1975 did his grave acquire a proper tombstone — arranged by his biographer, the historian John Hope Franklin.

Only after the funeral, apparently, did Williams's British fiancée learn that he had abandoned a wife and a fifteen-year-old son in the United States. In this deception and other ways, from his neglect of debts to his vaunting a nonexistent doctoral degree, there was something of the hustler about him. But, in a sense, this was the flip side of the extraordinary boldness that enabled him to defy a king, his officials, and the entire racial order of the day. By contrast, for example, there was George Grenfell, a veteran British missionary whom Williams visited on the Congo River. He too had seen firsthand the full range of abuses, including Leopold's state employees buying chained slaves, but, he wrote home within a few days of meeting Williams, he did not feel he could "publicly question the action of the State." And whatever Williams's elaboration of his own résumé, virtually everything he wrote about the Congo would later be corroborated — abundantly — by others.

Williams's *Open Letter* was a cry of outrage that came from the heart. It gained him nothing. It lost him his patron, Huntington. It guaranteed that he could never work, as he had hoped, to bring American blacks to the Congo. It brought him none of the money he always needed, and in the few months he had left before his life ended in a foreign beach resort, it earned him little but calumny. By the time he went to the Congo in 1890, close to a thousand Europeans and Americans had visited the territory or worked there. Williams was the only one to speak out fully and passionately and repeatedly about what others denied or ignored. The years to come would make his words ever more prophetic.

8

WHERE THERE AREN'T NO TEN COMMANDMENTS

LEOPOLD established the capital of his new Congo state at the port town of Boma, just upriver from the Atlantic, where Stanley had finished his epic trans-African trek in 1877. As the 1890s began, Boma was complete with a narrow-gauge trolley — a steam engine pulling a couple of cars — that linked the bustling docks and trading-company warehouses to a cooler plateau above. There stood the government offices and houses for the Europeans who worked in them. Boma also boasted a Catholic church made of iron, a hospital for Europeans, a post office, a military base whose cannon fired a salute to any newly arriving VIP, and a two-story hotel. Three times a day — at 6 A.M., 11:45, and 6:30 P.M. — about seventy-five white officials took the trolley down the hill and through a plantation of banana trees for meals in the hotel dining room. The only European who ate elsewhere was the governor general, who took his meals in his dignified Victorian mansion, complete with a cupola, French windows, and covered porches. Every year, the king's birthday was celebrated with such events as a ceremonial review of troops, a target-shooting contest, and a concert by a Catholic black children's choir.

Despite his impressive mansion, guarded by African sentries with blue uniforms and red fezes, the Congo's governor general had far less power than did a British, French, or German colonial governor. More than any other colony in Africa, the Congo was administered directly from Europe. The real headquarters of the État Indépendant du Congo were not in Boma but in suites of offices in Brussels, one on the grounds of the Royal Palace, the others next door or across the street. All the Congo's

high- and middle-level administrators were picked and promoted by the king himself, and a mini-cabinet of three or four Belgians at the top, in Brussels, reported to Leopold directly.

His one-man rule over this huge territory was in striking contrast to Leopold's ever more limited power at home. Once, in his later years, while he was talking in his study with several Cabinet ministers, his nephew and heir apparent, Prince Albert, opened a window, and a draft blew some papers onto the floor. Leopold ordered Albert to pick them up. "Let him do it," the king said to one of the ministers, who had hastily offered to do so instead. "A future constitutional monarch must learn to stoop." But in the Congo there was no stooping; Leopold's power was absolute.

At the lowest level, the king's rule over his colony was carried out by white men in charge of districts and river stations throughout the vast territory; some of them were not visited by steamboats for months at a time. Far in the interior, practice often lagged behind theory, but on paper, at least, even the humblest station chief was allotted a bottle of red wine per day and a plentiful supply of English marmalade, Danish butter, canned meats, soups and condiments, and *foie gras* and other pâtés from Fischer's of Strasbourg.

For these functionaries there was a plethora of medals, whose grades reflected the burgeoning hierarchy of imperial rule. For holders of the Order of the African Star, for instance, there were six classes, ranging from *grands-croix* and *commandeurs* down to mere *médaillés.* The Royal Order of the Lion, created by Leopold to "recognize merit and acknowledge services rendered to Us," also had six classes. For African chiefs who collaborated with the regime, there was a special medal — bronze, silver, or gold-plated, depending on the degree of "service" rendered. It bore Leopold's profile on one side and, on the other, the Congo state coat of arms and the words LOYALTY AND DEVOTION.

The white officials in Leopold's Congo were usually single men, many of whom took on one or more African concubines. But by the turn of the century a few officials began to bring their wives, and some of those who didn't turned to an enterprising British matchmaking agency that supplied mail-order brides from Europe.

Photographs of remote Congo posts from the 1890s generally show the same pattern. From the long shadows, it appears to be late afternoon. The two or three white men in the picture wear suits and ties and elongated sun helmets, like a London bobby's cap in white. They are

seated on wicker chairs, a dog at their feet, in front of a tent or simple thatched-roofed building, smiling. Behind them stand their unsmiling African servants, holding some emblem of their status: a serving tray, a towel draped over an arm, a bottle ready to pour. Wine glasses or tea cups rest on a table, symbols of the comforts of home. The white men are always dressed in white.

Underpinning such scenes were a number of royal decrees from Brussels. The first and most important had been issued on the very day in 1885 that the existence of the Congo state was formally proclaimed; it declared that all "vacant land" was the property of the state. There was no definition of what made land vacant. All over the world, of course, land that *looks* vacant has often been deliberately left to lie fallow while crops are planted somewhere else — especially in the tropics, where heavy rainfalls leach nutrients out of the soil.

Leopold was after whatever could be quickly harvested. In that sense, he treated both vacant and nonvacant land as his property, claiming a right to all its products. He made no distinction between the tusks of an elephant roaming wild or villagers' vegetables that could feed his soldiers; it was all his.

He did not, however, have the resources to exploit the entire territory, so another set of decrees carved parts of the Congo into several giant blocks, whose "vacant land" was leased out for long periods as concessions to private companies. These concession companies had shareholders — largely, though not entirely Belgian — and interlocking directorates that included many high Congo state officials. But in each of them the state — which in effect meant Leopold himself — usually kept 50 percent of the shares. In setting up this structure, Leopold was like the manager of a venture capital syndicate today. He had essentially found a way to attract other people's capital to his investment schemes while he retained half the proceeds. In the end, what with various taxes and fees the companies paid the state, it came to more than half.

Unlike a venture capitalist in the marketplace, however, the king deployed troops and government officials as well as investment funds. He used them ruthlessly to shut out of the territory most businesses in which he did not have a piece of the action. The Dutch trading firm on whose steamboat Williams had traveled found itself facing stiff competition for ivory from Congo state officials who stopped its boats, in one case with

gunfire. Once, according to a history of the company, "a state of siege was proclaimed for a certain region which made it closed territory for traders. When the state of siege was lifted, all the ivory had disappeared."

The king, meanwhile, continued to claim that making a profit was the farthest thing from his mind. "I thank you for having done justice yesterday to the calumnies spread by enemies of the Congo state, to the accusation of secrecy and the spirit of gain," he wrote to the prime minister after a parliamentary debate in 1891. "The Congo state is certainly not a business. If it gathers ivory on certain of its lands, that is only to lessen its deficit."

And if Africans were made to help out in the ivory-gathering, why that too, Heaven forbid, was not to make a profit, but to rescue these benighted people from their indolence. Talk of the lazy native accompanied the entire European land grab in Africa, just as it had been used to justify the conquest of the Americas. To an American reporter, Leopold once declared, "In dealing with a race composed of cannibals for thousands of years it is necessary to use methods which will best shake their idleness and make them realize the sanctity of work."

As the 1890s began, the work whose sanctity Leopold prized most highly was seizing all the ivory that could be found. Congo state officials and their African auxiliaries swept through the country on ivory raids, shooting elephants, buying tusks from villagers for a pittance, or simply confiscating them. Congo peoples had been hunting elephants for centuries, but now they were forbidden to sell or deliver ivory to anyone other than an agent of Leopold. A draconian refinement of the ivory-gathering method, which set the pattern for much that was to come, was a commission structure the king imposed in 1890, whereby his agents in the field got a cut of the ivory's market value — but on a sliding scale. For ivory purchased in Africa at eight francs per kilo, an agent received 6 percent of the vastly higher European market price. But the commission climbed, in stages, to 10 percent for ivory bought at four francs per kilo. The European agents thus had a powerful incentive to force Africans — if necessary, at gunpoint — to accept extremely low prices.

Almost none of these Belgian francs actually reached any Congolese elephant hunters. They received only small amounts of cloth, beads, and the like, or the brass rods that the state decreed as the territory's main currency. For Africans, transactions in money were not allowed. Money in free circulation might undermine what was essentially a command economy.

The commands were above all for labor. At the beginning, the state most wanted porters. Like Stanley, any official who ventured away from the river system and into the bush — to collect ivory, set up new posts, put down a rebellion — needed long columns of porters to carry everything from machine-gun ammunition to all that red wine and pâté. These tens of thousands of porters were usually paid for their work, if only sometimes the food necessary to keep them going, but most of them were conscripts. Even children were put to work: one observer noted seven- to nine-year-olds each carrying a load of twenty-two pounds.

"A file of poor devils, chained by the neck, carried my trunks and boxes toward the dock," a Congo state official notes matter-of-factly in his memoirs. At the next stop on his journey more porters were needed for an overland trip: "There were about a hundred of them, trembling and fearful before the overseer, who strolled by whirling a whip. For each stocky and broad-backed fellow, how many were skeletons dried up like mummies, their skin worn out . . . seamed with deep scars, covered with suppurating wounds. . . . No matter, they were all up to the job."

Porters were needed most at the points where the river system was blocked by rapids, particularly — until the railroad was built — for the three-week trek between the port town of Matadi and Stanley Pool. This was the pipeline up which supplies passed to the interior and down which ivory and other riches were carried to the sea. Moving dismantled steamboats to the upper section of the river was the most labor-intensive job of all: one steamboat could comprise three thousand porter loads. Here is how Edmond Picard, a Belgian senator, described a caravan of porters he saw on the route around the big rapids in 1896:

> Unceasingly we meet these porters . . . black, miserable, with only a horribly filthy loin-cloth for clothing, frizzy and bare head supporting the load — box, bale, ivory tusk . . . barrel; most of them sickly, drooping under a burden increased by tiredness and insufficient food — a handful of rice and some stinking dried fish; pitiful walking caryatids, beasts of burden with thin monkey legs, with drawn features, eyes fixed and round from preoccupation with keeping their balance and from the daze of exhaustion. They come and go like this by the thousands . . . requisitioned by the State armed with its powerful militia, handed over by chiefs whose slaves they are and who make off with their salaries, trotting with bent knees, belly forward, an arm raised to steady the

> load, the other leaning on a long walking-stick, dusty and sweaty, insects spreading out across the mountains and valleys their many files and their task of Sisyphus, dying along the road or, the journey over, heading off to die from overwork in their villages.

The death toll was particularly high among porters forced to carry loads long distances. Of the three hundred porters conscripted in 1891 by District Commissioner Paul Lemarinel for a forced march of more than six hundred miles to set up a new post, not one returned.

Stanislas Lefranc, a devout Catholic and monarchist, was a Belgian prosecutor who had come to the Congo to work as a magistrate. Early one Sunday morning in Leopoldville, he heard the sound of many children screaming desperately.

On tracing the howls to their source, Lefranc found "some thirty urchins, of whom several were seven or eight years old, lined up and waiting their turn, watching, terrified, their companions being flogged. Most of the urchins, in a paroxysm of grief . . . kicked so frightfully that the soldiers ordered to hold them by the hands and feet had to lift them off the ground. . . . 25 times the whip slashed down on each of the children." The evening before, Lefranc learned, several children had laughed in the presence of a white man, who then ordered that all the servant boys in town be given fifty lashes. The second installment of twenty-five lashes was due at six o'clock the next morning. Lefranc managed to get these stopped, but was told not to make any more protests that interfered with discipline.

Lefranc was seeing in use a central tool of Leopold's Congo, which in the minds of the territory's people, soon became as closely identified with white rule as the steamboat or the rifle. It was the *chicotte* — a whip of raw, sun-dried hippopotamus hide, cut into a long sharp-edged corkscrew strip. Usually the *chicotte* was applied to the victim's bare buttocks. Its blows would leave permanent scars; more than twenty-five strokes could mean unconsciousness; and a hundred or more — not an uncommon punishment — were often fatal.

Lefranc was to see many more *chicotte* beatings, although his descriptions of them, in pamphlets and newspaper articles he published in Belgium, provoked little reaction.

Leopold as a young man.

Henry Morton Stanley, in the "Stanley Cap" he designed for exploring in the tropics.

Henry Shelton Sanford, the wealthy Connecticut aristocrat who successfully lobbied the United States into recognizing Leopold's claim to the Congo.

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59	Hq	J	21

NEW ORLEANS. 1255 — Pm DEC. 8, 1880.

Received at

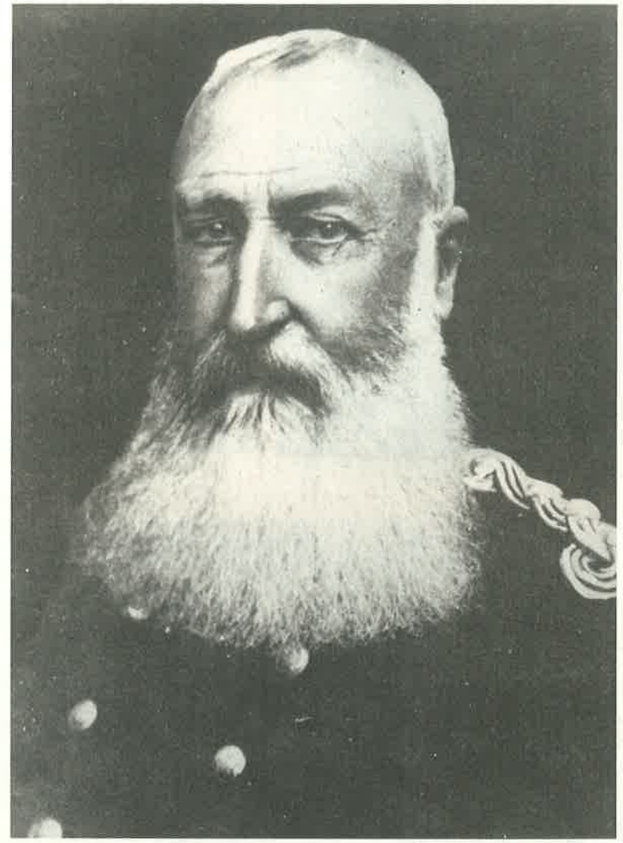
Dated Brussels Via Washington 7 Via Charleston 8 8

To Gen Sanford Charles Hotel NO

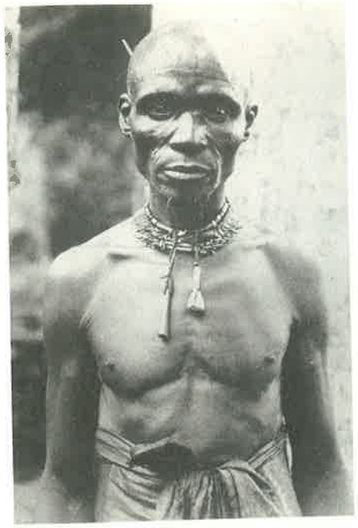
Enchanted with Emile Before beginning Negotiations please wire what you know about dispositions of Senate will

Williams

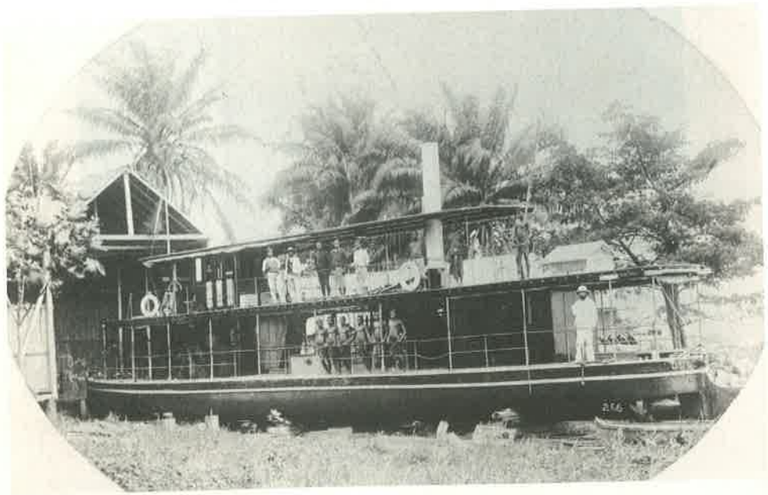
Coded telegram from Brussels congratulating Sanford on his Washington lobbying. "Emile" was President Chester A. Arthur, who had just praised Leopold in a speech to Congress. "William" was Leopold's top Congo aide, Colonel Maximilien Strauch.



King Leopold II.



Twa Mwe, a Kwango chief. Indigenous leaders often faced the choice of supplying their people as rubber slaves or being held hostage or killed.



The British missionary steamboat *Goodwill*, typical of craft on the river network in the 1890s.

George Washington Williams, a lawyer, journalist, minister, and historian, wrote the first full exposé of Leopold's reign of terror in the Congo.

An ivory gathering post in the Congo, c. 1890. Elephant tusks, bought from Africans for a pittance or confiscated at gunpoint, fetched high prices in Europe as raw material for everything from false teeth to piano keys.

Joseph Conrad.

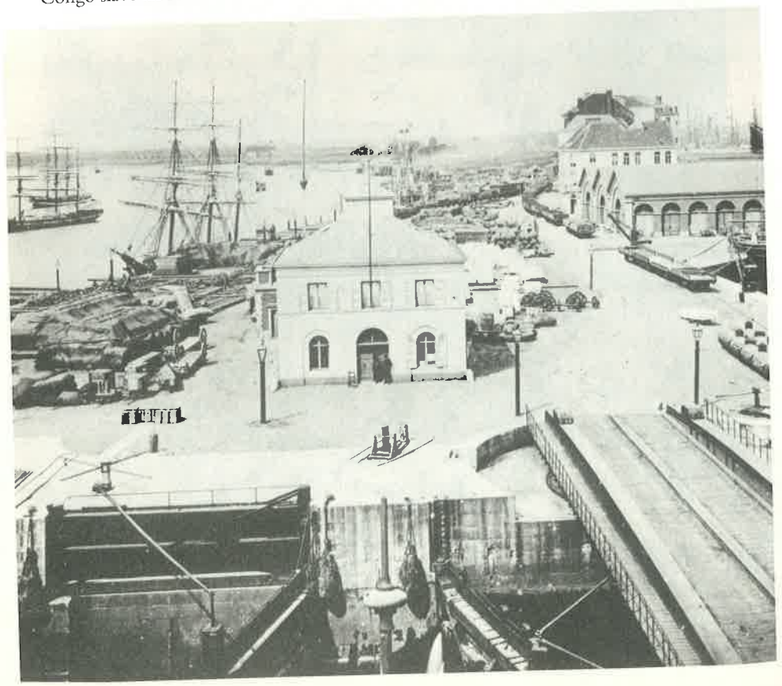
One prototype for Conrad's Mr. Kurtz: Léon Rom. This swashbuckling officer was known for displaying a row of severed African heads around his garden. He also wrote a book on African customs, painted portraits and landscapes, and collected butterflies.

BELOW: Rom (with rifle) after a hunt.

Another Kurtz prototype: Guillaume Van Kerckhoven, who cheerfully told a fellow traveler that he paid his black soldiers "5 brass rods (2½ d.) per human head they brought him during the course of any military operations he conducted. He said it was to stimulate their prowess in the face of the enemy."

E. D. Morel.

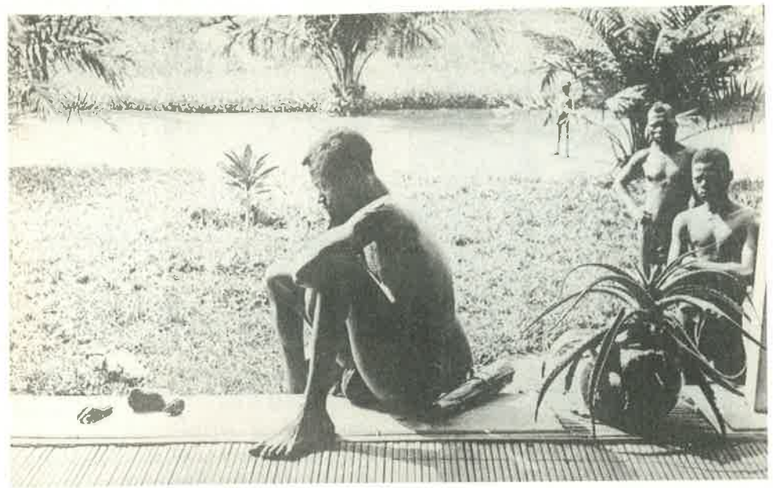
BELOW: The docks at Antwerp, where the young E. D. Morel's suspicions about Congo slave labor were awakened.



Sir Roger Casement, British consul, activist witness to Congo atrocities, and Irish patriot.

Hezekiah Andrew Shanu. Although awarded medals for his service to the regime, he secretly turned against it, sent important evidence to the reformers abroad, and was driven to suicide by Leopold's officials when they discovered this.

Reverend William H. Sheppard, Presbyterian missionary, explorer, and the first outsider to visit the capital of the Kuba kingdom. Sheppard's writings documenting the brutality of the Congo state made him the object of a lawsuit and trial.

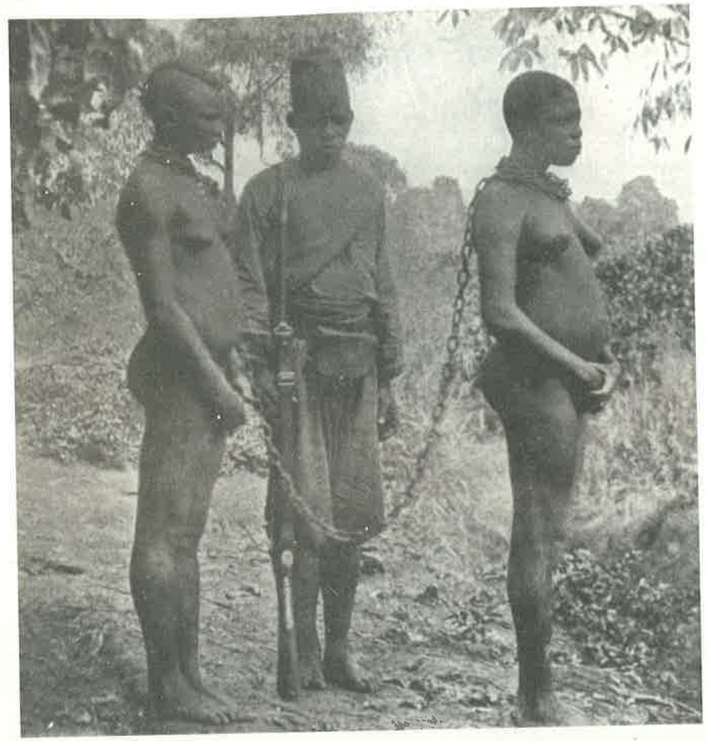


Nsala, of the district of Wala, looking at the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter, Boali, a victim of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company (A.B.I.R.) militia.

BELOW: British missionaries with men holding hands severed from victims named Bolenge and Lingomo by A.B.I.R. militiamen, 1904.

Two youths of the Equator district. The hands of Mola, seated, have been destroyed by gangrene after being tied too tightly by soldiers. The right hand of Yoka, standing, was cut off by soldiers wanting to claim him as killed.

BELOW: The *chicotte* in use. Note the pile of chain at lower left.



Women hostages, held under guard in order to force their husbands to go into the rain forest to gather wild rubber.

The village of Baringa. The chief is seated on the stool at center; his house is at right. Cooking smoke rises through the roofs of other houses.

BELOW: Baringa after it was razed to make way for a rubber plantation. When wild rubber supplies ran low, the regime ordered more rubber trees planted. It was often cheaper to use an existing clearing, like that of a village, than to cut down the forest.

. . GREAT . .

CONGO DEMONSTRATION.

THE

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. AT THE . .

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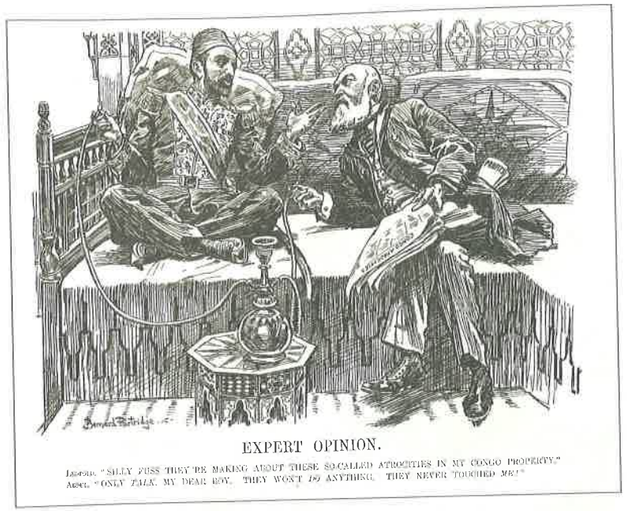
This cartoon appeared in Germany, accompanied by some doggerel about Leopold's zest for cutting off both black heads and bond coupons.

Congo reformers often pointed to the Berlin agreement of 1885, one of many broken promises regarding the treatment of Africans.

THE APPEAL.

"IN THE NAME OF ALMIGHTY GOD.—All the Powers exercising sovereign rights, or having influence in the said territories undertake to watch over the preservation of the native races, and the amelioration of the moral and material conditions of their existence."

Article VI. The Act of Berlin, 1885.



EXPERT OPINION.

LEOPOLD. "SILLY FUSS THEY'RE MAKING ABOUT THESE SO-CALLED ATROCITIES IN MY CONGO PROPERTY."
ABDUL. "ONLY *TALK*, MY DEAR BOY. THEY WON'T *DO* ANYTHING. THEY NEVER TOUCHED *ME!*"

Punch, 1905: One of a number of cartoons where Leopold compares notes with the sultan of Turkey, also condemned for his massacres (of Armenians).

IN THE RUBBER COILS.

Punch, 1906.

THE GUILT OF DELAY.

Punch, 1909.

> The station chief selects the victims. . . . Trembling, haggard, they lie face down on the ground . . . two of their companions, sometimes four, seize them by the feet and hands, and remove their cotton drawers. . . . Each time that the torturer lifts up the *chicotte,* a reddish stripe appears on the skin of the pitiful victims, who, however firmly held, gasp in frightful contortions. . . . At the first blows the unhappy victims let out horrible cries which soon become faint groans. . . . In a refinement of evil, some officers, and I've witnessed this, demand that when the sufferer gets up, panting, he must graciously give the military salute.

The open horror Lefranc expressed succeeded only in earning him a reputation as an oddball or troublemaker. He "shows an astonishing ignorance of things which he ought to know because of his work. A mediocre agent," the acting governor general wrote in a personnel evaluation. In an attempt to quiet his complaints, Lefranc wrote, officials ordered that executions at his post be carried out in a new location instead of next to his house.

Except for Lefranc, few Europeans working for the regime left records of their shock at the sight of officially sanctioned terror. The white men who passed through the territory as military officers, steamboat captains, or state or concession company officials generally accepted the use of the *chicotte* as unthinkingly as hundreds of thousands of other men in uniform would accept their assignments, a half-century later, to staff the Nazi and Soviet concentration camps. "Monsters exist," wrote Primo Levi of his experience at Auschwitz. "But they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are . . . the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions."

What made it possible for the functionaries in the Congo to so blithely watch the *chicotte* in action and, as we shall see, to deal out pain and death in other ways as well? To begin with, of course, was race. To Europeans, Africans were inferior beings: lazy, uncivilized, little better than animals. In fact, the most common way they were put to work was, like animals, as beasts of burden. In any system of terror, the functionaries must first of all see the victims as less than human, and Victorian ideas about race provided such a foundation.

Then, of course, the terror in the Congo was sanctioned by the authorities. For a white man to rebel meant challenging the system that

provided your livelihood. Everyone around you was participating. By going along with the system, you were paid, promoted, awarded medals. So men who would have been appalled to see someone using a *chicotte* on the streets of Brussels or Paris or Stockholm accepted the act, in this different setting, as normal. We can hear the echo of this thinking, in another context, half a century later: "To tell the truth," said Franz Stangl of the mass killings that took place when he was commandant of the Nazi death camps of Sobibor and Treblinka, "one did become used to it."

In such a regime, one thing that often helps functionaries "become used to it" is a slight, symbolic distance — irrelevant to the victim — between an official in charge and the physical act of terror itself. That symbolic distance was frequently cited in self-defense by Nazis put on trial after World War II. Dr. Johann Paul Kremer, for example, an SS physician who liked to do his pathology research on human tissue that was still fresh, explained:

> The patient was put on the dissecting table while he was still alive. I then approached the table and put several questions to the man as to such details which pertained to my researches. . . . When I had collected my information the orderly approached the patient and killed him with an injection in the vicinity of the heart. . . . I myself never made any lethal injections.

I myself never made any lethal injections. Although some whites in the Congo enjoyed wielding the *chicotte,* most put a similar symbolic distance between themselves and the dreaded instrument. "At first I . . . took upon myself the responsibility of meting out punishment to those whose conduct during the previous day seemed to warrant such treatment," recalled Raoul de Premorel, who worked for a company operating in the Kasai River basin. "Soon . . . I found it desirable to assign the execution of sentences to others under my direction. The best plan seemed to be to have each *capita* [African foreman] administer the punishment for his own gang."

And so the bulk of *chicotte* blows were inflicted by Africans on the bodies of other Africans. This, for the conquerors, served a further purpose. It created a class of foremen from among the conquered, like the *kapos* in the Nazi concentration camps and the *predurki,* or trusties, in the

Soviet gulag. Just as terrorizing people is part of conquest, so is forcing someone else to administer the terror.*

Finally, when terror is the unquestioned order of the day, wielding it efficiently is regarded as a manly virtue, the way soldiers value calmness in battle. This is the ultimate in "becoming used to it." Here, for instance, a station chief named Georges Bricusse describes in his diary a hanging he ordered in 1895 of a man who had stolen a rifle:

> The gallows is set up. The rope is attached, too high. They lift up the nigger and put the noose around him. The rope twists for a few moments, then *crack,* the man is wriggling on the ground. A shot in the back of the neck and the game is up. It didn't make the least impression on me this time!! And to think that the first time I saw the *chicotte* administered, I was pale with fright. Africa has some use after all. I could now walk into fire as if to a wedding.

The framework of control that Leopold extended across his enormous realm was military. After all, without armed force, you cannot make men leave their homes and families and carry sixty-five-pound loads for weeks or months. The king was particularly happy to run his own army in Africa, since in Belgium he was forever at loggerheads with legislators who did not share his passion for building great forts, spending more money on the army, and instituting the draft.

Leopold had made use of African mercenaries ever since sending Stanley to stake out his claim from 1879 to 1884. In 1888 he formally organized them into the Force Publique, an army for his new state. Over the next dozen years, it grew to more than nineteen thousand officers and men, the most powerful army in central Africa. By the late 1890s, it consumed more than half the state's budget. At once counterguerrilla troops, an army of occupation, and a corporate labor police force, it was

* If the underlings' allegiance is unreliable, sometimes the conquerors take precautions. When eighteen mutinous black soldiers were executed in Boma in 1900, a photographer recorded the scene: the condemned rebels are tied to stakes and a firing squad of loyal black troops has just fired a salvo. But in case the loyalists waver, the entire white male population of Boma is standing in a long row at right angles to both groups, each sun-helmeted white man with a rifle at the ready.

divided mainly into small garrisons — typically, several dozen black soldiers under one or two white officers, on a riverbank. The initial handful of military posts quickly grew to 183 by 1900, and to 313 by 1908.

The Force Publique had its hands full. Many of the king's new subjects belonged to warrior peoples who fought back. More than a dozen different ethnic groups staged major rebellions against Leopold's rule. The Yaka people fought the whites for more than ten years before they were subdued, in 1906. The Chokwe fought for twenty years, inflicting heavy casualties on Leopold's soldiers. The Boa and the Budja mobilized more than five thousand men to fight a guerrilla war from deep within the rain forest. Just as Americans used the word *pacification* in Vietnam seventy years later, so the Force Publique's military expeditions were officially called *reconnaissances pacifiques.*

The history of central Africa before the European arrival was as filled with wars and conquests as Europe's own, and even during Leopold's rule not all the Congo's violence was between colonizer and colonized. Because so many Congo peoples had earlier fought among themselves, the Force Publique was often able to ally itself with one ethnic group to defeat another. But sooner or later the first group found itself subdued as well. With their forces stretched thin over a huge territory, Leopold's commanders made clever use of this shifting pattern of alliances. In the end, though, their superior firepower guaranteed victory — and a history written by the victors.

Yet sometimes, even through those records, we can glimpse the determination of those who resisted the king. In Katanga in the far south, warriors from the Sanga people were led by a chief named Mulume Niama. Though the state troops were armed with artillery, his forces put up a stiff fight, killing one officer and wounding three soldiers. They then took refuge in a large chalk cave called Tshamakele. The Force Publique commander ordered his men to light fires at the three entrances to the cave to smoke the rebels out, and after a week he sent an emissary to negotiate Mulume Niama's surrender. The chief and his men refused. Soldiers lit the fires again and blocked the cave for three months. When the troops finally entered it, they found 178 bodies. Fearful of leaving any sign of a martyrs' grave, the Force Publique soldiers triggered landslides to obliterate all traces of the existence of the Tshamakele cave and of the bodies of Mulume Niama and his men.

Another rebellion took place along the caravan route around the lower Congo rapids. A notorious state agent, a Belgian named Eugène

Rommel, built a station there to procure porters for the three-week trek from Matadi to Stanley Pool, a job for which the state needed fifty thousand men a year by the mid-1890s. Unlike the Protestant missionaries and some private traders, who hired the porters they used on this route and negotiated wages with them, the Congo state — at Leopold's specific order — used forced labor. Rommel named his station Baka Baka, which means "capture, capture."

A local chief named Nzansu led an uprising, ambushing and killing Rommel on December 5, 1893, and burning his station to the ground. The rebels also burned and pillaged two other nearby state posts, where they killed two white officials and wounded several more. However, Nzansu spared Mukimbungu, a Swedish mission on the caravan route. He even gave the missionaries some supplies he had found abandoned on the trail and returned some goods his men had taken from the mission station. One of the missionaries, Karl Teodor Andersson, wrote to his church members back in Sweden:

> If our friends of the Mission at home are worried for our safety here as a result of letters and newspaper reports about the unrest in these parts, I wish to reassure them. . . . The leader of the rebels, Chief Nzansu of Kasi, has let us know that he does not wish harm to any one of us as we have always shown that we are friends of the black people. But to the men of the State he has sworn death. And anyone who knows of the conditions out here cannot feel surprised.

This rebellion particularly alarmed the state because it completely stopped traffic on the crucial caravan route to Stanley Pool. To crush the rebels, the authorities sent out a force of fifteen white officers and two hundred black soldiers. Another Swedish missionary, C. N. Börrisson, wrote home a few weeks later, "The rebels have not fled . . . but have assembled in the leader's village, which they are defending unto death although their other villages have been burned."

Börrisson goes on to speak powerfully for the rebels whose own voices we cannot hear:

> A man sows what he reaps. In reality, the state is the true source of these uprisings. It is strange that people who claim to be civilized think they can treat their fellow man — even though he is of a

different color — any which way. . . . Without a doubt one of the most disreputable [of the officials] is the late Mr. Rommel. One should not speak ill of the dead but I must simply mention some smaller matters to prove that the unrest has been justified. . . . He imprisoned women when the people refused to transport [supplies] and to sell him goods below market prices. . . . He was not ashamed to come by our station and abduct our school girls . . . and treat them in despicable ways. One Sunday morning brother Andersson and I went to a neighboring village and helped release three poor women whom his soldiers had imprisoned because one of them had asked for the return of a stone jug which had been taken from her. . . .

But what happens to all of the women who are taken prisoner? Some are set free . . . when their husbands have done all they can to regain the one who is dearest to them. Others are forced to work in the fields and also to work as prostitutes. . . . Our most respected men here . . . have told us with tears in their eyes and much vexation in their hearts that they had recently seen a group of seven hundred women chained together and transported [to the coast on steamboats]. "And," they said, "whether they cut off our heads or that of a chicken it is all the same to them. . . ."

So can anyone feel truly surprised that the discontent has finally come to the surface? Nzansu, the leader of the uprising, and [Rommel's] assassin, only wanted to become the Engelbrekt of the Congo and the Gustaf Wasa of his people. His followers are as loyal to him as Swedes were to their leaders in those times.

The missionary's comparison was to two Swedish patriots of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, noblemen who led rebellions of Swedish peasants against harsh foreign kings. Wasa was successful and was himself elected King of Sweden. Nzansu was less fortunate. He and his warriors fought on against Leopold's Force Publique for eight months, and, despite several scorched-earth expeditions sent against them, continued to fight sporadically for five more years. There seems to be no record of Nzansu's fate.

All the commissioned officers and some sergeants of the Force Publique were white, mostly Belgian, but from other countries as well. Their own armies were usually happy to give them leave to gain a few years' combat experience. All the ordinary soldiers were black. Mercenaries from Zanzibar and the British West African colonies in the army's first few years were soon outnumbered by soldiers from the Congo itself, most of whom were conscripts. Even those who volunteered often did so because, as one soldier explained to a European visitor, he preferred "to be with the hunters rather than with the hunted." Ill paid, ill fed, and flogged with the *chicotte* for the slightest offense, many tried to desert, and in the early days officers had to spend much of their time capturing them. Then, to guard against desertions, the state began sending new conscripts far from their home districts. As a soldier finishing your seven-year term, you might then face a journey of several hundred to a thousand miles to get home. Sometimes even then you would not be allowed to go.

The soldiers' frustrations frequently boiled over into mutinies, large and small. The first big one erupted at the military base at Luluabourg in the south-central savanna country in 1895. The base commander, Mathieu Pelzer, was a notorious bully who used his fists on those under him and routinely ordered soldiers given 125 lashes with the *chicotte.* When his African concubine slept with another man, he ordered her killed. At one point Pelzer ordered a soldier punished, but before the man wielding the *chicotte* could begin, a sergeant named Kandolo went up to him and snatched the whip out of his hands. When rebellion against Pelzer broke out shortly afterward, it was led by angry black noncommissioned officers with Kandolo at their head.

Soldiers attacked and wounded Pelzer, who fled into the bush and hid. But the rebels tracked him down and killed him. Under Kandolo, dressed in white and riding on a bull, they set off for other Force Publique posts, gathering supporters among the black soldiers and killing several European officers. For more than half a year, the rebels controlled most of the Kasai region. In the bush, they split into small groups, spreading out over a broad area and successfully evading or fighting off a long series of heavily armed expeditions sent against them. A year later, worried Force Publique officers estimated that there were still four hundred to five hundred rebels at large, recruiting new members and allying themselves with local chiefs against the state. Altogether, suppressing the revolt cost the Force Publique the lives of several hundred black soldiers and porters

and fifteen white officers or NCOs. One was an American, Lieutenant Lindsay Burke, a twenty-six-year-old native of New Orleans, who had been in Africa less than a year. He marched into an ambush and died, along with twenty-seven of his men, in early 1897. The rebel leader Kandolo was fatally wounded in battle, but two corporals who played a major role in the revolt, Yamba-Yamba and Kimpuki, fought on as guerrilla leaders; they were killed, still fighting, in 1908, thirteen years after the uprising began.

At the other end of the country, in the far northeast, a great mutiny broke out in 1897 among three thousand soldiers and an equal number of porters and auxiliaries. The men, who had been forced to march for months through forests and swamps in a renewed reach by Leopold toward the headwaters of the Nile, finally had enough. The fighting went on for three years, as column after column of loyalist Force Publique troops fought the rebels over some six hundred miles of forest and savanna along the chain of lakes on the Congo's eastern border. Beneath their own red-and-white flag, rebels from different ethnic groups fought together, maintained military discipline, and staged ambushes to replenish their supplies of weapons and ammunition. Sympathetic chiefs gave them support, including warnings by talking drum of approaching troops. Even the Force Publique's official history acknowledges that in battle "the rebels displayed a courage worthy of a better cause."

More than two years after the revolt began, the rebels were able to muster twenty-five hundred soldiers to attack a heavily fortified position. One contingent of loyalist Force Publique mercenaries was reduced from three hundred men to three during the campaign. The rebels were still fighting in 1900, when two thousand of them finally withdrew across the frontier into German territory, today's Rwanda and Burundi, where they gave up their arms in return for the right to settle.

This prolonged mutiny is the sole case in the history of Leopold's Congo where we have an eyewitness account of what it was like behind rebel lines. In April 1897, these insurgents captured a French priest, Father Auguste Achte, who unintentionally walked into their hands, assuming that the "immense camp" he had come upon must be that of a Force Publique expedition. Finding himself instead among some two thousand rebels, whose leaders were wearing captured gold-braided officers' uniforms and pistols, Achte was terrified, certain that he was going to die. Some of the mutineers did rough him up and tell him they had sworn to kill all white people. But the leaders of the group argued them down,

making a distinction between those whites who worked for the hated Congo state and those who did not. Mulamba, the chief of this group of rebels, reported Achte, told the priest that they were sparing his life because "I had no rifle, I taught God's word, I took care of sick natives, and (the decisive argument) I had never hit a black." The rebels had reached this conclusion after interrogating a dozen young Africans to whom the priest was giving religious instruction.

To Father Achte's surprise, the rebels eventually slaughtered a goat, fed him, brewed him a cup of coffee, and presented him with a gift of ivory to compensate for those of his goods they had confiscated, "so you won't write in Europe that we stole from you." After several days, he was released. The rebels told him they had killed their Belgian officers because the officers treated them like animals, they hadn't been paid for months, and soldiers and chiefs alike were flogged or hung for the slightest offense. They spoke of one white officer who shot sixty soldiers in a single day because they refused to work on a Sunday, and of another who "with his own hands poured salt and pepper on the bloody wounds made by the *chicotte* and ordered the sick from his post thrown alive into the Lualaba River."

"For three years I built up a hatred against the Belgians in my heart, and choked it back," Mulamba said to Achte. "When I saw Dhanis [Baron Francis Dhanis, the Force Publique commander in the area] face to face with my rebelling countrymen, I trembled with happiness: it was the moment of deliverance and vengeance." Other rebels told Achte that they had chosen Mulamba as their king and two others as his deputies, and that they wanted to set up an independent state free of white rule. This uprising and the other Force Publique rebellions were more than mutinies of disgruntled soldiers; they were precursors of the anticolonial guerrilla wars that shook central and southern Africa starting in the 1960s.

While Leopold grandly issued edicts banning the slave trade, virtually no visitors except George Washington Williams stated the obvious: not only the porters but even the soldiers of the Force Publique were, in effect, slaves. Moreover, under a system personally approved by the king, white state agents were paid a bonus according to the number of men they turned over to the Force Publique. Sometimes agents bought men from collaborating chiefs, who delivered their human goods in chains. (In one

transaction, recorded in a district commissioner's notes, twenty-five francs per person was the price received for a half-dozen teenagers delivered by two chiefs from Bongata in 1892.) Congo state officials were paid an extra bonus for "reduction in recruiting expenses" — a thinly veiled invitation to save the state money by kidnapping these men directly instead of paying chiefs for them.

Always, however, the slave system was bedecked with euphemisms, used even by officers in the field. "Two boats . . . just arrived with Sergeant Lens and 25 volunteers from Engwettra in chains; two men drowned trying to escape," wrote one officer, Louis Rousseau, in his monthly report for October 1892. Indeed, some three quarters of such "volunteers" died before they could even be delivered to Force Publique posts, a worried senior official wrote the same year. Among the solutions to the problem of this "wastage" he recommended were faster transport and lightweight steel chains instead of heavy iron ones. Documents from this time repeatedly show Congo state officials ordering additional supplies of chain. One officer noted the problem of files of conscripts crossing narrow log bridges over jungle streams: when *"libérés* [liberated men] chained by the neck cross a bridge, if one falls off, he pulls the whole file off and it disappears."

White officers who bargained with village chiefs to acquire "volunteer" soldiers and porters were sometimes dealing with the same sources that had supplied the east coast Afro-Arab slave-traders. The most powerful of these Zanzibar-based slavers was the handsome, bearded, strongly built Hamed bin Muhammed el Murjebi, popularly known as Tippu Tip. His nickname was said to have come from the sound of the slave-traders' principal instrument, the musket.

Tippu Tip was a shrewd, resourceful man who made a fortune in ivory as well as slaves, businesses he was able to expand dramatically, thanks to Stanley's discovery of the route of the upper Congo River.* Leopold knew that Tippu Tip's power and administrative acumen had made him

* Tippu Tip had supplied porters to Stanley, who had known enough not to ask too many questions about why they were sometimes in chains. On two of Stanley's expeditions, Tippu Tip and his entourage came along for part of the way. One reason the explorer's ill-fated Emin Pasha rescue operation drew such criticism in Europe was that at one point Stanley imperiously commandeered a missionary steamboat to transport his forces up the Congo River. The aghast men of God saw their boat carry off part of an expedition that included Tippu Tip and his thirty-five wives and concubines.

almost the de facto ruler of the eastern Congo. In 1887, the king asked him to serve as governor of the colony's eastern province, with its capital at Stanley Falls, and Tippu Tip accepted; several relatives occupied posts under him. At this early stage, with Leopold's military forces spread thin, the bargain offered something to both men. (The king also contracted to buy the freedom of several thousand of Tippu Tip's slaves, but one condition of their freedom, these "liberated" slaves and many others quickly discovered, was a seven-year enlistment term in the Force Publique.) Although Leopold managed for most of his life to be all things to all people, the spectacle of this antislavery crusader doing so much business with Africa's most prominent slave-dealer helped spur the first murmurings against the king in Europe.

Eventually the two men parted ways. Ambitious white state officials in the eastern Congo, without the approval of their superiors in Brussels, then fought several victorious battles against some of the Afro-Arab warlords in the region, fighting that after the fact was converted into a noble campaign against the dastardly "Arab" slave-dealers. Colonial-heroic literature elevated it to a central place in the period's official mythology, echoes of which can be heard in Belgium to this day. However, over the years Congo military forces spilled far more blood in fighting innumerable uprisings by Africans, including the rebels from their own ranks. Furthermore, as soon as the rogue campaign against the slavers was over, Leopold put many of them back in place as state officials.

What was it like to be captured and enslaved by the Congo's white conquerors? In one rare instance we can hear an African voice describe the experience. It was recorded by an American Swahili-speaking state agent, Edgar Canisius, who found himself unexpectedly moved by the story told to him by "a woman of great intelligence, named Ilanga." Later, when he met the officer and soldiers who had captured her, he concluded that she had indeed spoken the truth. The events she describes took place in the eastern part of the territory, near Nyangwe, the town where Stanley had first seen the giant river that turned out to be the Congo. Here, as recorded by Canisius, is Ilanga's story:

> Our village is called Waniendo, after our chief Niendo. . . . It is a large village near a small stream, and surrounded by large fields of *mohago* (cassava) and *muhindu* (maize) and other foods, for we all

worked hard at our plantations, and always had plenty to eat. . . . We never had war in our country, and the men had not many arms except knives. . . .

We were all busy in the fields hoeing our plantations, for it was the rainy season, and the weeds sprang quickly up, when a runner came to the village saying that a large band of men was coming, that they all wore red caps and blue cloth, and carried guns and long knives, and that many white men were with them, the chief of whom was Kibalanga [the African name for a Force Publique officer named Oscar Michaux, who once received a Sword of Honor from Leopold's own hands]. Niendo at once called all the chief men to his house, while the drums were beaten to summon the people to the village. A long consultation was held, and finally we were all told to go quietly to the fields and bring in ground-nuts, plantains, and cassava for the warriors who were coming, and goats and fowls for the white men. The women all went with baskets and filled them, and then put them in the road. . . . Niendo thought that, by giving presents of much food, he would induce the strangers to pass on without harming us. And so it proved. . . .

When the white men and their warriors had gone, we went again to our work, and were hoping that they would not return; but this they did in a very short time. As before, we brought in great heaps of food; but this time Kibalanga did not move away directly, but camped near our village, and his soldiers came and stole all our fowls and goats and tore up our cassava; but we did not mind that as long as they did not harm us. The next morning . . . soon after the sun rose over the hill, a large band of soldiers came into the village, and we all went into the houses and sat down. We were not long seated when the soldiers came rushing in shouting, and threatening Niendo with their guns. They rushed into the houses and dragged the people out. Three or four came to our house and caught hold of me, also my husband Oleka and my sister Katinga. We were dragged into the road, and were tied together with cords about our necks, so that we could not escape. We were all crying, for now we knew that we were to be taken away to be slaves. The soldiers beat us with the iron sticks from their guns, and compelled us to march to the camp of Kibalanga, who ordered the women to be tied up separately, ten

to each cord, and the men in the same way. When we were all collected — and there were many from other villages whom we now saw, and many from Waniendo — the soldiers brought baskets of food for us to carry, in some of which was smoked human flesh. . . .

We then set off marching very quickly. My sister Katinga had her baby in her arms, and was not compelled to carry a basket; but my husband Oleka was made to carry a goat. We marched until the afternoon, when we camped near a stream, where we were glad to drink, for we were much athirst. We had nothing to eat, for the soldiers would give us nothing. . . . The next day we continued the march, and when we camped at noon were given some maize and plantains, which were gathered near a village from which the people had run away. So it continued each day until the fifth day, when the soldiers took my sister's baby and threw it in the grass, leaving it to die, and made her carry some cooking pots which they found in the deserted village. On the sixth day we became very weak from lack of food and from constant marching and sleeping in the damp grass, and my husband, who marched behind us with the goat, could not stand up longer, and so he sat down beside the path and refused to walk more. The soldiers beat him, but still he refused to move. Then one of them struck him on the head with the end of his gun, and he fell upon the ground. One of the soldiers caught the goat, while two or three others stuck the long knives they put on the ends of their guns into my husband. I saw the blood spurt out, and then saw him no more, for we passed over the brow of a hill and he was out of sight. Many of the young men were killed the same way, and many babies thrown into the grass to die. . . . After marching ten days we came to the great water . . . and were taken in canoes across to the white men's town at Nyangwe.

Even children were not spared the rigors of Leopold's regime. "I believe we must set up three children's colonies," the king wrote on April 27, 1890. "One in the Upper Congo near the equator, specifically military, with clergy for religious instruction and for vocational education. One at Leopoldville under clergy with a soldier for military training. One at

Boma like that at Leo. . . . The aim of these colonies is above all to furnish us with soldiers. We thus have to build three big barracks at Boma, Leo, and near the equator . . . each capable of housing 1500 children and administrative personnel." Following up on Leopold's orders, the governor general six weeks later directed his district commissioners "from now on to gather the most male children possible" for the three state colonies.

As the years passed, many more children's colonies were established by Catholic missionaries. Unlike the Congo's Protestant missionaries, who were foreigners and beyond Leopold's control, the Catholics were mostly Belgian and loyal supporters of the king and his regime. (One Belgian order, the Scheut fathers, even named a mission station after a director of one of the big concession companies.) Leopold subsidized the Catholics lavishly and sometimes used this financial power to deploy priests, almost as if they were soldiers, to areas where he wanted to strengthen his influence.

The children taken in by these missionaries were, theoretically, "orphans." But in most intact, indigenous African societies, with their strong sense of extended family and clan ties, the concept of orphanhood in the European sense did not exist. To the extent that these children literally were orphans, it was frequently because their parents had been killed by the Force Publique. In the wake of their deadly raids throughout the territory, soldiers often collected survivors, both adults and children, and brought them to the Catholic missionaries.

> Monsieur Devos furnished us with five prisoners, tied by the neck, to dig up clay for brick-making, as well as 25 laborers from Ibembo for gathering wood [a Catholic priest reported to his superior in 1899]. . . . Since the last convoy of children from Buta, 25 others have arrived. . . . From time to time we have baptized some of the littler ones, in case of danger of their dying. . . . On July 1st we celebrated the national day of the État Indépendant du Congo. At 8 o'clock, with all our children and a flag in front, we were at the bottom of the stairway carved out of the cliff to welcome Commandant Devos and his soldiers. Returning to the mission, the children marched in front, the soldiers following. . . . During Mass . . . at the moment of the elevation of the host, "present arms!" was sounded by bugles.

The children's colonies were usually ruled by the *chicotte* and the chain. There were many mutinies. If they survived their kidnapping, transport, and schooling, most of the male graduates of the state colonies became soldiers, just as Leopold had ordered. These state colonies were the only state-funded schools for Africans in Leopold's Congo.

Among the traumatized and malnourished children packed into both the state and Catholic colonies, disease was rife and the death rate high, often over 50 percent. Thousands more children perished during the long journeys to get there. Of one column of 108 boys on a forced march to the state colony at Boma in 1892–1893, only sixty-two made it to their destination; eight of them died within the following few weeks. The mother superior of one Catholic colony for girls wrote to a high Congo state official in 1895, "Several of the little girls were so sickly on their arrival that . . . our good sisters couldn't save them, but all had the happiness of receiving Holy Baptism; they are now little angels in Heaven who are praying for our great king."

Despite such prayers, back home the great king was having more domestic troubles. For one thing, his hopes of seeing his daughter Stephanie become Empress of Austria-Hungary ended in disaster. Her husband, Crown Prince Rudolph, turned out to be an alcoholic and a morphine addict. One day in 1889 he and his mistress were found dead in a hunting lodge, an apparent double suicide — although for years rumors swirled that he had been murdered by political enemies. In any event, Stephanie could never become empress. Leopold rushed to Vienna, where the Belgian Cabinet sent him its condolences. The king, then in the midst of his campaign to raise Congo development funds, replied: "We thank you for your kind expressions regarding the disaster which has befallen us. We know the feelings of the ministers, and count upon their sympathy in the terrible trials which God has laid upon us. Do whatever you can to help Monsieur Van Neuss [the Congo state administrator general for finance] to place some more shares on the market; this would be most agreeable to me. Once more, I thank you."

The widowed Stephanie later married a Hungarian count whose blood was not royal enough for Leopold; the king referred to his son-in-law as "that shepherd." As with her sister Louise, Leopold refused to speak to Stephanie again.

Besides his disobedient daughters to fret over, the king had his mad sister Carlota, confined to her château on the outskirts of Brussels, apparently believing she was still Empress of Mexico. Her bridal dress, faded flowers, and a feathered Mexican idol hung on her wall. She was reported to spend her days talking to a life-size doll dressed in imperial robes. Rumors of her delusions provided endless reams of copy to tabloid editors all over Europe. Once when her château caught fire, Carlota was said to have leaned over a parapet and shouted at the flames, "That is forbidden! That is forbidden!"

Family problems could not, however, sap Leopold's energy in the slightest. It was as if he took for granted that this aspect of his life would be miserable, and he lived for other things, above all for his role as King-Sovereign of the Congo. And as he looked around himself in the 1890s, he could see previously uninterested Belgians beginning to share his dreams of conquest and glory. Steeped in the racial imagery of the time, these fantasies trickled even into stories for schoolboys. One contained this glorification of a young Belgian lieutenant martyred for the imperial cause in suppressing the 1897 mutiny:

> The situation was desperate. All seemed lost. But brave De Le Court sprang into the breach.
>
> Together with two other Belgian officers and the remnants of their platoons, he immobilized the black demons who had rushed into the pursuit of the column. . . . Sinister black heads seemed to emerge from every corner, grinding their white teeth. . . .
>
> He fell. . . . He understood the supreme moment of death had come. . . . Smiling, disdainful, sublime, thinking of his King, of his Flag . . . he looked for the last time upon the screaming horde of black demons. . . .
>
> Thus Charles De Le Court died in the fullness of youth in the face of the enemy.

These were years when, to the distress of many a young male European, Europe was at peace. For a young man looking for battle, especially battle against a poorly armed enemy, the Congo was the place to go. For a white man, the Congo was also a place to get rich and to wield power. As a district commissioner, you might be running a district as big as all of Holland or Belgium. As a station chief, you might be a hundred miles

away from the next white official; you could levy whatever taxes you chose in labor, ivory, or anything else, collect them however you wanted, and impose whatever punishments you liked. If you got carried away, the penalty, if any, was a slap on the wrist. A station chief at Manyanga, on the big rapids, who beat two of his personal servants to death in 1890 was only fined five hundred francs. What mattered was keeping the ivory flowing back to Belgium. The more you sent, the more you earned. "*Vive le Congo,* there is nothing like it!" one young officer wrote to his family in 1894, "We have liberty, independence, and life with wide horizons. Here you are free and not a mere slave of society. . . . Here one is everything! Warrior, diplomat, *trader!!* Why not!" For such people, just as for the humbly born Stanley, the Congo offered a chance for a great rise in status. Someone fated for a life as a small-town bank clerk or plumber in Europe could instead become a warlord, ivory merchant, big game hunter, and possessor of a harem.

Léon Rom, for example, was born in the provincial Belgian town of Mons. He enlisted in the army at the age of sixteen, but did not have enough education to become an officer. He then worked as a bookkeeper with a firm of customs brokers, but quickly tired of that. He came to the Congo in search of adventure in 1886, at the age of twenty-five. At a time when there were only a few hundred white men in the entire territory, his progress was rapid. Rom soon found himself district commissioner at Matadi, and in that capacity presided over the first civil marriage ceremony of a white couple in the Congo state. He next served briefly as a judge. With so few whites running the vast colony, there was no clear line between civilian and military functions, and Rom was soon put to work training black troops for the Force Publique. The pay was good, too; once promoted to captain, he earned 50 percent more than a colonel in the Belgian Army back home.

Acquiring various medals, Rom won some glory for an episode in a battle against the "Arabs" when he brashly entered an enemy fort to negotiate surrender terms. According to one account: "Rom spontaneously volunteered. . . . He left unarmed, accompanied only by an interpreter and, from the spot assigned as a rendezvous, saw all the Arab troops massed behind their ramparts, their rifles at the ready. An emissary, with the sultan's Koran as a safe-conduct, invited him to enter the fortress. In spite of the apprehensions of the interpreter, who smelled a trap, Rom penetrated resolutely into the enemy camp. After two hours of negotiations, he left this lair, carrying an Arab flag as proof of surrender." Rom's

own description is even more dramatic: he prevails over the shifty Arabs only because of his *"attitude décidée,"* while the terrified, trembling interpreter says, "Master, they're going to kill you!" Whether accepting this surrender was anything that risky to begin with, we do not know. One of the benefits of service as a Force Publique officer was that the nearest journalist was usually thousands of miles away, so you and a few friends could largely shape the record of your exploits.

Rom's upward mobility lay in more than just military rank; it also had intellectual trappings. Each time he returned to Europe he brought with him many butterfly specimens and in time was elected a member of the Entomological Society of Belgium. Honors like this, as well as his officer's sword and his cap with the Congo state star on it, were a far cry from the life of a provincial bookkeeper.

Beneath the eagerly repeated stories of wealth and glory to be found by young white men in the Congo usually lay something else: the sly hint that you could leave your bourgeois morality back in Europe. (As we shall see, this would be the case for Léon Rom.) For Europeans of the day, colonies all over the world offered a convenient escape. Kipling wrote:

Ship me somewheres east of Suez,
where the best is like the worst,
Where there aren't no Ten Commandments,
an' a man can raise a thirst.

In the Congo the Ten Commandments were practiced even less than in most colonies. Belgium was small, the Congo was huge, and the white death rate in the African tropics was still notoriously high. (Authorities tried hard to keep such figures secret, but before 1895 fully a third of white Congo state agents died there; some of the others died of the effects of disease after returning to Europe.) And so in order to find enough men to staff his far-flung network of river posts in malaria-ridden territory, Leopold had to recruit not just Belgians like Léon Rom, but young white men from throughout Europe, attracting them by such get-rich-quick incentives as the lucrative commission structure for acquiring ivory. Many who came out to work in the Congo were like the mercenaries who joined the French Foreign Legion or the fortune hunters who flocked to the two great gold rushes of the day, in South Africa and the Klondike. With its opportunities for both combat and riches, to

Europeans the Congo was a gold rush and the Foreign Legion combined.

This first wave of Leopold's agents included many hard-bitten men fleeing marital troubles, bankruptcy, or alcoholism. A popular song sums up the mood of the time. One official describes in his memoirs how, newly arrived in the Congo, he was kept awake all night by drunken agents singing it endlessly in the bar of his seedy seaport hotel. The first verse runs:

Y en a qui font la mauvais' tête
A leurs parents;
Qui font les dett', qui font la bête,
Inutil'ment:
Qui, un beau soir, de leur maîtresse
Ont plein le dos.
Ils fich' le camp, plein de tristesse
Pour le Congo. . . .

(There're those who blow up at their families,
Who run up debts, who play the fool in vain,
Who one fine evening are fed up with their girls.
They take off, full of sorrow, for the Congo. . . .)

Africans in the Congo, meanwhile, were singing very different songs. A missionary transcribed this one:

O mother, how unfortunate we are! . . .
But the sun will kill the white man,
But the moon will kill the white man,
But the sorcerer will kill the white man,
But the tiger will kill the white man,
But the crocodile will kill the white man,
But the elephant will kill the white man,
But the river will kill the white man.