

# **Murder In the Congo!**

## **Human Rights Abuses and Heroism in the Congo Free State**

**By David Cai**

### **Introduction**

Bloody heads hung from spikes on the walls of the village, baskets full of severed hands filled huts, and rooms were dedicated to the confinement and rape of slaves (“Red Rubber: Atrocities in the Congo Free State”). These were some of the horrors the Congolese experienced under the regime of King Leopold II. Driven by the profitable rubber and ivory trades throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the ironically named Congo Free State was in reality the site of widespread exploitation and brutality (“Crimes of the Hand: manual violence and the Congo”). For many years, these atrocities were kept secret, but one man's journalistic campaign brought international attention to the human rights abuses and initiated a global movement for reform (Congo Reform Association). His work not only expanded the rights of the Congolese people by calling global attention to human rights abuses, it showcased the moral and ethical responsibilities of journalists as well. This man was Edmund Dene Morel.

### **The Dark Continent**

Mysterious, dangerous, rich, and alluring, Europeans did not know very much about Africa until the 1870's when explorer Henry Morton Stanley traveled through the ancient continent, documenting his travels in his book, “Through the Dark Continent”. Convinced that

they had the right to colonize these lands because the local inhabitants were “savage” and “uncouth” (“New World Racism”), European powers industrialized the continent for profit in what would become known as the "Scramble for Africa". The division of the African continent into colonies was done without considering the ethical responsibilities European leaders had to involve African leaders in decision making over the partition, resulting in new geographic divisions that did not reflect the history or politics of already established kingdoms and societies (“The Partition of Africa”). In the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, the General Act of Berlin was established to declare trading regulations and the boundaries of colonies in Africa, resulting in the loss of sovereignty by African leaders as well as completely omitting the responsibility of European powers to treat African natives with respect and dignity (General Act of Berlin).

From 1885 to 1908, the Congo Free State was ruled by King Leopold II, who is better remembered for his brutal regime in the Congo Free State (“Leopold II”). Driven by a desire for personal profit, Leopold hatched an ambitious plan to conquer the Congo Basin, a region rich in natural resources like rubber and ivory (National Geographic). Leopold abused both the rights of the Congolese and abandoned his moral responsibility to ensure the health and safety of the Congolese under his rule (Williams). Under the guise of a humanitarian and philanthropic mission to improve the lives of the Congolese and introduce Christianity to Africa, Leopold established the Congo Free State in 1885, claiming that his “civilizing influence would counter the practices of the dreadful ‘Arab’ slave-traders” (Hochschild 78). In reality, Leopold's control over the Congo Free State was marked by ruthless exploitation, terror, and genocide.

## **Broken Beauty**

Before Leopold claimed the Congo Basin, native Congolese lived in the Kongo Kingdom (“The Kongo Kingdom”). Under the rule of the ManiKongo<sup>1</sup>, they enjoyed free will and peaceful lives. Mukunzo Kioko, an oral historian of the Pende people described what life was like: “Our fathers were living comfortably... They had cattle and crops; they had salt marshes and banana trees” (Kioko). The Kingdom itself was a sophisticated and well-developed state that the earliest Europeans recognized and admired (Ross). Other Europeans, such as “the Milanese ambassador in Lisbon compared the capital Mbanza Kongo to the prestigious city of Évora, the royal residence in Portugal” (“The Kongo Kingdom”). Prior to the reign of Leopold II, the Congolese did not have a rubber industry because this material did not possess value in their society (“The Kongo Kingdom”). It was not until the rubber boom in 1879 that rubber gained immense value (“Death in the Devil's Paradise”). This way of life would not last however: from 1885 until 1908, the Congolese under King Leopold faced human rights abuses as the Belgian leader demanded high quotas of rubber extraction. To maintain order, Leopold created the Force Publique (FP), Leopold’s private army composed of kidnapped Congolese children who were forced to serve (Dowd 2). Using the FP, Leopold imposed forced labor methods to extract rubber. To motivate workers into returning with rubber instead of fleeing, soldiers would take the wives and children of village men hostage until the men fulfilled their weekly quotas (Hochschild 162).

In addition to facing violence from the FP, rubber workers endured other tortures as they collected and processed this precious material. The difficult process of extracting rubber was

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<sup>1</sup> ManiKongo was the formal title for the King of the Kongo Kingdom.

accomplished by splitting the rubber vine to remove the rubber juice (Hochschild 164). After this, rubber juice then had to be dried. Workers would apply the juice onto their bodies since their body heat dried the rubber faster. When peeled off, these rubber mats pulled out body hair, causing excruciating pain to the workers ("Apple Rubber"): "The first few times it is not without pain that the man pulls it off the hairy parts of his body" (Chaltin). Adding to this misery was the fact that Congolese rubber harvesters lacked workers rights. They operated on impossible timeframes, were frequently threatened with death, lacked safety equipment, and often died on the job ("Belgian Congo"). Most egregiously, the quotas rubber workers were required to reach were impossible to satisfy: "The normal quota assigned to each village was three to four kilos of dried rubber per adult male per fortnight – which essentially meant full-time labor for those men" (Hochschild 163).

FP soldiers were responsible for ensuring that quotas were met. If quotas were not met, natives would be subjected to beatings, mutilations, and executions ("Red Rubber: Atrocities in the Congo Free State"). One example of this was recorded by a Catholic priest who quoted a native man, Tswambe. "I saw [Fievez's] soldier Molili, then guarding the village of Boyeka, take a big net, put ten arrested natives in it, attach big stones to the net, and make it tumble into the river" (Hochschild 166). To prove that the bullets they shot natives with had not been used for hunting, soldiers had to provide the hand of a person they had executed ("Red Rubber: Atrocities in the Congo Free State"). Sometimes though, soldiers "shot a cartridge at an animal in hunting; then cut off a hand from a living man" (Hochschild 165). These practices resulted in the deaths of around 10 million Congolese.

To keep these atrocities secret, Leopold created the International Association of the Congo, an international group dedicated to the well being of the Congo (“Association Internationale du Congo”). He used it as a front to deceive the world, but reports of atrocities in the Congo surfaced through the efforts of missionaries, journalists, and humanitarian activists. Missionaries, like John Harris of Baringa, were aware of the abuse of the Congolese, writing, “The abject misery and utter abandon is positively indescribable” (Baringa). Soon, figures including E.D Morel, William Shepard, Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain, Roger Casement, and George Washington Williams would also speak up about these atrocities (Congo Reform Association).

### **Here Comes the Cavalry!**

Mutilations, executions, and beatings were normal in the Congo Free State, yet unknown to the world (Red Rubber: Atrocities in the Congo Free State”; “Leopold II”). That was until E.D Morel investigated the Congo Free State due to his concern over human rights abuses. A French-speaking clerk in the Elder Dempster & Company shipping line, Morel was often sent to Belgium to oversee the unloading of ships (“Congo Free State Propaganda War”). Soon, he saw the dark correlation between the incoming shipments of rubber and the outbound ships of military surplus (Morel). Morel correctly guessed that Belgium and the Congo Free State were not trading, but rather that the Congolese were enslaved under brutal working conditions that threatened both their lives and dignity (Hochschild 184). This led him to investigate deeper and he eventually uncovered the brutal exploitation and forced labor under King Leopold II's regime. Filled with moral responsibility and “determination to do my best to expose and destroy what I

then knew to be a legalized infamy accompanied by unimaginable barbarities”, Morel quit his job as a clerk and launched the Congo Reform Association, (CRA) a public media campaign, along with Roger Casement and other famous figures like Mark Twain and members of the British Parliament (Morel; Congo Reform Association). Through his efforts, Morel's journalism exposed the horrors of the Congo Free State and galvanized a global human rights movement that ultimately led to significant reforms. “Morel's investigative work and publications, including the establishment of the newspaper *West African Mail* in 1903, played a crucial role in raising public awareness and mobilizing international condemnation of the atrocities in the Congo” (Lapham’s Quarterly).

The CRA utilized journalism as its main mechanism to spread news about the Congo Free State and apply international pressure against Leopold's regime. Using works by famous authors and politicians like Mark Twain’s *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Crime of the Congo* , and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Morel and Casement’s CRA raised public concern over human rights issues in the Congo (“Congo Reform Association”). Morel himself wrote “three full books and portions of two others, hundreds of articles for almost all the major British newspapers, and several dozen pamphlets” (Hochschild 187). Because of his journalistic reporting that exposed human rights abuses, Morel could not visit the Congo Free State. Subsequently, much of the details in his publications came from missionaries, who would send their reports to him for publishing, as “insiders knew that he was the man to come to if they had any revealing documents to leak” (Hochschild 189). These missionaries were often discredited by Leopold’s agents when they spoke out. For example, George Washington Williams was condemned by Leopold after Williams had published his

scathing letter accusing Leopold of human rights abuses (Ohio Statehouse).

In addition to his extensive writings, Morel organized public campaigns. Events across the world helped to gain attention for his cause. Among the most famous of these events were the Lantern Lectures, where photos of the Congo genocide were displayed to audiences (Congo Reform Association). One of the most famous lantern lecture pictures is the photograph of Nsala of Wala gazing at his daughter's severed hand and foot (Appendix 1). This photograph was shown as "a grim testament to the horrors of the rubber trade... a powerful visual tool in the fight against colonial abuses" (Hassel and Vanhaesebrouck 1). However, Leopold did not stay silent. He fought back fiercely, matching each accusation against him with his own. When the Foreign Office in London criticized him, Leopold replied "accusing the English of hypocrisy: much of the policies followed by Belgians in the Congo had been standard for the English elsewhere" (Prashad 11). He copied many of Morel's strategies, notably producing pro-Leopold books that were quickly published and distributed (Hochschild 239). Ultimately, international pressure forced Leopold to relinquish the Congo Free State to the Belgian government, but without the work of individuals and the media, this would never have occurred. The annexation of the Congo Free State displays the moral responsibility of individuals to speak up when presented with injustices, just as Morel did. It also emphasizes the responsibility of the media to use its power to aid the oppressed. If these individuals and the media had not upheld their responsibility, the Congolese would have continued to suffer.

## **Freedom At Last?**

When the Belgian Parliament convened in 1908, officials declared, “The Congo has been the scene of excesses that cast a shadow over civilization. We must end this state of affairs”. (Belgian Parliament 1908) That same year, the Congo Free State was annexed and renamed the Belgian Congo. Soon after, many of the rights Morel advocated for were granted to the Congolese (“Congo Reform Association”). By 1913, the arbitrary use of violence was curbed, nobody could be “forced to work on behalf of and for the profit of companies or privates”, and citizens were granted the right to trade with everyone (Belgium Parliament Article 3 Colonial Charter). However, despite this progress, the Belgian government also continued to abuse the rights of natives. For example, African leaders were not consulted on issues which violated their right to have a say in decision-making. They had no role in legislation, but traditional rulers were used as agents to collect taxes and recruit labour” (De Coning; “Belgian Congo”).

Moreover, the right to education was also ignored in the Belgian Congo. The government believed that “Congolese education had to essentially be moral education because their primary task in the Congo was a civilising mission to lead African pagans to Christianity” (De Coning). After the annexation of the Belgian Congo, the Belgian government prioritized extracting resources over the welfare of the Congolese as the land and resources of the area were controlled by Belgium from 1908 until 1960 (“Belgian Congo”). Due to the continued abuses of rights, rebellions broke out against the Belgians (“Belgian Congo”). For example, “A rebellion broke out in several eastern districts in 1919 and was not suppressed until 1923. In January 1959, riots broke out in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) after a rally was held calling for the independence of the Congo. Violent altercations between Belgian forces and the Congolese also occurred later that year” (“Belgian Congo”).



On June 30, 1960, the Belgian Congo gained independence and became the Democratic Republic of Congo (“Belgian Congo”). Despite stepping in to improve the quality of life for Congolese, the Belgian government neglected their responsibilities as colonial governors to take care of the natives in the Congo. Although not all of the rights Morel advocated for ended up being respected, life was still improved for the Congolese compared to Leopold’s reign. Shortly after the annexation of the Congo Free State, Morel disbanded the CRA because he believed that their job was finished (Congo Reform Association).

## **New Beginnings**

The Congo Free State Atrocity was an important event in human rights history because it showed that the media is able to bring change for the greater good. In the U.S., muckrakers exposed injustices in workers rights by publishing essays, accounts, and photographs in the media and in “several cases, muckrakers became activists themselves and spent years speaking throughout the country about their work and the need for reform” (PBS).

In the Congo Free State, individual missionaries and travelers tried to bring attention to the horrors of Leopold’s personal colony (Slade 2). Although they failed, they became the basis for Morel’s reporting. Together, they forced the annexation of the Congo Free State through international pressure (Congo Reform Association). The Congo Free State was a turning point for colonialism as it exposed the horrors of this practice and demanded greater oversight for colonial regimes (“Congo Free State”). Today, the Democratic Republic of Congo lags behind

the modern world in part due to its tumultuous history that can be traced to its colonial past (Center for Preventive Action 1).

## **Conclusion**

The Congo Free State was the site of various atrocities that were kept secret for years (“Congo Free State”). King Leopold II of Belgium took over the Congo Basin area under the guise of a philanthropic cause, but exploited the people and natural resources of the region for his personal profit without any regard for the welfare of the Congolese instead (“Leopold II”). Through the efforts of E. D. Morel and the media, the world fully became aware of these horrors (Congo Reform Association). By utilizing media and journalism, Morel created international pressure that forced the annexation of the Congo Free State (“Belgian Congo”). We learn from the Congo Free State that colonial powers have a responsibility to take care of their subjects, and that the colonized have certain unalienable rights. When these rights are violated, it is the moral responsibility of the wider world to act and bring justice to the oppressed. These violations also show us the unalienable rights everyone shares such as the right to life, freedom from torture, and freedom from slavery among others (Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

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