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Hackett 1

The Tragedy of King Leopold's Oppression

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Introduction

King Leopold II of Belgium colonized and terrorized the Central African region now known as the Congo, reigning over it from 1885 to 1908. Leopold's army enforced the enslavement, torture, mass killing, and mutilation of the Congolese for profit. The Congolese were forced to collect wild rubber and ivory for no payment and horrible treatment. An astounding ten million Congolese lives were lost under Leopold's brutal rule. King Leopold kept the truth about his horrors hidden from the outside world, 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, an African-American minister and journalist who interviewed Africans about their experience with their white oppressors and wrote about the terror in the Congo. 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.

I. Motives and Deception

In the late 19th century, Europe was scrambling to take control over parts 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”(“Colonialism in the Congo” 9). Leopold got a chance to do this during the Berlin Conference, which took place in September 1876. The German chancellor Otto von Bismarck invited and hosted explorers, diplomats, and geographers from fourteen different European nations, plus the U.S. It ended with the founding of the International Africa Association, an organization with the purpose of splitting up the rest of Africa. Over the next two decades, every part of Africa except for Ethiopia and Liberia was colonized by Europe. The Congo was claimed for Belgium by King Leopold. He sent Henry Stanley, an American explorer, to the Congo from 1879 to 1884 to secure treaties from local authorities in order to take over the Congo. Stanley got over 450 treaties from Congolese tribes. He secured these through a variety of unfair and illegal practices including trickery, intimidation, alcohol, and violent force (Williams).

II. Early Resistance

The Congolese people certainly didn't give into Leopold's oppression without a serious fight. They risked a lot in order to resist Leopold's cruelty, but were greatly unmatched in terms of weaponry and force. Leopold's men had guns and due to that managed to control Congolese groups without very much difficulty. Since the Congolese didn't have comparable arms, Leopold was able to use this as an advantage against them. However, certain Congolese ethnic groups fought against Leopold's soldiers. As the Force Publique (Leopold's soldiers) went through the Congo, combing it for workers, they encountered the Sanga people, who resisted the king's men. They were led by their chief, Mulume Niama. They fought and rebelled, but then found refuge in

a large chalk cave named Tshamakele. The Force Publique sent an officer to negotiate their surrender, but they refused. The soldiers then blocked the entrance of the cave for three months, killing the chief and his men, over 170 people. The chief and his men were so opposed to being enslaved by Leopold and so resistant to giving in that they were willing to sacrifice everything. Many uprisings and rebellions occurred while the Force Publique was still negotiating contracts and treaties. However, Leopold inevitably got power over the Congo and officially gained control of the country (Hochschild 124).

III. Brutal Reign

After King Leopold managed to claim hold of Congolese land, he sent the Force Publique, his Belgian soldiers, over to the Congo. He began forcing the Congolese, through slave labor, to collect rubber from the 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 their quota 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. A quote from a Congolese refugee, as interviewed by Roger Casement, detailed some of the brutality that occurred: "I ran away with two old people, but they were caught and killed, and the soldiers made me carry the baskets holding their cut-off hands. They killed my little sister, threw her in a house, and set it on fire" ("Colonialism in the Congo" 16). 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

around ten million lives were taken during the time of Leopold's rule (Hochschild 233).

IV. Opposition and Exposure

A. E.D. Morel

Edmund Dene Morel was an employee of a shipping line based in Liverpool, England that transported cargo to and from the Congo. He realized that they were only receiving goods and not exchanging any goods or money back, so he suspected that there was only one explanation: slave labor. He was quoted as saying, "On the face of the import statistics, the natives were getting nothing or next to nothing. How, then, was this rubber and ivory being acquired? Certainly not by commercial dealing. Nothing was going in to pay for what was coming out" ("Colonialism in the Congo" 19). He was completely appalled at the fact that his own employer was supporting this system. Morel then published an article in his company's newspaper about what he had discovered, which got him fired. He then 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 U.S. had a responsibility to change what was going on in the Congo. He states his opinion on the matter very clearly in this quote:

"The Congo Free Estate has invented a form of slavery more degrading and more atrocious than any slavery which had existed previously. They may disguise it as they like. The fact remains... [the Congo Free Estate] is guilty of having established official slavery" ("Colonialism in the Congo" 19).

Through his activism, he basically managed to get this topic into newspapers all around the world almost single-handedly. (Hochschild 2)

B. George Washington Williams

George Washington Williams was an American 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. This letter states, “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” (Williams). The letter stated the illegal methods by which Leopold had obtained the contracts, as well as a long list of crimes that Williams introduced as charges.

C. Roger Casement

Roger Casement was an Irish-born British government worker who spent time in the Congo observing human rights abuses. His connection to the Congo started when he was nineteen, when he was working as a purser for an Elder Dempster ship. After working there for years after, he was recruited by the British Foreign Office as a consul in the Congo. In 1903 he wrote a major report, a document exposing what was going on in the Congo at the time. It was written for the British government but copies were sent to the Belgian government as well.

Before writing the report, however, he kept a diary during his time in the Congo, which also documents the Congo's suffering. 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" (Hochschild 202). He said that "to call this 'trade' is the height of lying." His horror with the events occurring was 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. In 1904, he met Edmund Dene Morel, and agreed to lend his support to Morel's organization, the Congo Reform Association.

D. Congo Reform Association

In 1904, Edmund Dene Morel established the Congo Reform Association. He was sponsored by William Cadbury, the owner of the Cadbury chocolate company. He gathered a multitude of notable people of the time to join the Association, including Mark Twain, Booker T. Washington, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Roger Casement. Together they published books, pamphlets, and held lectures that were attended by thousands, all of which helped to expose the brutality that King Leopold had brought upon the Congo (C.R.A. History).

V. End of Leopold's Reign

With the help of the efforts of all of Leopold's opponents, he was officially forced to resign in March 1908 by the Belgian government. There was public pressure building to the point that the Belgian government was compelled to force Leopold out. He actually sold the

Congo to the government, and made around an extra 50 million from that exchange. Leopold ended up making an estimated 220 million francs total, or \$1.1 billion in today's money (Hothschild 277). According to historian Adam Hothschild, around half of the entire population of the Congo was killed, equal to 10 million people. He had ruled over the Congo twenty-three years, from 1885 to 1908. Leopold died on December 17th, 1909, from a hemorrhagic stroke. After Leopold was no longer in control of the Congo, it became a Belgian colony, renamed as the Belgian Congo. The brutality did not completely stop, but there were significantly less reports of abuses against Congolese workers. The Congo remained a colony until June 30, 1960.

Conclusion

King Leopold caused an unfathomable tragedy when he instigated the mutilation, enslavement, and mass killing of millions of Congolese. It completely disrupted the society, seeing as so much of the Congo's population was decimated. Leopold, although unfairly, 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 by the Belgian legislature- which was pressured by advocates and the public- to stop ruling over the Congo, which is a small triumph, the country was left poor and generally uneducated due to 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 public campaigning against Leopold's terror is considered one of the first major human rights movements. Hochschild holds that it "kept alive a tradition, a way of seeing the world, a human capacity for outrage at 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” (305). Leopold’s opponents were the ones that passionately tried to convince the world that this was an issue everyone should be concerned about, not just people in 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 teaches the world that everyone can stop these tragedies or prevent them from happening by staying aware of what all governments are doing and advocating for those in need.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Casement, Roger. The Casement Report. The Casement Report.

This report was written by Roger Casement himself. This source gave me further evidence of charges against Leopold, as well as Roger Casement's opinions.

"Leopold Denies Charges Against Him." New York Times, 11 Dec. 1906.

This is a New York Times article from 1906, which is during Leopold's rule. This source gave me information about the general public's opinion on Leopold, and also about what the public actually knew. It gave me an idea of how well the events were covered up, and the fact that people actually viewed Leopold as a human rights hero.

Williams, George Washington. "An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo By Colonel, The Honorable Geo. W. Williams, of the United States of America." Received by King Leopold, 18 July 1890.

This is a letter from George Washington Williams to King Leopold. This source gave me information about George Washington Williams's opinion on what was going on, as well as factual evidence for particular events. It was the perfect primary source since it also provided the honest reaction to these events, which was horror.

Secondary Sources

Blane, Colin. "From Our Own Correspondent: Belgian Wealth Squeezed from Congo." BBC News, BBC, 18 Jan. 2001, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/1123933.stm.

This article gave me information about the after effects of the events that occurred, and recently as well. It only provided a specific aspect of the effects, but was helpful nonetheless.

"Colonialism in the Congo: Conquest, Conflict, and Commerce." The Choices Program, Watson Institute for International Studies Brown University, www.choices.edu.

This packet gave me a ton of information about all the events that occurred, plus a ton of primary quotes that I used in the essay. It gave me a good overview that provided grounds for looking further into events that were mentioned.

“C.R.A. History.” Welcome to the Congo Reform Association,
www.congoreformassociation.org/cra-history/.

This website gave me information about the Congo Reform Association- who started it, why they started it, and who was involved. It was detailed about who was a part of the association, which was very useful.

“Democratic Republic of Congo Profile - Timeline.” BBC News, BBC, 10 Jan. 2019,
www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13286306.

This timeline gave me an overview of the Congo, including information from 2019. This was very useful for putting events into chronological context and making more sense of when certain things happened.

“DR Congo: Chronology.” Human Rights Watch, 23 Jan. 2012,
www.hrw.org/news/2009/08/21/dr-congo-chronology.

This is another timeline that provided me with extensive information regarding the events following King Leopold’s rule. This was helpful because it was not something that was really mentioned in King Leopold’s Ghost- my main source- so it was helpful to see more about the politics and current events of the Congo.

Hochschild, Adam. King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa. Mariner Books, 1998.

This book gave me extensive information about events that occurred, especially information about the specific resistors. It also gave me a nice overview that improved my overall understanding.

“King Leopold II.” The Belgian Monarchy,
www.monarchie.be/en/royal-family/history/king-leopold-ii.

This timeline gave me an overview and summary of King Leopold's life, which helped me put things into place more. It also helped me understand more about King Leopold as a person, and place more into context.

McFerrin, Hunter. “News from Africa: The DRC Poverty Rate Continues to Stagnate.” The Borgen Project, 16 July 2017, borgenproject.org/the-drc-poverty-rate/.

This website gave me info on the poverty rate in the Congo currently, which helped me see the effects of Leopold’s destruction.