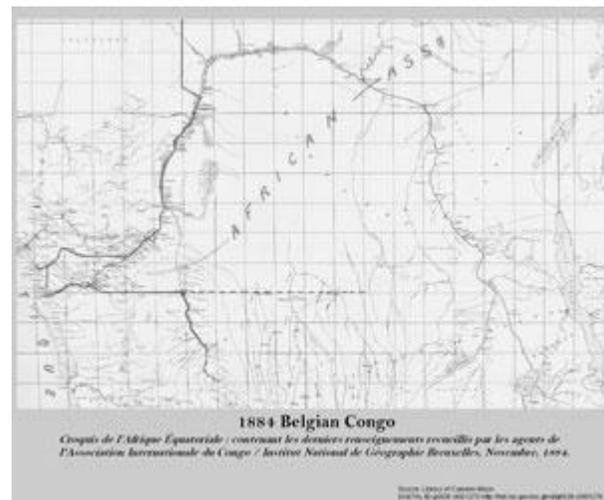


Yale University: Genocide Studies Program

Congo Free State, 1885-1908

In 1876, Belgium's King Leopold II (1835-1909) convened a geographical conference in Brussels. Leopold proposed establishing an international benevolent committee for the propagation of civilization among the peoples of Central Africa (the Congo region). Originally conceived as a multi-national, scientific, and humanitarian assembly, the *Association Internationale Africaine* (AIA, African International Association) eventually became a development company controlled by Leopold.[1,2,3] He subsequently organized the *Comité d'Études du Haut-Congo* (CEHC, Study Committee of the Upper Congo), an international commercial, scientific, and humanitarian committee, and sometime between 1879 and 1882, the *Association Internationale du Congo* (AIC, International Congo Society) emerged.[1,2,3] From 1878 to 1884, Leopold used these organizations to establish influence and eventually Belgian sovereignty, in the Congo Basin. His primary objective was to exploit the lucrative ivory market in Central Africa by establishing a secure trade route between the Upper and Lower Congo.[1,2,3] The region was reported to be rich in other commodities as well, such as mineral resources.[3] Rubber exports began as early as 1890,[4] and by the mid-1890s rubber extraction would become the colony's most profitable industry.



In 1884, the Conference of Berlin (1884-1885) convened to finalize the colonial partitioning of the African continent. Conference participants included Austria-Hungary, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and the United States. In 1885, Leopold's efforts to establish Belgian influence in the Congo Basin were awarded with the *État Indépendant du Congo* (CFS, Congo Free State). By a resolution passed in the Belgian parliament, Leopold became *Roi-Souverain* of the newly formed CFS, over which he enjoyed nearly absolute control.[3] The CFS (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo), a country of over two million square kilometers, became Leopold's personal property, the *Domaine Privé*.[5]

Under terms of the General Act of the Berlin Conference, Leopold pledged to suppress the East African slave trade; promote humanitarian policies;

guarantee free trade within the colony; impose no import duties for twenty years; and encourage philanthropic and scientific enterprises.[5] Contrary to his pledge, beginning in the mid-1880s Leopold issued a series of decrees that eventually violated these conditions. Leopold first decreed that the State asserted rights of proprietorship over all vacant lands throughout the Congo territory.[1,2,3,5] By three successive decrees, Leopold reduced the rights of the Congolese in their land to native villages and farms, essentially making nearly all of the CFS *terres domaniales*.[5] Leopold further decreed that merchants limit their commercial operations in rubber to bartering with the natives.[3,5]

By this time, Leopold had also established the *Force Publique* (FP) to campaign against the Arab slave trade in the Upper Congo, protect his economic interests, and suppress uprisings within the CFS, which were common. The FP's officer corps comprised only whites—Belgian regular soldiers and mercenaries from other countries.[1] On arriving in the CFS, these officers recruited men from Zanzibar and West Africa, and eventually from the Congo itself.[3] In addition, Leopold had been actually encouraging the slave trade among Arabs in the Upper Congo in return for slaves to fill the ranks of the FP.[3,5] During the 1890s, the FP's primary role was to exploit the natives as *corvée* laborers to promote the rubber trade.[1,2,3]

By 1890, facing considerable financial difficulty, Leopold applied for permission to levy import duties.[5] However, in direct violation of his promises of free trade within the CFS under the terms of the Berlin Treaty, not only had the State become a commercial entity directly or indirectly trading within its



dominion,[5] but also, Leopold had been slowly monopolizing a considerable amount of the ivory and rubber trade by imposing export duties on the resources traded by other merchants within the CFS.[5]

By the final decade of the 19th century, J. B. Dunlop's 1887 invention of inflatable, rubber bicycle tubes and the growing popularity of the automobile dramatically increased the global demand for rubber. To monopolize the resources of the entire CFS, Leopold issued three decrees in 1891 and 1892 that reduced the native population to serfs.[5] Collectively, these forced the natives to deliver all ivory and rubber, harvested or found, to State officers thus nearly completing Leopold's monopoly of the ivory and rubber trade.[3]

An additional decree in 1892 divided the *terres vacantes* into a *domainal system*, which privatized extraction rights over rubber for the State in certain private domains, allowing Leopold to grant lucrative concessions to private companies.[3] In other areas, private companies could continue to trade but were highly restricted and taxed. The domainal system destroyed the traditional economy of the Congo basin and enforced a *labor tax* on Leopold's Congolese subjects requiring local chiefs to supply men to collect rubber and other resources.[3] It essentially obliged natives to supply these products without payment.

Genocide scholar Adam Jones comments, "The result was one of the most brutal and all-encompassing *corvée* institutions the world has known . . . Male rubber tappers and porters were mercilessly exploited and driven to death." [6] Leopold's agents held the wives and children of these men hostage until they returned with their rubber quota.[5] Those who refused or failed to supply enough rubber often had their villages burned down, children murdered, and their hands cut off.[1,3]



Although local chiefs organized tribal resistance, the FP brutally crushed these uprisings. Rebellions often included Congolese fleeing their villages to hide in the wilderness, ambushing army units, and setting fire to rubber vine forests.[2] In retribution, the FP burned villages and FP officers sent their soldiers into the forest to find and kill hiding rebels. To prove the success of their patrols, soldiers were ordered to cut off and bring back dead victims' right hands as proof that they had not wasted their bullets.[3] If their shots missed their targets or if they used cartridges on big game, soldiers would cut off the hands of the living and wounded to meet their quotas.[3]

"Everywhere I hear the same news of the Congo Free State – rubber and murder, slavery in its worst form." This account was published in *Century Magazine* (1897) by E. J. Glave, a former CFS administrator.[3] Inspired by works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), originally published as a three-part series in *Blackwood's Magazine* (1899), organized international criticism of Leopold's genocidal activities mobilized. In 1900, Edmund Dene Morel, a part-time journalist and head of trade with Congo for the Liverpool shipping firm Elder Dempster, began writing articles describing conditions in the CFS. In 1902,

Morel retired from his position at Elder Dempster and launched a full-time campaign to expose the human rights abuses occurring in the CFS. He founded his own magazine, *The West African Mail*, and conducted speaking tours in Britain.

Increasing public outcry over the atrocities in the CFS moved the British government to launch an official investigation. The diplomat, Sir Roger Casement, was sent to the CFS as British Consul. Reporting to the Foreign Office in 1900, Casement wrote, "The root of the evil lies in the fact that the government of the Congo is above all a commercial trust, that everything else is orientated towards commercial gain . . ." [3] The establishment of the Congo Reform Association (CRA) in Great Britain was a direct result of Casement's 1904 *Congo Report*. The CRA, whose members included Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and inspired Mark Twain among others, provided a foundation for one of the 20th century's first human rights movements.

Yielding to international pressure, in 1908 the Belgian parliament annexed the CFS as the Belgian Congo, effectively removing Leopold from power. Just prior to releasing sovereignty over the CFS, Leopold destroyed all evidence of his activities in the CFS, including the archives of its Departments of Finance and the Interior.[3] The Belgian parliament refused to hold any formal commission of inquiry into the human rights abuses that had occurred in the CFS. Over the next few decades, inhumane practices in the Belgian Congo continued and a huge number of Congolese remained enslaved.[4] By 1959, Belgium power began to erode due to a series of riots in Leopoldville (today Kinshasa). The Congo was emancipated from Belgium on June 30, 1960, and the modern Democratic Republic of the Congo was established.

From 1885 to 1908, it is estimated that the Congolese native population decreased by about ten million people.[2] Historian Adam Hochschild identifies a number of causes for this loss under Leopold's reign—murder, starvation, exhaustion and exposure, disease, and plummeting birth rates. Congolese historian Ndaywel e Nziem estimates the death toll at thirteen million.[7] Leopold capitalized on the

vast wealth extracted in ivory and rubber during his twenty-three year reign of terror in the CFS. He spent some of this wealth by constructing grand palaces and monuments including the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. Ironically, Leopold never visited the kingdom in which he committed such atrocities, to witness the tragedy of his greed.

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Dean Pavlakis adds: There is some debate over whether the Congo catastrophe qualifies as genocide, because the Congo state did not act with the intent of eliminating one or more ethnic groups.[2] However, the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide includes deliberate killings, for whatever motive, of members of an ethnic group with the intent to destroy them as such, "in whole or in part." This suggests that the Congo Free State, in deciding to wipe out particular ethnic groups that resisted its inhuman practices, did indeed practice genocide.[8]

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