# History of Leopold’s Congo

The African continent’s history is riddled with the impacts of colonial exploitation. No stronger example of this is in the Congo Basin, home to the native Congolese people. The Congolese suffered greatly due the ruthless expansionism of King Leopold II of Belgium.

In 1885 King Leopold II of Belgium was looking for a way to make profit. He had to look no further than the other monarchies in Europe to know that exploiting Africa was the most efficient way to make money, no matter the cost of human rights, or even lives. He began by putting together an organization called the *Association Internationale du Congo*. Under the guise of an organization hoping to modernize and bring religion and European life to Central Africa. He signed treaties with roughly four hundred and fifty separate African entities. With all of these signed treaties, he was able to justify to other European powers his taking over of the land.

Now King Leopold II had possession over the vast tract of land in the heart of the Congo rainforest. The only use of the land in his mind was to make a profit, and there was a crop in the Congo that Europe was buying up: rubber. The Congo rainforest was rich in rubber trees and Leopold knew this. His committee began putting in place infrastructure like railroads and outposts that would allow them to later extract the most value out of the resources in the area as quickly as possible. However, funding the construction of railroads would not allow Leopold to make a profit. So the first major crime was committed against the Congolese; they were round up and forced to construct the railroads. This was the first of many times that Leopold would look to enslaving the native peoples for his own benefit.

Now with infrastructure put into place, the committee that Leopold had previously put into place transformed into an administrative body over the Congo with the goal of producing as much rubber as possible. And again, to make the maximum profit, forced labor of the Congolese was used. Entire villages were given quotas of rubber that had to be met within a certain timeframe. Most of the time, these quotas were entirely unrealistic and couldn’t be met. When rubber quotas weren’t met, people were killed.

Entire villages burned to the ground by Leopold’s forces. The Belgians executed entire families because they didn’t come back with pounds and pounds of rubber. Quickly, an even more gruesome practice began to spread through the region. The Belgians in change of receiving the rubber quotas and executing those who didn’t meet them had limited ammunition at the time. A law was put in place for them to ensure they didn’t waste any of their bullets. Once they had executed someone for not meeting a quota, they were to chop off both of their hands to prove that the bullet was used to kill someone, and not waster on killing local wildlife for dinner. The effects of this seemingly insignificant regulation would prove to be giant — and horrifying — for the local population.

The result of this gross practice was a black market for the severed hands of Congolese workers. Now, rather than simply shooting the Congolese who didn’t come back with enough rubber, their hands were chopped off while they were still alive. Victims were then just left to either bleed out and die a slow painful death, or, if they were lucky enough to stop the bleeding, they would likely die of infection. Even if everything went to their favor, they would be crippled for the rest of their life and unable to work and provide for themselves. Sadly the former was by far the most likely outcome. It is estimated by independent sources that anywhere from 2 million to 12 million Congolese men, women, and children were killed during Leopold’s rule.

Eventually, in 1908 the Belgian parliament was pressured to take control of the land from Leopold, because of humanitarian concerns in Europe of the atrocities committed against the Congolese people. The Belgian government annexed the land from King Leopold’s control, bringing a sudden end to his rule over the land, and an end to the Congo Free State. This by no means ended the suffering in the Congo Basin, but it was a crucial step towards ending the horrors that took place.

Africa has suffered for a long time because of the crimes that were committed in the name of colonization. Throughout history, again and again, the African peoples have suffered at the hands of Europeans. It is extremely important that we do not let these events become lost to history.

## Works Cited

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