illustrious creator".

*"The new state of the Congo will one day be a prime example of what we wish to achieve". –Bismark, Chancellor of the German Empire*

Although he gave great speeches in great conferences Léopold II had a very different discourse elsewhere: in documents he sent to his delegates in CFS whose task was to extract the profits, or his declarations to the press. For example, in an interview with Leopold II which appeared in the New York paper Publisher's Press on 11 December 1906 – twenty years after the Berlin conference – he said “When dealing with a race made up of cannibals for thousands of years, it is necessary to use methods that shake their laziness and make them understand the healthy aspects of work”.

*“When dealing with a race made up of cannibals for thousands of years, it is necessary to use methods that shake their laziness.” –Léopold II*

As from the moment in 1885 when Leopold II could create from nothing the Congo Free State as his own personal state he issued a first decree that declared all unexploited land as state property. He grabbed the land even though the reason for creating the CFS was to allow the chiefs to enter into agreements and to defend themselves against the Arab slave traders. With Stanley's help, he passed a series of treaties with Congolese tribal chieftains by which the lands of their villages and of their territories came under the control of the head of State of CFS, Leopold II. Other lands, which were immense territories, were declared vacant and so also became the property of the CFS

## **The Javanese model as applied by Belgium's Leopold II in the Congo**

At this point Leopold II used the model applied by the Low Countries in Java to his country's exploitation of the Congo: he systematically exploited the population, succeeding in dominating it particularly thanks to the creation of the 'Force Publique', requiring of said population the harvesting of latex (natural rubber), elephant tusks, and provision of

the necessary food supplies to the colonizers. The king granted himself a monopoly on almost all Congolese activities and sources of wealth. His model involved harvesting a maximum of the Congo's natural resources by strategies which have nothing in common with modern methods of industrial production. Indeed, the agenda compelled the Congolese population to harvest latex to fulfil a certain quota per capita, and to hunt in order to gather enormous quantities of elephant tusks. Leopold II maintained a colonial force with an army mainly consisting of Congolese but with Belgian officers, in order to impose respect for the colonial order and for the obligatory supply systems. He made systematic use of horrifyingly brutal methods. So much rubber was required per head. In order to compel village chiefs and other men to go and harvest, their women were imprisoned in concentration camps, where, regularly, they were sexually abused by colonists or by Congolese from the Force Publique. If the required results and quantities were not reached, people were killed 'as an example', or mutilated. Photographs from that era show the victims of such mutilations, and these photographs reveal a specific purpose. Force Publique soldiers had to prove that every cartridge had been used appropriately, and cutting hands was done with machetes and did not require shooting.

The vision and the political strategy of Leopold II, king of the Belgians, representative of the country's and of the people's interests, were illustrative of a colonialist approach of extreme brutality. Moreover, on the subject of this policy, he states, To claim that all white-generated production in the country must be spent only in Africa and in order to generate profit for the blacks is pure heresy, an injustice, an error which, if actually implemented, would bring to a standstill the march of civilization in the Congo. The State, which could only have become a State with the active support of the whites, must be useful to the two races and allocate to each its fair share. Clearly, the share for

the Congolese is forced labor, the leather whip and severed hands.

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On the subject of unrestrained exploitation of natural rubber resources, I shall only mention a few figures: rubber harvesting begins in 1893, and is linked to the demand for tyres by the early automotive industry and the development of the bicycle. Production figures show 33,000 kilos of rubber in 1895; 50,000 kilos in 1896; 278,000 kilos in 1897; 508,000 kilos in 1898... Such huge harvests generated huge benefits for private companies created by Leopold II, who was also their main shareholder, to manage the exploitation of the Congo Free State. The price of a kilo of rubber at the mouth of the Congo River is 60 times less than the market price in Belgium. One is reminded of the current issue of the price of diamonds or coltan (columbite-tantalum) mined today.

## **The international campaign against the crimes committed in the Congo by Leopold II of Belgium**

This policy eventually triggered an enormous international campaign against the crimes perpetrated by the regime of Leopold II. Black pastors in the United States were protesting against this situation, then were joined by British activist E.D. Morel. Morel worked for a British company in Liverpool, and was regularly called on to travel to Antwerp. He observed that while Leopold II claimed that Belgium was undertaking commercial exchanges with the Congo Free State, ships were returning from the Congo with cargoes of elephant tusks and thousands of kilos of rubber, and the return cargoes were mainly arms and foodstuffs for the colonial forces. Morel considered this to be a very strange kind of trade, a strange kind of exchange. At the time, those Belgians supporting

Leopold II never acknowledged this truth. They declared that Morel represented the interests of British imperialism and only criticized the Belgians in order to take their place. Paul Janson, a member of parliament who gave his name to the main auditorium of the Free University of Brussels, declared, I shall never criticize the actions of Leopold, because those who criticize him, especially the British, do so only in the spirit of 'move over and make room for us'.

However, criticism grew, with books such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Crime of the Congo*, a too-little known work by Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. An international campaign against the exploitation of the Congo generated demonstrations in the United States and also in Great Britain, finally producing results. Leopold found himself obliged to set up an international commission of inquiry in 1904, which met on the spot, in the Congo, to take evidence. The testimonies received there are overwhelming. They are available in manuscript form in the Belgian state archives.

## **We now have a duty to remember the crimes against humanity committed in the Congo**

During the last twenty years, many conferences have been held and books published to denounce the type of state established in the Congo by Leopold II, King of Belgium. In short, an ample corpus of serious literature has now been added to the documentation of the period.

From this we learn, for example, that the portion of the Congo Free State's budget destined to cover military expenses varied, year in, year out, between 38% and 49% of total expenditure. This demonstrates the importance of the leather whip, the importance of modern guns in establishing a dictatorship making systematic use of the weapons of brutality and assassination....

One may consider it a certainty that the King of the Belgians, and the Congo Free State, which he ran with the agreement of the Belgian government and parliament of the time, are responsible for 'crimes against humanity' deliberately committed. These crimes are not blunders, they are the direct result of the type of exploitation to which the Congolese population was subjected. Some prominent authors have spoken of 'genocide.' I propose not to create a debate focused on this issue because it is difficult to agree on figures. Some serious authors estimate the Congolese population in 1885 to have been around 20 million, and write that in 1908 when Leopold II transferred the Congo to Belgium, thus creating the Belgian Congo, there remained 10 million Congolese. These estimates by reputable authors are, however, difficult to verify in the absence of a population census.

*... it is certain that Leopold II, King of the Belgians, is responsible for 'crimes against humanity,' deliberately committed.*

Whether Leopold's colonial activity resulted in millions or in tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent victims, it would not change the fact that this was a case of crimes against humanity, and this is fundamental to re-establish the historical truth. Citizens, and notably the young, entering the town hall in the city of Liège, or going from the rue du Trône to the place Royale in Brussels, pass a plaque saluting the work of colonization, or pass by the equestrian statue of Leopold II. Citizens pass the statue of Leopold II erected on the Ostend sea-front. They see a majestic Leopold II with, at a lower level, grateful Congolese extending their grateful hands towards him. The only commentary there commemorates the civilizing role of Leopold in the liberation of the Congolese from the slave trade... It is urgent to re-establish historical truth, to stop telling lies to our children, stop lying to Belgian citizens, stop insulting the memory of the victims, and of their descendants,



and of those descendants of the Congolese who were subjected in body and in spirit to truly terrible domination.

This duty of remembrance must be undertaken elsewhere too. Let's avoid any debate along the lines of 'All you do is criticize Belgium and say nothing about what's going on in other places'. Indeed the wider context is mentioned at the beginning of this paper: Britain dominated South Asia with extreme brutality ; the Low Countries dominated the populations of Indonesia with great violence; before that, three-quarters of the population of what was then called 'the Americas' had been exterminated and, in the Caribbean, around 100% in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Belgian state certainly has no monopoly on brutality, but we are in Belgium and for us Belgian citizens, along with our Congolese friends, and with nationals from other countries now living in Belgium, it is fundamental that we not forget, and that we restore the historic truth.

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