

King Leopold's Ghost

**A Story
of Greed,
Terror,
and
Heroism
in
Colonial
Africa**

Adam Hochschild

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The Congo in 1900



INTRODUCTION

THE BEGINNINGS of this story lie far back in time, and its reverberations still sound today. But for me a central incandescent moment, one that illuminates long decades before and after, is a young man's flash of moral recognition.

The year is 1897 or 1898. Try to imagine him, briskly stepping off a cross-Channel steamer, a forceful, burly man, in his mid-twenties, with a handlebar mustache. He is confident and well spoken, but his British speech is without the polish of Eton or Oxford. He is well dressed, but the clothes are not from Bond Street. With an ailing mother and a wife and growing family to support, he is not the sort of person likely to get caught up in an idealistic cause. His ideas are thoroughly conventional. He looks—and is—every inch the sober, respectable businessman.

Edmund Dene Morel is a trusted employee of a Liverpool shipping line. A subsidiary of the company has the monopoly on all transport of cargo to and from the Congo Free State, as it is then called, the huge territory in central Africa that is the world's only colony claimed by one man. That man is King Leopold II of Belgium, a ruler much admired throughout Europe as a "philanthropic" monarch. He has welcomed Christian missionaries to his new colony; his troops, it is said, have fought and defeated local slave-traders who preyed on the population; and for more than a decade European newspapers have praised him for investing his personal fortune in public works to benefit the Africans.

Because Morel speaks fluent French, his company sends him to Belgium every few weeks to supervise the loading and unloading of ships on the Congo run. Although the officials he works with have been handling this shipping traffic for years without a second thought, Morel begins to notice things that unsettle him. At the docks of the big port of Antwerp he sees his company's ships arriving filled to the hatch covers with valuable cargoes of rubber and ivory. But when they cast off their hawsers to steam back to the Congo, while military bands play on the pier and eager young men in uniform line the ships' rails, what they carry is mostly army officers, firearms, and ammunition. There is no trade going on here. Little or nothing is being exchanged for the rubber and ivory. 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 be only one explanation for their source: slave labor.

Brought face to face with evil, Morel does not turn away. Instead, what he sees determines the course of his life and the course of an extraordinary movement, the first great international human rights movement of the twentieth century. Seldom has one human being—impassioned, eloquent, blessed with brilliant organizing skills and nearly superhuman energy—managed almost single-handedly to put one subject on the world's front pages for more than a decade. Only a few years after standing on the docks of Antwerp, Edmund 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. He would organize delegations to the British Foreign Office. He would mobilize everyone from Booker T. Washington to Anatole France to the Archbishop of Canterbury to join his cause. More than two hundred mass meetings to protest slave labor in the Congo would be held across the United States. A larger number of gatherings in England—nearly three hundred a year at the crusade's peak—would draw as many as five thousand people at a time. In London, one letter of protest to the *Times* on the Congo would be signed by eleven peers, nineteen bishops, seventy-six members of Parliament, the presidents of seven Chambers of Commerce, thirteen editors of major newspapers, and every lord mayor in the country. Speeches about the horrors of King Leopold's Congo would be given as far away as Australia. In Italy, two men would fight a duel over the issue. British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, a man not given to overstatement, would declare that "no external question for at least thirty years has moved the country so strongly and so vehemently."

This is the story of that movement, of the savage crime that was its target, of the long period of exploration and conquest that preceded it, and of the way the world has forgotten one of the great mass killings of recent history.

I knew almost nothing about the history of the Congo until a few years ago, when I noticed a footnote in a book I happened to be reading. Often, when you come across something particularly striking, you remember just where you were when you read it. On this occasion I was sitting, stiff and tired, late at

night, in one of the far rear seats of an airliner crossing the United States from east to west.

The footnote was to a quotation by Mark Twain, written, the note said, when he was part of the worldwide movement against slave labor in the Congo, a practice that had taken eight to ten million lives. Worldwide movement? Eight to ten million lives? I was startled.

Statistics about mass murder are often hard to prove. But if this number turned out to be even half as high, I thought, the Congo would have been one of the major killing grounds of modern times. Why were these deaths not mentioned in the standard litany of our century's horrors? And why had I never before heard of them? I had been writing about human rights for years, and once, in the course of half a dozen trips to Africa, I had been to the Congo.

That visit was in 1961. In a Leopoldville apartment, I heard a CIA man, who had had too much to drink, describe with satisfaction exactly how and where the newly independent country's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, had been killed a few months earlier. He assumed that any American, even a visiting student like me, would share his relief at the assassination of a man the United States government considered a dangerous leftist troublemaker. In the early morning a day or two later I left the country by ferry across the Congo River, the conversation still ringing in my head as the sun rose over the waves and the dark, smooth water slapped against the boat's hull.

It was several decades later that I encountered that footnote, and with it my own ignorance of the Congo's early history. Then it occurred to me that, like millions of other people, I had read something about that time and place after all: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. However, with my college lecture notes on the novel filled with scribbles about Freudian overtones, mythic echoes, and inward vision, I had mentally filed away the book under fiction, not fact.

I began to read more. The further I explored, the more it was clear that the Congo of a century ago had indeed seen a death toll of Holocaust dimensions. At the same time, I unexpectedly found myself absorbed by the extraordinary characters who had peopled this patch of history. Although it was Edmund Dene Morel who had ignited a movement, he was not the first outsider to see King Leopold's Congo for what it was and to try hard to draw the world's

attention to it. That role was played by George Washington Williams, a black American journalist and historian, who, unlike anyone before him, interviewed Africans about their experience of their white conquerors. It was another black American, William Sheppard, who recorded a scene he came across in the Congo rain forest that would brand itself on the world's consciousness as a symbol of colonial brutality. There were other heroes as well, one of the bravest of whom ended his life on a London gallows. Then, of course, into the middle of the story sailed the young sea captain Joseph Conrad, expecting the exotic Africa of his childhood dreams but finding instead what he would call "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience." And looming above them all was King Leopold II, a man as filled with greed and cunning, duplicity and charm, as any of the more complex villains of Shakespeare.

As I followed the intersecting lives of these men, I realized something else about the terror in the Congo and the controversy that came to surround it. It was the first major international atrocity scandal in the age of the telegraph and the camera. In its mixture of bloodshed on an industrial scale, royalty, sex, the power of celebrity, and rival lobbying and media campaigns raging in half a dozen countries on both sides of the Atlantic, it seemed strikingly close to our time. Furthermore, unlike many other great predators of history, from Genghis Khan to the Spanish conquistadors, King Leopold II never saw a drop of blood spilled in anger. He never set foot in the Congo. There is something very modern about that, too, as there is about the bomber pilot in the stratosphere, above the clouds, who never hears screams or sees shattered homes or torn flesh.

Although Europe has long forgotten the victims of Leopold's Congo, I found a vast supply of raw material to work with in reconstructing their fate: Congo memoirs by explorers, steamboat captains, military men; the records of mission stations; reports of government investigations; and those peculiarly Victorian phenomena, accounts by gentleman (or sometimes lady) "travelers." The Victorian era was a golden age of letters and diaries; and often it seems as if every visitor or official in the Congo kept a voluminous journal and spent each evening on the riverbank writing letters home.

One problem, of course, is that nearly all of this vast river of words is by Europeans or Americans. There was no written language in the Congo when Europeans first arrived, and this inevitably skewed the way that history was