THE CONGO

The slave trade having been abolished by 1807, and slaves having been emancipated, the easiest way to exploit black labor was to occupy the countries in which the black men live, and it conveniently happened that these countries contained various valuable raw materials. Greed was only one, though the most important of the motives to African imperialism, but there was one case, that of the Congo “Free” State, in which it appears to have been the sole motive.

King Leopold of Belgium was the son of Queen Victoria’s Uncle Leopold, whose advice she valued in the early years of her reign. He was a promoter of scientific research, particularly in Africa, and a patron of missionary efforts. The Berlin Conference of 1884 convened for the partition of Africa, decided that this high-minded monarch should be entrusted personally with the government of a territory which extended over about one million square miles, and contained the greater part of the Congo River basin. He was respected by diplomats, extolled by travelers, and generally believed to be a model of philanthropy [humanitarianism] in his attitude to the blacks. In 1906, when he offered £12,000 for scientific research as to the prevention of sleeping sickness [a parasitic disease of people and animals, caused by protozoa transmitted by the tsetse fly], he declared in a manifesto: “If God gives me satisfaction (victory over sleeping sickness) I shall be able to present myself before His judgment-seat with the credit of having performed one of the finest acts of the century, and a legion of rescued beings will call down upon me His grace.”

When King Leopold took over the Congo, he announced that his purpose was purely philanthropic. Henry Morton Stanley, a British explorer of Africa and who conducted propaganda for King Leopold in England, explained how much he loved the black man, and feared that English people could not “appreciate rightly, because there are no dividends attached to it, this restless, ardent, vivifying, and expansive sentiment which seeks to extend civilizing influence among the dark placed of sad-browed Africa.” The Prince of Wales (Edward VII), whose help was invoked by King Leopold as early as 1876 in calling a conference to discuss “the settlement by Europeans of unexplored Africa and the encouragement of exploration with a view to spreading civilization,” became dubious [doubtful] when assured that the sole motive was humanitarian. He wrote to Sir Bartle Frere, a British colonial administrator, “The question is whether the public who represent money will take the same interest that he does. Philanthropy is all very well, but unless it is practical and gives a practical result it will not find that favor in the eyes of the English public that it deserves.”

However, Leopold’s emphasis on philanthropy served his purpose. The other European nations showed little enthusiasm for an enterprise that was represented as involving expenditure without hope of profit, and when he offered to bear all the expense himself, they allowed him to assume the burden (as they supposed it) on condition of his preserving freedom of trade, freedom of the press, and so on.

After winning the approval of the world by suppressing Arab slave-raiders, the royal philanthropist set to work to introduce orderly government into his dominions. He issued decrees by which all the land, all the rubber, and all the ivory was to be property of the State – which was himself. It was made illegal for natives to sell rubber or ivory to Europeans, and for Europeans to buy either from the natives. He next sent a secret circular [a statement or letter meant for circulation] to his officials, explaining that they “must neglect no means of exploiting the produce of the forests,” and that they would receive a bonus on all rubber and ivory, which would be great when the cost of collection was small, and small when it was great. For example, if the cost of collection was thirty centimes [a denomination of currency in Belgium] per kilo, the official received fifteen centimes; while if the cost was over seventy centimes per kilo, the official received only four centimes. The financial results were all that could have been hoped. Parts of the Congo were worked directly for the King, parts for companies in which he was a large shareholder. It has been estimated that the King’s profits in his private holdings alone amounted to £300,000 a year (approximately $40,000,000/year in 2011).

The methods by which these vast profits were accumulated were very simple. Each village was ordered by the colonial authorities to collect and bring in a certain amount of rubber – as much as the men could collect and bring in by neglecting all work
for their own maintenance. If they failed to bring the required amount, their women were taken away and kept as hostages in compounds or in harems meant for use by government employees. If this method failed, native troops, many of them cannibals, were sent into the village to spread terror, if necessary by killing some of the men; but in order to prevent a waste of cartridges, they were ordered to bring one right hand for every cartridge used. If they missed, or used cartridges on big game, they cut off the hands of living people to make up the necessary number. The result was, according to the estimate of Sir H. H. Johnston, which is confirmed from all other impartial sources, that in fifteen years the native population was reduced from about twenty million to scarcely nine million. It is true that the sleeping sickness contributed something to this reduction, but the spread of this disease was greatly accelerated by King Leopold’s practice of moving hostages from one end of the dominions to the other.

Enormous pains were taken to keep secret the large-scale systematic murder by which the royal capitalist obtained his profits. The officials and law-courts were both in his pay and at his mercy, private traders were excluded, and Catholic missionaries silenced by his piety. Belgium was systematically corrupted, and the Belgian government was to a considerable extent his accomplice. Men who threatened disclosures were bought off, or, if that proved impossible, disappeared mysteriously. The only men in the Congo who could not be silenced were the Protestant missionaries, most of whom, not unnaturally, supposed that the King was ignorant of the deeds done in his name.

The truth might have remained long unrecognized but for one man – E. D. Morel. Morel, an English shipping clerk, was sent to Belgium because he could speak French, and could therefore arrange all the minutiae of steamer fares and passenger accommodation, and the scales of freights for goods and produce, with the Congo State officials. In the course of his work he became acquainted with some of the grisly facts of Congo maladministration. He drew his employers’ attention to these stories and their verification. The result was his dismissal.

Almost penniless, he set to work with pen and paper to enlighten the world through the British press and British publishers on the state of affairs in the Congo. Morel and the Congo Reform Association succeeded in rousing public opinion, first in England, and then throughout the civilized world. King Leopold, to keep up the pretense that the atrocities had occurred against his wishes, was compelled to appoint a commission of three impartial jurists to investigate the charges, and, although he published only a fragment of their report, what was allowed to appear made it evident that the charges were well founded. At last, in 1908, Europe, using the authority conferred by the Berlin Conference, deprived him of the Congo and handed it over to Belgium’s parliament, on the understanding that the King’s system of exploitation should cease. By this time, King Leopold had come to be avoided by his brother monarchs.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What were King Leopold’s pretenses [false justification] for colonial rule in the Congo?

2. What were King Leopold’s true motives for establishing colonial rule in the Congo?

3. What methods did King Leopold use to successfully extract economic wealth from his colony?

4. In what ways was the example of colonization in the Congo similar to European imperialism elsewhere in the world?

5. In what ways was the example of the Congo very different from most examples of European colonialism during the era of Western Imperialism?