"A book of terrible beauty . . . *King Leopold's Ghost* is essential reading for the new century."
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—Ronan Bennett, *Observer*

"This is a harrowing story, told with a crisp incisiveness . . . We knew of this skeleton in the colonial cupboard . . . but we did not know it was quite so ugly."
—Charles Nicholl, *Daily Telegraph*

KING LEOPOLD'S GHOST

A STORY of GREED, TERROR, and HEROISM in COLONIAL AFRICA

ADAM HOCHSCHILD

A MARINER BOOK
Houghton Mifflin Company
BOSTON NEW YORK

pretense no longer. Belgians were even more upset when it became clear that their king was spending much of his newfound wealth abroad. He was soon one of the largest landowners on the French Riviera, where he built a dock for his fifteen-hundred-ton yacht, the *Alberta,* and had architects from Nice design and build a series of splendid villas. His property included most of the land at the end of the scenic fingertip of Cap Ferrat, then, as now, among the most expensive seaside real estate in the world.

On his young mistress Leopold showered castles and mansions. When she became pregnant, he and the French government split the cost of building a new road near her villa at Cap Ferrat, in order to give her carriage a smoother ride. When her son was born, he was given the title of Duke of Tervuren, and she became the Baroness de Vaughan. The king took her around the Mediterranean on his yacht, but the Belgian public loathed her, and her carriage was once stoned in the streets of Brussels. In the minds of Europeans, the king's public and private lives by now were wholly entwined. When Caroline's second son was born, he had a deformed hand. A cartoon in *Punch* showed Leopold holding the newborn child, surrounded by Congolese corpses with their hands cut off. The caption read: VENGEANCE FROM ON HIGH.

How did Leopold feel about being the target of such wrath? Clearly, it exasperated him; he once wrote to an aide, "I will not let myself be soiled with blood or mud." But the tone he sounded was always of annoyance or self-pity, never of shame or guilt. Once, when he saw a cartoon of himself in a German newspaper slicing off hands with his sword, he snorted, according to a military aide, and said, "Cut off hands — that's idiotic! I'd cut off all the rest of them, but not the hands. That's the one thing I need in the Congo!" Small wonder that when the king jokingly introduced Prime Minister Auguste Beernaert to a gathering as "the greatest cynic in the kingdom," Beernaert replied, deadpan, that he would not dare take precedence over His Majesty.

15

A RECKONING

As E. D. MOREL, Roger Casement, and their allies caught Europe's attention with reports of the holocaust in central Africa, newspapers and magazines ran pictures of burned villages and mutilated bodies, and missionary witnesses spoke of the depopulation of entire districts. Looking at this written and photographic record today immediately raises a crucial question: what was the death toll in Leopold's Congo? This is a good moment to pause in our story to find an answer.

The question is not simple. To begin with, history in this case cannot have distinct lines drawn around it as it can, say, when we ask how many Jews the Nazis put to death between 1933 and 1945. King Leopold II's personal État Indépendant du Congo officially existed for twenty-three years, beginning in 1885, but many Congolese were already dying unnatural deaths by the start of that period, and important elements of the king's system of exploitation endured for many years after its official end. The rubber boom, cause of the worst bloodletting in the Congo, began under Leopold's rule in the mid-1890s, but it continued several years after the end of his one-man regime.

Furthermore, although the killing in the Congo was of genocidal proportions, it was not, strictly speaking, a genocide. The Congo state was not deliberately trying to eliminate one particular ethnic group from the face of the Earth. Instead, like the slave dealers who raided Africa for centuries before them, Leopold's men were looking for labor. If, in the course of their finding and using that labor, millions of people died, that

to them was incidental. Few officials kept statistics about something they considered so negligible as African lives. And so estimating the number of casualties today requires considerable historical detective work.

In population losses on this scale, the toll is usually a composite of figures from one or more of four closely connected sources: (1) murder; (2) starvation, exhaustion, and exposure; (3) disease; and (4) a plummeting birth rate. In the worst period in the Congo, the long rubber boom, it came in abundance from all four:

1. *Murder.* Although outright murder was not the major cause of death in Leopold's Congo, it was most clearly documented. When a village or a district failed to supply its quota of rubber or fought back against the regime, Force Publique soldiers or rubber company "sentries" often killed everyone they could find. Those times when an eyewitness happened upon a pile of skeletons or severed hands, and a report survives, represent, of course, only a small proportion of the massacres carried out, only a few sparks from a firestorm. But among those scattered sparks are some that burn distinctly:

- In 1896, a German newspaper, the *Kölnische Zeitung,* published, on the authority of "a highly esteemed Belgian," news that 1308 severed hands had been turned over to the notorious District Commissioner Léon Fiévez in a single day. The newspaper twice repeated the story without being challenged by the Congo state. Several additional reports of that day's events, including some from both Protestant and Catholic missionaries, cited even higher totals for the number of hands. On a later occasion, Fiévez admitted that the practice of cutting hands off corpses existed; he denied only, with great vehemence, that he had ever ordered hands cut off living people.
- In 1899, a state officer, Simon Roi, perhaps not realizing that one of the people he was chatting with was an American missionary, bragged about the killing squads under his command. The missionary, Ellsworth Faris, recorded the conversation in his diary: "Each time the corporal goes out to get rubber, cartridges are given to him. He must bring back all not used; and for every one used he must bring back a right hand! . . . As to the extent to which this is carried on, [Roi] informed me that in six months they, the State, on the Momboyo River had used 6000 cartridges, which means that 6000 people are killed or mutilated. It means more than 6000, for the people have told

me repeatedly that the soldiers kill children with the butt of their guns."
- The punitive expeditions against the Budja rebels [see pages 192–193] altogether killed more than thirteen hundred Budjas. Reports of this appeared in various Belgian newspapers in 1900, one of which was subsidized by the Congo state. Dozens of other rebellions against rubber-collecting broke out throughout the territory over the next decade. Estimating the death toll caused by suppressing them all is impossible, but sometimes a stray statistic carries appalling implications, when we remember that soldiers were severely punished for "wasting" bullets on nonhuman targets. Among a raft of revealing documents from the A.B.I.R. concession company that Morel got hold of is a register showing that in the year 1903, a *single* one of the thirty-five rubber-collecting posts in A.B.I.R. territory was sent a total of 159 firearms and 40,355 rounds of ammunition.

The list of specific massacres on record goes on and on. The territory was awash in corpses, sometimes literally. Where a river flows into Lake Tumba, wrote the Swedish missionary E. V. Sjöblom, "I saw . . . dead bodies floating on the lake with the right hand cut off, and the officer told me when I came back why they had been killed. It was for the rubber. . . . When I crossed the stream I saw some dead bodies hanging down from the branches in the water. As I turned away my face at the horrible sight one of the native corporals who was following us down said, 'Oh, that is nothing, a few days ago I returned from a fight, and I brought the white man 160 hands and they were thrown into the river.'"

It was not only missionaries and visitors who recorded the mass murders. Many Force Publique officers kept astonishingly frank diaries about the death and destruction they left behind them.

- At the village of Bikoro on Lake Tumba, a Swedish officer of the Force Publique, Lieutenant Knut Svensson, may have been the cause of some of the mangled bodies his countryman Sjöblom had seen. Svensson noted in his diary a death toll of 527 people in four and a half months' time, upon the imposition of the rubber regime in 1894–1895. (According to oral tradition in the area today, Svensson would assemble the people of a recalcitrant village, on the pretext of signing a treaty or recruiting porters, and then simply open fire.)
- The diary of another officer, Charles Lemaire, is chilling in its casual-

ness: "28 March 1891: . . . The village of Bokanga was burned. . . . 4 April 1891: A stop at Bolébo. . . . Since they wanted to meet us only with spears and guns, the village was burned. One native killed. . . . 12 April 1891: Attack on the Ikengo villages. . . . The big chief Ekélé of Etchimanjindou was killed and thrown in the water. . . . 14 June 1891: Expedition against the Loliva who refuse to come to the station. Dreadful weather; attack made in driving rain. The group of villages was large; couldn't destroy them all. Around 15 blacks killed. . . . 14 June 1891: At 5 A.M. sent the Zanzibari Metchoudi with about 40 men . . . to burn Nkolé. . . . The operation was successful and everything was burned. . . . 4 September 1891: At 4 A.M. preparations for attacking Ipéko. . . . The whole village was burned and the banana trees cut down. . . . 13 July 1892: The Bompopo villages were attacked 7 July by Lieutenant Sarrazijn; 20 natives killed; 13 women and children taken prisoner."

- From the diary of Louis Leclercq, another Force Publique officer: "21 June 1895. . . . Arrived at Yambisi at 10:20 A.M. Village abandoned. . . . We sent several groups of soldiers to scour the area; they came back several hours later with 11 heads and 9 prisoners. A canoe sent out hunting in the evening also brought back several heads. 22 June 1895: They brought us three prisoners in the morning, three others towards evening, and three heads. A man from Baumaneh running through the forest shouting for his lost wife and child came too close to our camp and received a bullet from one of our sentries. They brought us his head. Never have I seen such an expression of despair, of fear. . . . We burned the village."

The diaries of Lemaire and Leclercq — and others — go on in this vein for day after day, week after week.

Resistance of any kind, or even cutting corners, was fatal. E. D. Morel reprinted a message that a district commissioner, Jules Jacques,* sent to one of his underlings after finding that some villagers had severed vines, killing them, to extract the rubber, instead of merely tapping the vines as they were supposed to: "M. le Chef de Poste. Decidedly these people of [Inongo] are a bad lot. They have just been and cut some rubber

* Jacques later won glory in World War I, and today there is a statue of him in the main square of Diksmuide, Belgium.

vines. . . . We must fight them until their absolute submission has been obtained, or their complete extermination. . . . Inform the natives that if they cut another single vine, I will exterminate them to the last man."

Conrad was not making much up when he had Mr. Kurtz scrawl the infamous line "Exterminate all the brutes!"

2. *Starvation, exhaustion, and exposure.* As news of the terror spread, hundreds of thousands of people fled their villages. In retaliation, soldiers often took their animals and burned their huts and crops, leaving them no food. This pattern of action was established even before the rubber boom, when Leopold's soldiers were looking primarily for ivory and for porters and food for themselves. A Swedish lieutenant describes such a raid in 1885 in the lower Congo rapids district: "When we were approaching there was a terrible tumult in the village. The natives . . . were completely taken with surprise. We could see them gather what they could of their belongings and escape into the deep thick woods. . . . Before I left the place I had the village plundered of the large number of goats, hens and ducks that were there. . . . Then we abandoned the village and retired to a better place for our noon rest."

As they fled these expeditions, villagers sometimes abandoned small children for fear that their cries would give away their hiding places. As a result, many children starved. A small proportion of the population, lucky enough to live near the Congo's borders, escaped from the country. Some thirty thousand refugees, the French colonial governor estimated, had crossed into French territory by 1900. Others fled to British territory, although a number of them drowned in the Luapula River, which formed part of the border with British-owned Northern Rhodesia. But for most people there was nowhere to flee except deep into the rain forest or the swamps, where there was no shelter and little food. The American soldier of fortune Edgar Canisius saw refugees from his scorched-earth raids "living like wild beasts in the forest, subsisting on roots, and ants and other insects." A fellow Presbyterian missionary of William Sheppard's wrote, in 1899, "All the people of the villages run away to the forest when they hear the State officers are coming. To-night, in the midst of the rainy season, within a radius of 75 miles of Luebo, I am sure it would be a low estimate to say that 40,000 people, men, women, children, with the sick, are sleeping in the forests without shelter."

Around the same time, a young English explorer named Ewart S. Grogan walked the length of Africa and was shocked at what he saw in

crossing a "depopulated and devastated" 3000-square-mile tract in the far northeastern part of the Congo: "Every village has been burnt to the ground, and as I fled from the country I saw skeletons, skeletons everywhere; and such postures — what tales of horror they told!"

Hunger also struck villagers who did not flee into the forest, because if they were near a rubber post they had to give up much of their bananas, manioc, fish, and meat to feed the soldiers. The village of Bumba in the A.B.I.R. concession, for example, had only a hundred families, but it was expected each month to deliver fifteen kilos of yams or similar vegetables, in addition to five pigs or fifty chickens. Furthermore, villages like this one usually had to come up with all the food while their able-bodied men were in the forest, desperately searching for rubber. Without the manpower to clear new garden plots, so essential in farming the fragile soil of the rain forest, the women often replanted worn-out fields. Harvests declined, and in the old A.B.I.R. region the period is remembered today as *lonkali,* the time of famine.

Untold thousands of people, women, children, and the elderly, died as hostages. Soldiers kept them in dirt compounds, often in chains, feeding them little or nothing until the men of a village brought in the demanded amount of rubber — something that might take weeks. In one stockade in 1899, prisoners were found to be dying at the rate of three to ten a day.

3. *Disease.* As with the decimation of the American Indians, disease killed many more Congolese than did bullets. Europeans and the Afro-Arab slave-traders brought to the interior of the Congo many diseases previously not known there. The local people had no time to build up immunities — as they largely had to malaria, for instance. Both new illnesses and old ones spread rapidly, because huge numbers of Congolese were now forced to travel long distances: as men conscripted to be long-haul porters or to work as steamboat crews (a large boat required from twenty to sixty woodcutters) or as soldiers impressed into the Force Publique. The most notorious killers were smallpox and sleeping sickness, although less dramatic lung and intestinal infections also took a high toll.

Smallpox had been endemic in parts of coastal Africa for centuries, but the great population movements of the imperial age spread the illness throughout the interior, leaving village after village full of dead bodies. A Kuba king — the successor to the one who had welcomed William Sheppard to the kingdom — died from the disease. Smallpox inspired a particular terror. The Africans called it "the sickness from above" or "the

sickness of heaven," because the terrifying disease seemed to come from no familiar source. One traveler to the Congo came on a deserted town where a fifteen-foot boa constrictor was dining on smallpox victims' flesh, and on another where the vultures were so gorged that they were too heavy to fly.

Sleeping sickness also spread lethally up the rivers. Half a million Congolese were estimated to have died of it in 1901 alone. The disease is caused by a parasite first spread by the bite of the pink-striped tsetse fly, about the size of a horsefly, with a distinctive high-pitched buzz. Once contracted by humans, sleeping sickness becomes highly contagious. It can cause fever, swelling of the lymph glands, a strange craving for meat, and a sensitivity to cold. At last comes the immense lethargy that gives the illness its name.

Faced with undeniable evidence of massive population loss, Leopold's apologists, then and now, blame sleeping sickness. And it is true that sleeping sickness and the other diseases would doubtless have taken many lives even if the Congo had come into the twentieth century under a regime other than Leopold's. But the story is more complicated, for disease rarely acts by itself alone. Epidemics almost always take a drastically higher and more rapid toll among the malnourished and the traumatized: the Nazis and Soviets needed no poison gas or firing squads to finish off many of those who died in their camps. Today, thanks in part to our century of famines and barbed wire, epidemiologists understand all too well the exact mechanisms by which this happens. Even in the Congo, one did not have to be a physician to see that those who were dying of disease were not dying of disease alone. Charles Gréban de Saint-Germain, a magistrate at Stanley Falls, wrote in 1905: "Disease powerfully ravages an exhausted population, and it's to this cause, in my opinion, that we must attribute the unceasing growth of sleeping sickness in this region; along with porterage and the absence of food supplies, it will quickly decimate this country. I've seen nowhere in the Congo as sad a spectacle as that along the road from Kasongo to Kabambare. The villages for the most part have few people in them; many huts are in ruins; men, like women and children, are thin, weak, without life, very sick, stretched out inert, and above all there's no food."

4. *Plummeting birth rate.* Not surprisingly, when men were sent into the forest in search of rubber for weeks at a time, year after year, and women were held hostage and half-starved, fewer children were born. A Catholic

missionary who worked for many years in the Lake Mai Ndombe district, a major rubber area, noticed this pattern. When he arrived, in 1910, he was surprised by the almost total absence of children between the ages of seven and fourteen, although there were many of other ages. This pinpoints the period from 1896 to 1903 — just when the rubber campaign was at its height in the district. A witness in a nearby area at that very time was Roger Casement, on his investigative trip. He estimated that the population had dropped by 60 percent and wrote that "the remnant of the inhabitants are only now, in many cases, returning to their destroyed or abandoned villages. . . . A lower percentage of births lessen[s] the population. . . . Women refuse to bear children, and take means to save themselves from motherhood. They give as the reason that if 'war' should come to a woman 'big with child' or with a baby to carry, 'she' cannot well run away and hide from the soldiers." Part of the population loss in the Congo resulted, then, when families, terrorized and torn apart by the rubber campaign, simply stopped having children.

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No territory-wide census was taken in the Congo until long after the rubber terror was over. But Daniel Vangroenweghe, a Belgian anthropologist who worked in a former rubber area in the 1970s, found persuasive demographic evidence that large numbers of men had been worked to death as rubber slaves or killed in punitive raids — and he discovered the evidence in the regime's own statistics. No other explanation accounts for the curious pattern that threads through the village-by-village headcounts taken in the colony long before the first territorial census. These local headcounts consistently show far more women than men.

At Inongo in 1907, for example, there were 309 children, 402 adult women, but only 275 adult men. (This was the very town for which, some ten years earlier, the district commissioner had ordered "absolute submission . . . or . . . complete extermination.") At nearby Iboko in 1908 there were 322 children, 543 adult women, but only 262 adult men. Statistics from numerous other villages show the same pattern. Sifting such figures today is like sifting the ruins of an Auschwitz crematorium. They do not tell you precise death tolls, but they reek of mass murder.

During Leopold's rule, by how much, from all four causes, did the Congo population shrink? Just as when historians chart population loss from the Black Death in fourteenth-century Europe, they can be more confident of the percentage than they are of absolute numbers. They have,

after all, no census data. Interestingly, some estimates of population loss in the Congo made by those who saw it firsthand agree with some of those made by more scientific methods today.

An official Belgian government commission in 1919 estimated that from the time Stanley began laying the foundation of Leopold's state, the population of the territory had "been reduced by half." Major Charles C. Liebrechts, a top executive of the Congo state administration for most of its existence, arrived at the same estimate in 1920. The most authoritative judgment today comes from Jan Vansina, professor emeritus of history and anthropology at the University of Wisconsin and perhaps the greatest living ethnographer of Congo basin peoples. He bases his calculations on "innumerable local sources from different areas: priests noticing their flocks were shrinking, oral traditions, genealogies, and much more." His estimate is the same: between 1880 and 1920, the population of the Congo was cut "by at least a half."

Half of what? Only in the 1920s were the first attempts made at a territory-wide census. In 1924 the population was reckoned at ten million, a figure confirmed by later counts. This would mean, according to the estimates, that during the Leopold period and its immediate aftermath the population of the territory dropped by approximately ten million people.

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Burned villages, starved hostages, terrified refugees dying in swamps, orders for "extermination" — even in crass, purely monetary terms, aren't these inefficient means of doing business? Massacring huge numbers of people may frighten the survivors into gathering rubber, but doesn't it destroy the labor force? Indeed it does. Belgian administrators ordered the census taken in 1924 because they were deeply concerned about a shortage of available workers. "We run the risk of someday seeing our native population collapse and disappear," fretfully declared the permanent committee of the National Colonial Congress of Belgium that year. "So that we will find ourselves confronted with a kind of desert."

Why, then, did the killings go on for so long? The same irrationality lies at the heart of many other mass murders. In the Soviet Union, for example, shooting or jailing political opponents at first helped the Communist Party and then Josef Stalin gain absolute power. But after there were no visible opponents left, seven million more people were executed, and many millions more died in the far-flung camps of the gulag. So

many engineers were seized that factories came to a halt; so many railway men died that some trains did not run; so many colonels and generals were shot that the almost leaderless Red Army was nearly crushed by the German invasion of 1941.

In the Congo, as in Russia, mass murder had a momentum of its own. Power is tempting, and in a sense no power is greater than the ability to take someone's life. Once under way, mass killing is hard to stop; it becomes a kind of sport, like hunting. Congo annals abound in cases like that of René de Permentier, an officer in the Equator district in the late 1890s. The Africans nicknamed him Bajunu (for *bas genoux*, on your knees), because he always made people kneel before him. He had all the bushes and trees cut down around his house at Bokatola so that from his porch he could use passersby for target practice. If he found a leaf in a courtyard that women prisoners had swept, he ordered a dozen of them beheaded. If he found a path in the forest not well-maintained, he ordered a child killed in the nearest village.

Two Force Publique officers, Clément Brasseur and Léon Cerckel, once ordered a man hung from a palm tree by his feet while a fire was lit beneath him and he was cooked to death. Two missionaries found one post where prisoners were killed by having resin poured over their heads, then set on fire. The list is much longer.

Michael Herr, the most brilliant reporter of the Vietnam War, captures the same frenzy in the voice of one American soldier he met: "We'd rip out the hedges and burn the hooches and blow all the wells and kill every chicken, pig and cow in the whole fucking ville. I mean, if we can't shoot these people, what the fuck are we doing here?" When another American, Francis Ford Coppola, tried to put the blood lust of that war on film, where did he turn for the plot of his *Apocalypse Now*? To Joseph Conrad, who had seen it all, a century earlier, in the Congo.

16

"JOURNALISTS WON'T GIVE YOU RECEIPTS"

As the Congo Reform crusade reached its height, the man in England whose name was most indelibly linked to the territory passed from the scene. After having been elected to Parliament, Sir Henry Morton Stanley found serving there a bore. The rousing adventure stories he liked to tell on the lecture circuit were no substitute for a polished House of Commons debating style. Stanley lacked something else useful in Parliament: a sense of humor. He soon resigned.

The years of battling malaria, dysentery, and other tropical diseases had taken their toll. Only in his early sixties, this surprisingly small man with close-cropped white hair and mustache and a ruddy, weathered face moved ever more slowly. He avidly followed the news of the Boer War, fulminating against the rebels who dared to challenge British rule. Filled with self-pity and calling himself "a man who had given up his life for his country and for Africa," he worked fitfully on his autobiography. Although he had been a fast, prolific writer all his life, he left this book unfinished, perhaps fearful of being caught in the web of contradictory stories he had spun about his childhood and youth. He, his wife, Dorothy, and an adopted son divided their time between a London home and an elegant mock-Tudor country mansion in Surrey. They named a pond, a stream, and a pine grove on their estate after the scenes of his fame: Stanley Pool, the Congo River, and the Ituri forest.

Stanley was rumored to be unhappy with the chamber of horrors the Congo had become, but the few public statements he made were all in Leopold's defense. His health grew worse, probably exacerbated by