The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 19
"Heart of Darkness I"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating…

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath:

The horror! The horror!

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 19. Heart of Darkness – Part I.

Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski was an ethnic Pole born in Russia in 1857. As a teenager, he became a sailor and traveled the world serving on French, British and Belgian merchant vessels. He became a British subject in 1886. By 1894, he had quit the sea for a career as a writer. He wrote in English, despite that being his third language, after Polish and French, and made a name for himself as Joseph Conrad. His writing is notable for its complex prose, haunted by pessimism and self-doubt, and his reliance on his personal experiences as a sailor.

The year 1899 saw the first publication of what is today his most famous work: *Heart of Darkness*. *Heart of Darkness* is still much read, much studied, and much admired to this day. Nowadays, it's read mostly as a parable about the universal themes of good and evil, innocence and sin, the nature of the human soul. Too often today do we forget that whatever else *Heart of Darkness* may be, it is first and foremost testimony. It is eyewitness testimony that Conrad himself said was pushed a little, and only very little, beyond the actual facts.

[music: Liszt, *Three Funeral Odes*]

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness.*

You may recall all the way back in episode 3 how I described the Portuguese efforts to find a trade route to the East Indies by travelling south along the coast of Africa during the 15th century. The Portuguese finally accomplished this in 1498.

16 years before that, in 1482, a Portuguese explorer named Diogo Cão, in the course of exploring the west coast of Africa, became the first European to stumble upon a remarkable sight. The waters of the ocean itself had turned a strange shade of yellow-brown, and his ship had to fight a strong current to proceed. When the Portuguese tasted the water, they discovered the surprising answer to this mystery. The water was fresh, meaning that what they had encountered was the output of an enormous river, discharging fresh water into the Atlantic Ocean at such a rate that the water remained fresh and silty for dozens of miles out to sea.

Cão and his men were the first Europeans to see the Congo River. It was the largest river any European had ever laid eyes on, measured by water flow, and second in the world only to the Amazon in South America, which would not be discovered for a few more decades. Ever since, Europeans have called this river and this region the Congo, as well as the people who live there, though the people are also called the Congolese. I'm going to use the word "Congolese" for the sake of clarity.

There was already a Kingdom of Kongo when the first Portuguese arrived. The Congolese kingdom did not have the wheel or a written language, but they did practice agriculture, and they produced cloth and pottery and iron and copper goods. The Congolese state at its height ruled over millions of people, issued its own currency, and collected taxes. When the Portuguese arrived, the Kingdom of Kongo traded with them, accepted missionaries, and within a generation, Catholicism became the state religion.

The Congolese state also practiced slavery. The Portuguese were more than willing to buy slaves, and the Congolese more than willing to sell them. Over time, the king became alarmed at the number of Congolese being carried off into slavery in foreign lands, and attempted to set limits on the slave trade. But the Portuguese would not cooperate, and there were always Congolese willing to sell slaves regardless of what the king said. Today, some 25% of the African-American population of the United States has Congolese ancestry.

From the 16th through the 19th century, there was always a state in the Congo, though it declined in power and wealth. Depopulation due to the slave trade was an important reason, although internal conflicts, wars with other Africans (and with the Portuguese) and succession crises were also factors.

You might think that this mighty Congo River would function as a highway for European exploration into central Africa, but this was not the case. The interior of central Africa is a huge plateau, meaning that the river runs through a sharp descent before it reaches the sea. The upshot of this is that the river is only

navigable for a short distance inland. After that, a prospective explorer would have to climb steep slopes for 200 miles to get into the interior of the continent. In the interior of central Africa are thick jungles, unforgiving heat, and tropical diseases alien to Europeans, and especially deadly for horses and other draft animals. As a result, central Africa remained a blank spot on European maps until late in the 19th century, and was often referred to as “darkest Africa".

One of the first Europeans to explore the Congo basin was Dr. David Livingstone. David Livingstone was born in 1813 in Scotland. His father was a Sunday school teacher, and a devoutly religious man. His son inherited these traits, but also had an interest in biology and geology. Dad wasn’t happy about his son’s interest in science, but as a young man, David persuaded his father that a career in medicine could also be used to propagate the Gospel, and so David was permitted to study to become a doctor.

He was interested in mission work from an early age, and ended up in Africa, where he spent most of the second half of his life as a medical missionary and explorer. Livingstone was deeply hostile to the slave trade, and he believed that the remedy for it would be a combination of christianization and trade with the people living in the interior of Africa, which would make the slave trade uneconomical.

In contrast to the usual practice of explorers at the time, in carting around huge amounts of supplies and equipment, and then huge numbers of porters to carry the supplies and equipment, and then armed men to protect the supplies, the equipment and the porters, Livingstone travelled light. He treated Africans with compassion and respect, and depended on their goodwill in return. This turned out to be a more practical way to travel through Africa, and so he managed to visit many places no European had ever seen before.

Though he saw much and travelled much, injury, disease and hardship took its toll, and there is evidence that Livingstone was not thinking clearly in the last years of his life, during which time he made an almost obsessive effort to find the source of the Nile, which was ultimately unsuccessful. But it took Livingstone into the Congo basin, which he reached from the east – that is, by travelling west into the interior of Africa from the Indian Ocean.

And of course, I’m telling you about Dr. Livingstone as a prelude to introducing Henry Morton Stanley. Henry Morton Stanley was born in Wales in 1841. He emigrated to the United States, where he has the unusual distinction of having served in the American Civil War in the armed forces of… both sides. After the war, he got a job as overseas correspondent for the *New York Herald*. In 1869, some three years after Dr. Livingstone had embarked on another exploration of Africa, and had not been heard from, the *Herald* assigned Stanley to find him.

It seems he was in no hurry, because he didn’t begin his expedition from Zanzibar until 1871. Stanley was old-school in his style of exploring Africa, by which I mean that he carted along huge quantities of stuff, and then needed 200 porters to carry it all. He did not subscribe to Dr. Livinstone’s school of African relations, either. He was reputedly harsh in his treatment of the native Africans. The explorer Sir Richard Burton said that Stanley “killed Africans as if they were monkeys.”

It took six months, but Stanley did indeed find Livingstone. When the *New York Herald* broke the story, it quoted Stanley as uttering those immortal words: “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?”

Livingstone and Stanley spent a few months together, went exploring together, and then Stanley came home to write a book about the expedition entitled *How I Found Livingstone*. The thing is, Stanley destroyed his diary pages concerning the meeting with Livingstone, which raises questions about how much of this story, including that famous quote, was fabricated after the fact. As for Dr. Livingstone, he died 18 months later, never having returned from Africa, and so we don't have any account from him of the famous meeting to corroborate or to contradict Stanley's.

Stanley's expedition, and his book, made him a celebrity, and in 1874, the *New York Herald* sent him back to Africa to further explore the mysterious center of the continent. Again, Stanley began at Zanzibar and travelled west, this time with a party of over 350, including riverboats that could be assembled when needed and then taken apart and ported overland when no navigable water was available. He spent some time exploring the African Great Lakes, still looking for the source of the Nile, which I gather was to 19th century white explorers what the Holy Grail was to the knights of the round table. He never found it either.

But he headed west deeper into the Congo to the Lualaba River. Livingstone had mentioned this river to Stanley, and speculated that it was the source of the Nile, as it runs almost due north, which if you check a map, you'll see that very few rivers do, the Nile being a rare exception. Only, when Stanley saw the river, he realized it was much too big to be the Nile this far south. Perhaps, then, it was the Congo?

Well, that was hard to believe, too. Stanley had brought along a sextant and navigational instruments, much like what one would bring along on a sea voyage, and so he was able to calculate his longitude and latitude with great precision. He knew that he was already north of the latitude at which the Congo empties into the Atlantic Ocean, and this river he was following was flowing farther to the north, so it didn't seem likely that it was the Congo, either. Still, Stanley and his party followed the river, which was navigable over long stretches, but occasionally broken up by a series of impassable rapids, and conquered it with his special "take 'em apart and put 'em back together again" boats. It was indeed the Congo, which makes a dramatic 180º turn around the Congo Plateau, and Henry Morton Stanley became the first person to follow the river all the way from the highlands of central Africa to the Atlantic Ocean.

And of course, I'm telling you the story of Henry Morton Stanley as a prelude to introducing King Leopold II, the King of the Belgians – and the villain of this story.

[music: Liszt, *Three Funeral Odes*]

He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams…

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Leopold II was born in 1835, which made him just four years younger than the nation he reigned over. The land we know of today as Belgium had previously been part of the Netherlands pursuant to the 1815 Congress of Vienna. As I mentioned in episode 2, a revolt against Dutch rule broke out in 1830, following the performance of an opera in Brussels. The grievances of what was then the southern Netherlands revolved around religion. The southern Netherlands was a predominantly Catholic region in a majority Protestant nation. And also culture, as there was a substantial French-speaking minority.

In 1831, the great powers of Europe, meeting at the Congress of London, agreed to Belgian independence, on the condition that it become a monarchy. In those days, monarchies were seen as important bulwarks against the outbreak of another revolution such as had recently been seen in France. Speaking of France, an independent Belgian state was also seen by the great powers as a useful buffer between France and Germany, although in those days, "buffer" meant protecting Germany from France. Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the 20th century know how ironic this is.

And so, 1831 is where we mark the beginning of Belgium as an independent state, although it would take the Netherlands another 8 years of fighting before they would sign the Treaty of London in 1839. In that same treaty, the great powers mutually agreed to respect Belgium's neutrality. This will have consequences.

The great powers wanted Belgium to be a monarchy, and so it came to be. Its first king was Leopold I, the youngest son of the Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. Leopold had already turned down an offer to become King of Greece following that nation's independence, but he accepted the offer for Belgium. The early years of Belgian independence were difficult, but the elder Leopold appears to have managed them fairly well, and maintained a policy of neutrality in foreign affairs, which Leopold II will continue.

Leopold I died in 1865 at the age of 74, and his only surviving son, also named Leopold, became King of the Belgians after him. The official title here is "King of the Belgians", not "King of Belgium". That's because Belgium was conceived from the start as a constitutional monarchy.

Now, you might think that being the king of a country is a pretty sweet deal, even if you do get stuck with a constitutional monarchy and have to go asking parliament for everything. But you are not Leopold II. Being King of the Belgians wasn't enough. He famously derided Belgium as "a small country of small people". In the middle years of the 19th century, the great powers were building colonial empires. Even countries as small as Portugal and the Netherlands had valuable colonial possessions. Why shouldn't Belgium?

Even before he became king, Leopold II coveted a colonial empire. When he was 26, he spent a month in Seville in Spain, poring over the records of the old Spanish Empire and calculating the profits Spain made in the New World. He visited Ceylon; he visited Burma; he visited the Dutch East Indies. He was probably the only person in Belgium who was interested in a colonial empire. He could not count on his nation to support his ambition with either its blood or its treasure. Some sophisticated wheeling and dealing would be called for. He considered buying some territory in Egypt, or maybe a province of Argentina, or Fiji – or the Philippines, which he attempted to buy from Spain. The Spanish told him

politely that the Philippines were not for sale. Maybe the Chinese, then? Maybe they could be persuaded to part with, say, Taiwan?

But before I go on with King Leopold's business ventures, which aren't going to pan out for a while yet, I'd like to say a few words about his family. He had a younger brother, Philippe, and a sister, Charlotte. Charlotte married Maximilian, the younger brother of the Austrian Kaiser, Franz Josef. Maximilian, you may recall, accepted Napoleon III's invitation to become Emperor of Mexico, which ended badly, with Maximilian being executed. Charlotte had been sent back to Europe in the final days in an unsuccessful attempt to drum up support in the royal houses of Europe for her husband's "empire", so she survived her husband's fall and execution, but the experience appears to have left her mentally ill, and she was under her brother Leopold's care thereafter. There is a story that a fire once broke out in her living quarters, and as the servants rushed to put it out, she stood there yelling at the flames: "It is forbidden! It is forbidden!"

In 1853, when he was 18 years old, Leopold himself married Marie Henriette, an Austrian noblewoman who was a cousin of Franz Josef's. They had three daughters and a son. The son died at the age of 9, leaving Leopold's younger brother Philippe as his heir presumptive. After the last of their children were born, Leopold and his wife lived separate lives until the queen died in 1902.

Leopold was a notorious rake, with a particular taste for teenage girls. In the 1880s, there was a scandal in London over the trafficking of poor underaged English girls to rich foreign gentlemen. Leopold of Belgium was named in a British investigation as one of the foreigners who was paying steep prices for a steady supply of young British girls guaranteed to be virgins. But the investigation was hushed up, rumor has it that happened because the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII, was named as another gentleman with a similar arrangement.

As for Leopold's three daughters, the eldest, Louise, married Prince Philipp, a German nobleman, against the wishes of Leopold, who saw the marriage as a threat to Belgium's prized neutrality. The marriage fell apart, then Louise took a lover, then she divorced Philipp, then she got deeply into debt, then she committed forgery, then she spent some time in an asylum for the insane until her lover busted her out of the place.

The second daughter, Stéphanie, married Archduke Rudolf, the only son of the Austrian Kaiser Franz Josef, which put her in line to be the next kaiserin as well as getting an African lake and an asteroid named after her. Now, this was a marriage that Leopold could get behind. But it was probably a bad sign when Rudolf showed up in Brussels to meet his fiancée for the first time and brought his mistress with him. Rudolf and Stéphanie had a daughter together, but the marriage soon fell apart and they both entered into affairs with other people. Rudolf, as you may recall from episode 1, apparently killed himself in 1889, leaving the Austrian Kaiser with no male heir. Stéphanie remarried in 1900 to a Hungarian count. Leopold did not approve of this second marriage, and frequently referred to Stephanie's husband as "that shepherd".

The third daughter, Clémentine, who was much younger than her siblings, fell in love with Napoléon-Victor Bonaparte, sometimes called Napoleon V, the last hope of the dwindling number of Bonapartists in France. But Leopold wasn't keen on picking a fight with the Third Republic, and forbade

the marriage. After her mother died, Clémentine took over the duties of hostess at Leopold's palace. Although it's not clear what, if anything, Clémentine ever did to alienate her father the way her sisters had, a Belgian cabinet minister remarked late in the king's life that Leopold had only two ambitions: To become a billionaire, and to ensure that his daughters never saw a penny of it. Spoiler alert: he will achieve both his ambitions.

And bear in mind here that the reason why Belgium has a royal family in the first place is that the Congress of Vienna ordained that every country in Europe needed to be a monarchy in order to spare the continent the ravages of republicanism. So, nice job, Congress of Vienna. You must be very proud.

Anyway, by 1875, Leopold had been King of the Belgians for 10 years, and he still didn't have his colony. It was at this point he began to turn his attention to Africa, and in particular, that big blank spot in the center of European maps of the continent: The Congo. He followed the stories of Livingstone and Stanley with interest.

Now, I previously mentioned slavery. There was still a slave trade going on in Africa at this time. Slavery was passing away in European and American territories, but the Ottomans still practiced something akin to slavery, and Africans themselves still owned slaves. The island of Zanzibar, off the east coast of Africa, belonged to Oman at this time, and slaves were still being captured in Africa, brought to Zanzibar, and shipped on to Ottoman lands. Westerners liked to call this the "Arab slave trade", although the traders in Africa were themselves Muslim Black Africans.

If Leopold could not conquer a colony, or buy a colony, perhaps he could con the world into giving him one. He convened a conference in Brussels of African explorers and established the International African Association, intended as a charitable organization to fight slavery and bring the blessings of civilization to central Africa. The organization could be headquartered in Brussels, right? Because Belgium is a small and neutral country that is clearly no threat to the great powers and offers no competition to their colonial ambitions, right? The idea was a popular one, and philanthropists across Europe began to donate money.

As soon as Stanley returned to Europe following his exploration of the Congo River, full of stories about the region's potential and the horrible Arab slave traders, Leopold began putting out feelers. In 1878, they met and struck a deal. Stanley would return to the Congo for further exploration, on Leopold's payroll this time. Leopold created another organization, the International Association of the Congo. Now, Leopold deliberately kept his financial dealings murky, but it appears that the International Association of the Congo was a for-profit corporation 100% owned by King Leopold. He deliberately gave it a name similar to the International African Association, his philanthropic nonprofit that he now cast adrift. The Congo Association even had its own flag – a single gold star on a blue background.

Stanley spent the next five years travelling the Congo on King Leopold's payroll. He built a trail to bypass that 200 miles of rapids that made it so hard to travel into the Congo from the Atlantic coast, and at the upper end of the trail, where the Congo River becomes navigable, Stanley built an outpost and called it Leopoldville. He travelled through the Congo, signing treaties wherever he went, and planting the blue-and-gold flag. The native African leaders were signing agreements granting Leopold exclusive trade rights, and ceding to the Congo Association all their land. They thought they were signing treaties of

friendship, and had no idea of the sweeping concessions they were making in these documents they could not read.

King Leopold had swindled for himself a colony, a colony not for Belgium, but for King Leopold personally. His own private domain, a territory as large as western Europe, or the entire United States east of the Mississippi. But this was the time of the “scramble for Africa". Britain, France and Germany in particular were expanding their African holdings. Unless the major powers could be persuaded to recognize Leopold’s claims, they wouldn’t mean very much. But how could they be persuaded to recognize claims that are adverse to their own interests? The Italian explorer de Brazza, for example, was already exploring the Congo River himself in the name of France.

Leopold was nothing if not wily. He needed a country to back his claim, ideally a rising power with no African interests of its own. There was such a country, and Leopold went to work on it. Its name is the United States of America.

We’ll have to stop there for today, but I hope you’ll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of the heart of darkness, and examine King Leopold’s dealings in the Congo. It turns out that he’s willing to do anything to make a buck, and by “anything” I mean mass murder. That’s next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

Oh, and one more thing. I’m sure everyone who listens to *The History of the Twentieth Century* understands that I couldn’t possibly put this podcast together without relying on books and articles by many great historians who are much wiser and harder-working than I will ever be. But for these two episodes on the heart of darkness, I have to give a particular shoutout to Adam Hochschild and his book *King Leopold’s Ghost.* Hochschild has written a brilliant book, which I highly recommend, on a subject that most people try to ignore, and that many would prefer that we all forgot. Thank you, Adam.

[music: Closing Theme]