

# The Tragedy of King Leopold's Oppression

By: Sophia Hackett

# CONTENT OUTLINE

1. Thesis
2. Introduction and/or background
3. Subtopic 1: Motives and Deception
4. Subtopic 2: Brutal Reign
5. Subtopic 3: Opposition and Exposure
6. Conclusion

# Thesis

Leopold created a tremendous tragedy in the Congo when he enslaved most of the population and killed millions; however, his opponents created small triumphs by successfully exposing him.

## Introduction

King Leopold II of Belgium colonized and terrorized the Congo and reigned over it from 1885 to 1909. Leopold's men enforced the enslavement, torture, mass killing, and mutilation of the Congolese. The Congolese were forced to collect wild rubber and ivory for no payment and horrible treatment. An astounding eight to ten million Congolese lives were lost under Leopold's brutal rule. King Leopold kept the truth about his horrors hidden, so not many resisted at first because they had no idea it was happening. However, some people managed to figure it out and did resist, such as E. D. Morel, a British worker at a Liverpool shipping line who had suspicions about Congo slave labor confirmed; and George Washington Williams, a black minister and journalist who interviewed Africans about their experience with their white oppressors and wrote about the terror in the Congo.

## Background (optional)

The casualties were on a Holocaust level

There was no written language in the Congo when Europeans first arrived, so there were no records written by the Congolese on the events

Before Europeans went to Africa, they thought that there were crazy creatures such as people with one eye or giant birds there.

The monarch of the Congo, the ManiKongo, carried a zebra-tail whip, whoever approached him had to do so on all fours, no one was allowed to watch him eat or drink by penalty of death.

'They measured distance by marching days, and marked time by the lunar month and by a four-day week the first of which was a holiday.'

Cowrie shells were the currency

They also had slaves, some of which were people captured in warfare, or criminals, or people given away in dowry settlements.

## Subtopic 1: Motives and Deception

In the late 19th century, Europe was scrambling to take pieces of Africa in order to make money off of the raw resources by setting up colonies. Many Europeans also thought it was their responsibility to 'civilize' Africa. King Leopold took interest in the Congo specifically. King Leopold himself said "[Our goal is] to open civilization to the only part of the globe it has yet to penetrate." Also, "I do not want to miss a good chance of getting us a slice of this magnificent African cake." The Berlin Conference took place in September 1876, in which Leopold invited and hosted explorers and geographers from 14 different nations, including the US. It ended with the founding of the International Africa Association, an organization that's purpose was to split up the rest of Africa. Over the next 2 decades, every part of Africa except for Ethiopia and Liberia were colonized by Europe. The Congo was taken by King Leopold. He sent Henry Stanley, an American explorer, to the Congo and from 1879 to 1884, Stanley got over 450 treaties from Congolese tribes. He got these treaties through a variation of unfair and illegal practices including trickery, intimidation, violent force and alcohol.

# Evidence

This is information about why Europeans started colonizing Africa.

“Many people suggested that Africa could be a source of cheap raw materials.”

“A race began among European countries to learn more about areas in Africa where they might acquire territory and set up colonies ahead of their rivals.”

“Many Europeans saw it as their duty to save the souls of those less fortunate, to uplift the populations, and to bring civilization to what they saw as a ‘heathen’ continent.”

“Over the next 20 years all of Africa except Liberia and Ethiopia would be sliced up among the Europeans.”

“The conference ended with the formation of the International Africa Association, an organization meant to coordinate the remaining exploration of Central Africa.”

“From 1879 to 1884, Stanley...through a combination of trade, trickery, alcohol, intimidation, and violent force, Stanley emerged with over 450 treaties.

The Choices Program, page 7, 9, 10

## Subtopic 2: Brutal Reign

After King Leopold managed to claim hold of Congolese land, he sent his soldiers, the Force Publique, over to the Congo. He also employed black Americans as soldiers and workmen. He began forcing the Congolese, through slave labor, to collect rubber from the natural rubber trees in the area. The government workers would hold Congolese families hostage to force the men to work. If the workers failed to meet a certain amount of rubber collected, Leopold's soldiers would torture and mutilate them. They had ears or hands cut off, and many were shot. Reports of decapitation were not uncommon. Many Congolese died either at the hands of the soldiers or from the terrible conditions- they were forced to collect rubber in extreme heat, ate only two bowls of plain rice a day, and slept on filthy ship decks. Towns were burned, property was stolen, and many people were enslaved. It's estimated that somewhere between 5 and 10 million lives were taken during the time of Leopold's rule.



# Evidence

“Your majesty’s Government has sequestered their land, burned their towns, stolen their property, enslaved their women and children, and committed other crimes too numerous to mention in detail.”

“They often thirst for water when the season is dry; they are exposed to the heat and rain, and sleep upon the damp and filthy decks of the vessels of ten so closely crowded as to lie in human ordure. And, of course, many die.”

“We tried, always going further into the forest, and when we failed ad or rubber was short, the soldiers came to our towns and killed us. Many were shot. Some had their ears cut off, others were tied up with ropes around their necks and bodies taken away.

Sources: George Washington Williams’ letter to King Leopold, The Choices Program page 3

## Subtopic 3a: Opposition and Exposure (Morel)

Edmund Dene Morel was an employee of a Liverpool shipping line that transported cargo to and from the Congo. He realized that they were only receiving goods and not exchanging anything back, so he realized that there was only one explanation—slave labor. Morel then published an article in his company's newspaper about what he had discovered, which got him fired. He became a full-time journalist, writing about what was going on in the Congo. He spoke at the White House, trying to convince President Theodore Roosevelt that the US had a responsibility to change what was going on in the Congo. He basically managed to put this topic on newspapers all around the world almost single handedly.

## Subtopic 3b: Opposition and Exposure (Williams)

George Washington Williams was a minister and lawyer who worked as a part-time journalist. He wrote several books about African-American history, filled with extensive research and effort. He became interested in King Leopold and the fact that the king was employing black Americans in the Congo. He went to visit in 1890, and was shocked by the brutality and exploitation that was occurring. He wrote a letter to King Leopold expressing his disgust with the events taking place in the Congo, but to no avail. The letter detailed the illegal methods that Leopold had obtained the contracts, as well as a long list of crimes that Williams introduced as charges.

## Subtopic 3c: Opposition and Exposure (Casement)

Roger Casement was an Irish government worker who spent time in the Congo observing human rights abuses. In 1903 he wrote the Casement Report, a document exposing what was going on in the Congo at the time. Before the report, however, he kept a diary during his time in the Congo. Some entries from June and July say, “June 5- The country a desert, no natives left. July 25: I walked into villages and saw the nearest one- population dreadfully decreased- only 93 people left out of many hundreds.” He said that “to call this ‘trade’ is the height of lying.” His horror with the events occurring were obvious with every sentence. After he published his report, it was met by criticism by the general public. However, the British press got their hands on the report and completely attacked and denounced what was going on in the Congo, helping to expose the events.

# Evidence

“As Morel watches these riches streaming to Europe with almost no goods being sent to Africa to pay for them, he realizes that there can only be one explanation- slave labor.”

“Edmund Dene Morel would be at the White House, insisting to President Theodore Roosevelt that the United States had a special responsibility to do something about the Congo.”

“In 1890, Williams studied conditions in the Belgian Congo at the commission of President Benjamin Harrison and on one occasion wrote a letter of complaint to the Belgian Crown about the mistreatment of the Africans. Although he had hoped to spark a movement in protest of the Belgian government’s role in its African colony, little came of his effort in the U.S.”

“The first official reactions were dated two months prior to the publication of the report. They were full of worry, fear, and suspicion.”

“the British press blatantly attacked the Congo and presented it on its front page news as hell on earth.”

Sources: Black Past: <https://blackpast.org/aah/williams-george-washington-1849-1891>, King Leopold’s Ghost by Adam Hochschild <https://breac.nd.edu/articles/the-three-lives-of-the-casement-report-its-impact-on-official-reactions-and-popular-opinion-in-belgium/>

## Conclusion

King Leopold caused a major tragedy when he enforced and enacted the mutilation, enslavement, and mass killing of millions of Congolese. It completely disrupted the society. Leopold legally owned all of their land, and the natural resources the country was so rich with were extracted by Leopold with no profit or benefit going to the Congolese themselves. As a result of this, even though Leopold was forced to stop ruling over the Congo (Which is a small triumph), the country was left poor and generally uneducated since the complete disruption of normal systems that occurred. As of now, the Congo is still one of the poorest countries in the world. The exposure and retaliation against the event is considered one of the first major human rights movements, and Leopold's opponents were the ones that were trying to convince the world that this was an issue the whole world should be concerned about, not just the Congo. They showed that it was a *human* issue, not an issue that should be left to someone else to deal with. This is a compelling and significant story to learn because it shows that even though an issue may be taking place in another country, that doesn't mean that it is any less important or horrendous.