

Dossier #1

A STORY of GREED,
TERROR, and HEROISM
in COLONIAL AFRICA



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KING
LEOPOLD'S
GHOST

ADAM
HOCHSCHILD

Document 1

“THE TREATIES MUST GRANT US EVERYTHING”

WALKING INTO FIRE

ON JUNE 10, 1878, a steamer carried Henry Morton Stanley across the English Channel to his first meeting with the King of the Belgians. We do not know what Leopold was doing as he waited for the explorer in his office at the Royal Palace, his patient months of wooing about to bear fruit. But it would not be unreasonable to imagine that this geographer-king once again looked at his maps.

Such a look would have confirmed that only in Africa could Leopold hope to achieve his dream of seizing a colony, especially one immensely larger than Belgium. There was no more unclaimed territory in the Americas, and Maximilian and Carlota's disastrous adventure in Mexico was a reminder of what could happen if one tried to take control of an independent country there. Nor were there blank spaces in Asia: the Russian Empire stretched all the way to the Pacific, the French had taken Indochina, the Dutch the East Indies, and most of the rest of southern Asia, from Aden to Singapore, was colored with the British Empire's pink. Only Africa remained.

Stanley had followed the Congo River for some fifteen hundred miles. He had obviously not seen all of it, though, because when he first reached it, far upstream, it was already nearly a mile wide. Full exploration would take many years, but after eagerly devouring Stanley's newspaper articles, Leopold had a rough idea of what the explorer had found.

Eventually the statistics would be known. The Congo River drains more than 1.3 million square miles, an area larger than India. It has an estimated one sixth of the world's hydroelectric potential. Most impor-

tant of all, for a nineteenth-century empire-builder, the river and its fan-shaped web of tributaries constitute more than seven thousand miles of interconnecting waterways, a built-in transportation grid rivaled by few places on earth. Once disassembled steamboats could be transported around the great rapids and onto that network, they would find wood to burn in their boilers growing right at dockside; most of the navigable rivers ran through the fast-growing rain forest that covered half the basin.

Of the people who lived in the Congo basin, Europeans still knew little. When not drawing a bead on them through his gun sights, Stanley had been interested in them mainly as a source of supplies, people with whom he could trade trinkets or cloth for food. But he had made two important discoveries about the area's inhabitants. One was that they were no military threat: his nearly three dozen battles showed their spears and arrows and decrepit muskets to be no match for his new, breech-loading Snider rifles. His other discovery was that, along the crucial transportation artery of the Congo River, there was no single all-powerful state that had to be subdued. Further exploring along the river's tributaries would find several large kingdoms, but centuries of slave-hunting raids from both the east and west African coasts had severely weakened most of them. Many of the peoples of the Congo basin were small in population. As the next round of exploration would soon show, there were more than two hundred different ethnic groups speaking more than four hundred languages and dialects. With the potential opposition so fragmented, conquest would be relatively easy.

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What kind of societies existed in this land that, unknown to most of its inhabitants, Stanley was busily staking out for the King of the Belgians? There is no simple answer, for what would turn out to be the Congo's borders, if superimposed on the map of Europe, would stretch from Zürich to Moscow to central Turkey. It was as large as the entire United States east of the Mississippi. Although mostly rain forest and savanna, it also embraced volcanic hills and mountains covered with snow and glaciers, some of whose peaks reached higher than the Alps.

The peoples of this vast territory were as diverse as the land. They ranged from citizens of large, organizationally sophisticated kingdoms to the Pygmies of the Ituri rain forest, who lived in small bands with no chiefs and no formal structure of government. The kingdoms, with large towns as their capitals, tended to be in the savanna, where long-distance travel was easier. In the rain forest, where paths had to be hacked through thick, rapidly growing foliage, communities were generally far smaller.

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These forest-dwellers were sometimes seminomads: if a group of Pygmies, for instance, killed an elephant, that site became a temporary settlement for a week or two of feasting, since it was easier to move a village than a dead elephant.

Although some Congo peoples, like the Pygmies, were admirably peaceful, it would be a mistake to see most of them as paragons of primeval innocence. Many practiced slavery and ritual cannibalism and were as likely to make war on other clans or ethnic groups as people anywhere on earth. And traditional warfare in this part of Africa, where a severed head or hand was sometimes proof of an enemy killed in battle, was as harsh as warfare elsewhere. In some areas of the Congo all women were maimed, as still happens today, by forced clitoridectomies, a practice no less brutal for being a cultural initiation rite.

Like many indigenous peoples, inhabitants of the Congo basin had learned to live in balance with their environment. Some groups practiced what was, in effect, birth control, where couples had to abstain from sex before the men left on a hunting expedition, for example, or as long as the woman was breast-feeding a baby. Substances found in certain leaves and bark could induce miscarriages or had contraceptive properties. All these means of population control, incidentally, were strikingly similar to those which had evolved in another great rain forest an ocean away, the Amazon basin.

Most striking about the traditional societies of the Congo was their remarkable artwork: baskets, mats, pottery, copper and ironwork, and, above all, woodcarving. It would be two decades before Europeans really noticed this art. Its discovery then had a strong influence on Braque, Matisse, and Picasso — who subsequently kept African art objects in his studio until his death. Cubism was new only for Europeans, for it was partly inspired by specific pieces of African art, some of them from the Pende and Songye peoples, who live in the basin of the Kasai River, one of the Congo's major tributaries.

It is easy to see the distinctive brilliance that so entranced Picasso and his colleagues at their first encounter with this art at an exhibit in Paris in 1907. In these central African sculptures some body parts are exaggerated, some shrunken; eyes project, cheeks sink, mouths disappear, torsos become elongated; eye sockets expand to cover almost the entire face; the human face and figure are broken apart and formed again in new ways and proportions that had previously lain beyond the sight of traditional European realism.

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~~gained by the discovery of~~ One day a few years before William Shepard first embarked for Africa, a veterinary surgeon with a majestic white beard was tinkering with his son's tricycle at his home in Belfast, Ireland. John Dunlop was trying to solve a problem that had bedeviled bicyclists for many years: how do you get a gentle ride without springs? Dunlop finally devised a practical way of making a long-sought solution, an inflatable rubber tire. In 1890 the Dunlop Company began making tires — setting off a bicycle craze and starting a new industry just in time, it turned out, for the coming of the automobile.

Europeans had known about rubber ever since Christopher Columbus noticed it in the West Indies. In the late 1700s, a British scientist gave the substance its English name when he noticed it could rub out pencil marks. The Scot Charles Macintosh contributed his name to the language

in 1823 when he figured out a mass-production method for doing something long practiced by the Indians of the Americas: applying rubber to cloth to make it waterproof. Sixteen years later, the American inventor Charles Goodyear accidentally spilled sulfur into some hot rubber on his stove. He discovered that the resulting mixture did not turn stiff when cold or smelly and gooey when hot — major problems for those trying to make rubber boots or raincoats before then. But it was not until the early 1890s, half a decade after Dunlop fitted the pneumatic tire onto his son's tricycle wheel, that the worldwide rubber boom began. The industrial world rapidly developed an appetite not just for rubber tires, but for hoses, tubing, gaskets, and the like, and for rubber insulation for the telegraph, telephone, and electrical wiring now rapidly encompassing the globe. Suddenly factories could not get enough of the magical commodity, and its price rose throughout the 1890s. Nowhere did the boom have a more drastic impact on people's lives than in the equatorial rain forest, where wild rubber vines snaked high into the trees, that covered nearly half of King Leopold's Congo.

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 1890s wild rubber had far surpassed it as the main source of revenue from the Congo. His fortune assured, the king eagerly grilled functionaries returning from the Congo about rubber harvests; he devoured a constant stream of telegrams and reports from the territory, marking them up in the margins and passing them on to aides for action. His letters from this period are filled with numbers: commodity prices from world markets, interest rates on loans, quantities of rifles to be shipped to the Congo, tons of rubber to be shipped to Europe, and the exact dimensions of the triumphal arch in Brussels he was planning to build with his newfound profits. Reading the king's correspondence is like reading the letters of the CEO of a corporation that has just developed a profitable new product and is racing to take advantage of it before competitors can get their assembly lines going.

The competition Leopold worried about was from cultivated rubber, which comes not from a vine but a tree. Rubber trees, however, require much care and some years before they grow large enough to be tapped. The king voraciously demanded ever greater quantities of wild rubber from the Congo, because he knew that the price would drop once plantations of rubber trees in Latin America and Asia reached maturity.

This did indeed happen, but by then the Congo had had a wild-rubber boom nearly two decades long. During that time the search knew no bounds.

As with the men bringing in ivory, those supplying rubber to the Congo state and private companies were rewarded according to the amount they turned in. In 1903, one particularly "productive" agent received a commission eight times his annual salary. But the big money flowed directly back to Antwerp and Brussels, in the capital mostly to either side of the rue Bréderode, the small street that separated the back of the Royal Palace from several buildings holding offices of the Congo state and Congo business operations.

Even though Leopold's privately controlled state got half of concession-company profits, the king made vastly more money from the land the state exploited directly. But because the concession companies were not managed so secretively, we have better statistics from them. In 1897, for example, one of the companies, the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber and Exploration Company, or A.B.I.R., spent 1.35 francs per kilo to harvest rubber in the Congo and ship it to the company's headquarters at Antwerp — where it was sold for prices that sometimes reached 10 francs per kilo, a profit of more than 700 percent. By 1898, the price of A.B.I.R.'s stock was nearly thirty times what it had been six years earlier. Between 1890 and 1904, total Congo rubber earnings increased ninety-six times over. By the turn of the century, the État Indépendant du Congo had become, far and away, the most profitable colony in Africa. The profits came swiftly because, transportation costs aside, harvesting wild rubber required no cultivation, no fertilizers, no capital investment in expensive equipment. It required only labor.

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Letter from King Leopold II of Belgium to Minister Beernaert on the Congo, July 3, 1890

Leopold II was "King of the Belgians" (ruled 1865-1909) and "Sovereign-King of the Congo Free State," at the time (19th century) the largest swath of African land under the control of a colonial power (one million square miles). Leopold...ruled the Congo as his own personal fiefdom, though he never set foot there.

Dear Minister,

I have never ceased to call the attention of my countrymen to the need to turn our view toward overseas lands.

History teaches that countries with small territories have a moral and material interest in extending their influence beyond their narrow borders. Greece founded opulent cities, bastions of arts and civilization, on the shores of the Mediterranean. Later, Venice built its grandeur on its maritime and commercial relations no less than on its political success. The Netherlands have 30 million subjects in the Indies who exchange tropical products for the products of the mother country.

It is in serving the cause of humanity and progress that peoples of the second rank appear as useful members of the great family of nations. A manufacturing and commercial nation like ours, more than any other, must do its best to secure opportunities for all its workers, whether intellectual, capitalist, or manual.

These patriotic preoccupations dominated my life. It is they that caused the creation of the African effort.

[A] young and vast State, led from Brussels, has peacefully taken its place in the sun, thanks to the kind support of the powers which have applauded its beginnings. Belgians administer it, while other compatriots, more numerous every day, are already making a profit on their capital.

The immense river system of the Upper Congo opens the way for our efforts for rapid and economical ways of communication that will allow us to penetrate directly into the center of the African continent. The building of the railroad in the cataract area, assured from now on thanks to the recent vote of the legislature, will notably increase the ease of access. Under these conditions, a great future is reserved for the Congo, whose immense value will soon shine out to all eyes.

Soon after that memorable act, I thought it my duty, when death will come to strike me, to make it easy for Belgium to profit from my work....

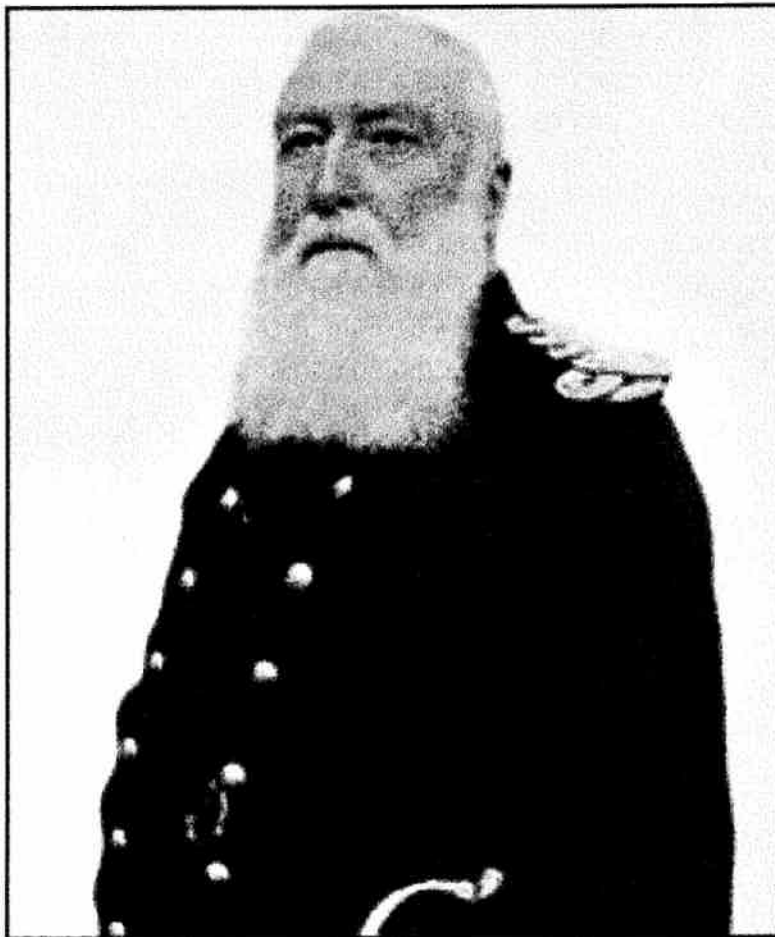
The beginning of enterprises such as those that have so preoccupied me is difficult and onerous. I insisted on bearing the charges. A King, to give service to his country, must not fear to conceive and pursue the realization of a project so adventurous in appearance. The riches of a Sovereign consist of public prosperity. That alone can

appear to his eyes as an enviable treasure, which he should try constantly to build up.

Until the day of my death, I will continue with the same thoughts of national interest that have guided me until now, to direct and sustain our African efforts....I do not think I am mistaken in affirming that Belgium will gain genuine advantages and will see opening before her, on a new continent, happy and wide perspectives.

Believe me, dear Minister,

Your very devoted,
Leopold.



Leopold, much later, at the end of his regime