

KING LEOPOLD'S GHOST: A STORY OF GREED, TERROR AND HEROISM IN COLONIAL AFRICA

Adam Hochschild (2006) *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, London: Pan Books.

Review by Stephen McCloskey

New titles on development issues are not in short supply so it may appear odd that this issue of *Policy and Practice* carries a review of a book first published in 1998 about colonialism in Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This exceptional title, however, is a book for the annals charting a largely ignored and unwritten period of tyranny, slaughter and naked greed in the Congo, one of Africa's most troubled states. It goes a long way toward informing Congo's current Balkanised state plagued by perpetual conflict, corruption, disease, gender-based violence and wider regional destabilisation. A 'bewilderingly complicated civil war' has seen rival rebel groups form and change alliances while exploiting Congo's mineral wealth. Oxfam estimates that since 1998, 5.4 million lives have been taken in the conflict, the deadliest since the Second World War (2013).

By reaching into Congo's past, Adam Hochschild traces how it became a victim of Europe's first scramble for Africa and suffered human rights abuses that claimed an estimated ten million lives. That this dreadful carnage has remained hidden for so long speaks to how the written record of the coloniser is more readily available than that of the poor and powerless. It also highlights the importance of history as a source of learning about the origins of inequalities between the global North and South and the need to ensure its incorporation into contemporary education. And, yet another reason for consulting this important book lies in its vivid and moving evocation of activism in direct response to the atrocities waged in the Congo. This activism was variously undertaken by: missionaries who were firsthand witnesses to abuses; European activists who were forerunners of today's human rights campaigners; and, most notably, the Congolese themselves who regularly rebelled with great courage against their better armed and resourced occupiers. Only a few of

Congo's resistance leaders are recorded in written histories of the period and include Kadolo and Mulume Niama 'who lost their lives as rebels'.

Leopold's personal fiefdom

The story of Congo's colonialism is entwined with the avarice and cunning of Belgium's King Leopold the second, who lusted after the status and wealth available to his much larger European neighbours through their 'acquisition' of new colonies in Africa. Leopold's calculated, 'fox-like' diplomatic manoeuvring and shady international commissions disguised his real ambitions for the Congo as benign philanthropy. This book lays bare his relentless pursuit of his own personal fiefdom and its untold riches in ivory and rubber. By using the celebrity status and personal ambitions of the explorer Henry Morton Stanley, Leopold secured on the ground access to Congo's resources and a convenient flag under which he claimed his spoils. As a master of presentation, media manipulation and underhand dealing, Leopold was adept at marshaling international support for his enterprise. At a conference in Berlin in the mid-1880s, Leopold secured recognition from fourteen European states and the United States as the sovereign of the ironically named 'Congo Free State'.

This entirely contrived and illegal agreement allowed Leopold free rein to enforce his will in the Congo in pursuit of lucrative profits in ivory and rubber. He established a personal militia, the notorious Force Publique, to press the local population into portering or rubber cultivation. Failure to meet rubber quotas regularly resulted in punishment or death. Women and children were held in stockades without food or water to ensure the men returned with the requisite quantities of rubber that became increasingly difficult to access in desperate rainforest conditions. Many of those killed were flayed by the *chicotte*, a whip made of 'raw, sundried hippopotamus hide' that tore strips of flesh from their victims. Another grisly form of punishment was the dismemberment of hands which were retained as evidence of kills by militia members for their officers. A reviled Force Publique commander Guillaume Van Kerckhoven paid his black soldiers '5 brass rods (2½d) per human head they brought him during the course of any military operations he conducted' (196). Joseph Conrad came across several likenesses for his Mr Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) during his service on a steamboat on the Congo River.

In addition to killings by the colonial militia, the other main causes of population loss in this period were 'starvation, exhaustion and exposure' as thousands fled their homes and livelihoods in advance of Leopold's soldiers and were left without food or shelter. Disease was another lethal part of the occupation as local people had no immunities to the new illnesses brought by their occupiers. Moreover, the trauma of conflict, homelessness and hunger left the local population increasingly vulnerable to, and less able to combat, sickness and disease. The cumulative effect of these abuses and traumas was death on an enormous scale. While Hochschild acknowledges the difficulties in accurately calculating the number of deaths under Leopold's rule, 'persuasive demographic evidence' gathered in the territory puts the number killed at approximately ten million.

Atrocities exposed

While the colonial administration and its royal axis represented the worst traits of human behaviour, the growing international campaign against this horror represented some of the best. The leading figures in, or contributors to, this campaign were individuals who had been exposed to some aspect of the noxious cultivation and trade in rubber and ivory. Central to this movement was E D Morel, an employee of a Liverpool-based shipping line carrying cargo to and from the Congo. On an assignment to Brussels for his employer, Morel discovered incoming ships laden with valuable cargoes and leaving with nothing in exchange apart from military supplies and arms. This discovery of a slave trade changed his life utterly and set him on a path of tireless activism and campaigning that would ultimately turn the international tide against Leopold.

But to sustain his campaign Morel needed evidence of slavery and abuses in the Congo and this came from witnesses with first-hand experiences. Among the many courageous supporters who sustained Morel's Congo Reform Association three figures stand out. The first is Roger Casement, part of the British consular service with twenty years experience of Africa, who in 1903 at his own suggestion, carried out an investigation of Congo's rubber-producing interior. By spurning colonial communications and accommodation, Casement took an arduous route around the country that gave him exposure to an

'Infamous. Infamous, shameful system' (203). Casement was incensed at what he saw and his report was incendiary. When he finally met with Morel he pledged to support the campaign and immediately donated one month's salary to the cause. Their agreement would see Morel front the campaign and Casement provide behind the scenes strategic advice and support. It would result in both men's deepening politicisation and ultimate incarceration.

Other key figures in the campaign included Hezekiah Andrew Shanu, a Nigerian businessman and servant of the regime who turned against it and began feeding information to Morel. When this was discovered he was 'harassed unremittingly' by the Congo authorities until he committed suicide in 1905. Another whistleblower was the black American missionary William Sheppard, a student of Congo's Kuba people, who were among Africa's greatest artists. Sheppard was tried at the behest of a Congolese company for an article published in 1908 that celebrated the Kuba culture and exposed colonial atrocities. He was found not guilty and the company had to pay court costs.

Casement, Sheppard and Shanu were joined by many celebrated literary and philanthropic figures who began supporting Morel's campaign which was becoming a prototype for human rights organisations to follow over the next century. Morel secured the support of Westminster MPs, ceaselessly disseminated pamphlets, books and newspaper articles, and exploited every opportunity to expose the dissolute nature of Leopold's court. By 1908, the beleaguered king agreed to release control of the Congo to the Belgian government as a colony but was richly remunerated for his 'loss'.

Campaign victory?

Although the atrocities, mutilations and mistreatments declined markedly under the Belgian regime, Congo remained a colony and the cultivation of rubber continued with taxes rather than the *chicotte* used to enforce labour. At the time, few campaigners dared suggest that Congo be restored to self-determination and from a distance the Congo campaign victory seems hollow. But Hochschild sees two significant achievements for the campaign. First, it 'put a remarkable amount of information on the historical record' despite concerted efforts by Leopold's regime to cover its tracks and destroy evidence of abuses. And second, the campaign supporters:

“[K]ept 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).

In that important sense, the Congo campaign represents an important case study that would benefit development educators in their practice, particularly in the way that Morel went beyond ‘results’ and talked as well about causes: ‘above all, the theft of African land and labor that made possible Leopold’s whole system of exploitation’ (306). Casement, too, saw the wider significance of human rights when suggesting that basic freedoms in life are not seen as gifts to be doled out but ‘rights to which all human beings are entitled from birth’ (305).

On reflecting on the campaign, Hochschild poses the interesting question ‘why the Congo?’ when forced labour systems were in place for the extraction of rubber in France’s equatorial African territories, in Portuguese-controlled Angola and the Cameroons ruled by Germany. It’s a question without a satisfactory answer although it is suggested that Belgium’s economic and political influence relative to Europe’s powerhouses at the time made it an easier target than, say, France or Germany. Moreover, the Congo campaign did not conflict with Britain’s strategic or economic interests, as we saw with Casement’s investigation under the auspices of the Foreign Office and Morel’s successful recruitment of MPs to the cause of the Congo Reform Association. Indeed, Britain, France and Germany were deeply envious of the revenues derived from the Congo by Leopold and would have had no reason to ease his increasing discomfort at the revelations of abuse emanating from his colony. It is worth noting however, that when Morel and Casement became engaged in causes that directly challenged the strategic interests of the British state they were shown no mercy. Morel was imprisoned for anti-war activities during World War One and Casement was hung in 1916 for high treason having joined the Irish rebellion. Before facing the hangman, Casement said ‘I made awful mistakes, and did heaps of things wrong and failed at much – but...the best thing was the Congo’ (287).

King Leopold's Ghost is an immaculately written, highly accessible history that offers a richly informative and insightful analysis of Europe's relations with Congo and Africa in a previously neglected yet hugely important period. For development educators it represents an important case study that should be part of our practice with learners. It demonstrates the importance of activism and vividly illustrates how history can directly influence the present both positively and negatively. Morel, Casement and their many supporters are figures to reclaim and champion from history as vindication of the importance of human agency in response to injustice wherever it is found.

References

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Stephen McCloskey is Director of Centre for Global Education.