

Colonial horrors

reviewed by [Wiebe Boer](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa.

By Adam Hochschild. Houghton Mifflin, 366 pp.

"The Horror! The horror!" the last words of the infamous Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, call attention to one of the worst episodes of systematic exploitation and murder in recent history. Conrad experienced this turn-of-the century regime of terror firsthand in the Congo Free State, the private colony of King Leopold II of Belgium. Adam Hochschild brings this forgotten episode back into the public debate. In a readable, vivid and well-researched account, he tells how Leopold secured the Congo and how his abusive regime made it profitable, first through the ivory trade and then through the extraction of rubber.

Hochschild details the often psychotic and selfish motivations that drove the men who "discovered," "conquered" and "ruled" Africa. We find out the truth about Henry Morton Stanley, still honored as a hero in many history books, and about Leopold, considered a great humanitarian in the late 19th century. Leopold's obsessions led to the deaths of an estimated 10 million Congolese and the subjugation of many more.

The exploitation of Africa and Africans was driven by the growing market for innocuous products such as sugar, tea, coffee, cotton, ivory and rubber in the industrializing West. The holocaust in the Congo was an extreme chapter in the history of the brutalities of European colonialism and of the extraction of these innocent commodities from Africa, although certainly not the only one. The cruelties that accompanied the acquisition of "red rubber" in the Congo included forcing Africans to carry heavy loads over hundreds of miles of land and to labor on a railway line over nearly impassable territory. The Congolese were mutilated, whipped, raped and murdered. And all for what? To supply rubber for the tires on which the bicycle wheels of Europe and North America turned in ever-increasing numbers. And, of course, to make a lot of money for Leopold—money with which he built many of the monuments that still adorn Brussels.

The other side of the story Hochschild tells is the massive campaign to expose Leopold's holocaust and to force reforms on the governance of the territory. This campaign was led by Englishmen such as E. D. Morel and Americans such as George Washington Williams. Numerous celebrities (Conrad among them) supported it. They waged "the first human rights campaign of the 20th century." This campaign eventually forced Leopold to give the Congo to the Belgian government in 1908. However, in a series of paintings the Congolese artist-historian Tshibumba Matulu portrays the entire colonial era, before and after Leopold, as only part of the ongoing betrayal and loss that has characterized modern Congolese history. King Leopold's ghost has continued to haunt the people, first under Belgian colonial rule and then under the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko, the infamous dictator installed and supported by the United States.

Many have refused to believe that Leopold's men committed such atrocities, and popular memory largely forgot the tragedy, which is why many of us have heard of it only if we have read *Heart of Darkness*. Westerners are not the only ones guilty of "forgetting" the tragedy. According to André Siamundele, a Congolese doctoral student at Yale, this history was largely removed from official memory within Congo itself until Mobutu inserted it into history books in order to whitewash his own actions.

The biggest question this book raises is, Where are the Africans? Hochschild emphasizes that he struggled to find African voices. But as is often the problem for those writing African history, such voices are difficult to find. They are to be found only in the writings of Europeans about Africa, or through nondocumentary sources

such as oral interviews.

The setting of Hochschild's story is not Central Africa but the headlines, auditoriums and state houses of the West. The two main characters, Leopold and Morel, never set foot in the Congo. As a result, *King Leopold's Ghost* ends up as a rather typical book "about" Africa; it is really about the wheeling and dealing of white men (and a few African-Americans) that harmed or helped the Africans, who were always perceived as helpless and voiceless. Hochschild does not show what the Congo was like outside of the terror, and he makes no attempt to characterize the society and humanize the people beyond their few recorded responses to the terror.

It was the dehumanization of Africans which made what happened in the Congo possible, and it is the failure to remedy this that makes it possible for much of the world to continue to expect Africans to suffer. What about the various forms of African resistance to exploitation? And, on the other side, what of the African involvement in the horrific Force Publique, the military police who were the administrators of the terror? Although the officers were Europeans, the rest of the force were Africans, meaning that much of the killing and beating was done by Africans themselves. Hochschild does mention the African involvement in the Force Publique, but he implies that these people, too, were helpless participants. When scholars find African agency, they discover that Africans participated on both sides, as slaves and slave traders, as colonized and colonizers, and as victims and victimizers.

Hochschild is not an Africanist, but a popularizer of episodes of human rights history. His book is not an academic account of the history of the Congo Free State, and much of what he writes is certainly not new to anyone familiar with African studies. However, his popularization of this story offers a glimpse of the terrors behind the veil of the colonists and their "civilizing mission." This book is an important contribution to righting the wrongs of public ignorance about the very real horrors of colonial Africa. One hopes that it will pave the way for other such accounts, while also leading people to ask deeper questions about what has really happened in Africa and to Africans over the past few centuries.