

The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 20
“Heart of Darkness II”
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Leopold II, King of the Belgians, had always wanted a colonial empire to call his very own. With the help of Henry Morton Stanley, he was able to con local leaders in the Congo into signing away their lands to him. But these treaties were mere scraps of paper unless the western nations could be persuaded to recognize them. So he set out to get that recognition from the major powers, beginning with the United States.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 20. Heart of Darkness – Part II.

[music: Liszt, *Three Funeral Odes*]

You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do. Temperament, I suppose.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Henry Shelton Sanford was a wealthy American businessman from Connecticut. He was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Belgium by President Lincoln in 1861. He served in that position throughout the Lincoln and Johnson administrations. He represented the American Geographical Society at King Leopold's conference to organize the International African Association. In 1883, he met with U.S. President Chester Arthur to lobby for American recognition of the Congo Association's claim to the Congo.

It was the most sophisticated lobbying effort a foreign power had ever made in the United States, and you should bear in mind that at this point, although the United States is a rising power, few people would call it a great power. The United States' government, the United States' people, were not accustomed to being lobbied by foreign interests. And this was a polished operation – Leopold managed it long-distance from Europe, sending coded telegrams back and forth to Sanford. And it wasn't just the U.S. government that was being lobbied; all sorts of private organizations and interests in the United States were being told whatever it was they needed to hear to support Leopold's project. Sanford told President Arthur that Leopold's Congo project was like America's own little African project, Liberia. The comparison was an apt one, since like the Congo, Liberia was not a project of the United States government, but rather of a private charitable organization. Sanford suggested to white supremacist southern Democrats that

African-Americans could be sent to build new lives in the Congo. He told the chamber of commerce that the Congo would be a free trade zone that would welcome American business and investment. It all worked. The United States became the first country to recognize the International African Association's claim — or wait, is that the International Association of the Congo? The U.S. State Department's declarations actually used both names interchangeably, sometimes in the same paragraph.

The upshot of the deal was that the United States government was now going to recognize Leopold's Congo Association as if it were a sovereign state, and it would respect the flag of the Congo Association flown from ships in the same way it would respect the flag of any other sovereign power. This was a huge boost to Leopold's credibility, and with this in hand, he turned to the great powers in Europe.

Next up were the French – recognition in exchange for Leopold recognizing the French claim to the land on the other bank of the Congo, which was explored by De Brazza and is the reason why there are two Congos on the map to this day. And also in exchange for the promise that if Leopold went bankrupt (which the French considered highly likely) that the Congo would go to France. The French liked that idea because they didn't want to see it go to Britain.

The Germans were next. They reasoned that Leopold's Congo with free trade for German merchants would be a better deal than a French Congo or a British Congo. And so even the crafty Otto von Bismarck got rolled by Leopold II. To the Belgian government, Leopold promised to fund his Congo project on his own, and that it would never be a drain on the Belgian treasury.

And so, at the Berlin Conference in 1885, the great powers recognized what would come to be called the Congo Free State – the first state ever to be governed by a corporation (or an organization, or... whatever it is).

[music: Liszt, *Three Funeral Odes*]

...these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Leopold II would rule over the Congo Free State for nearly 25 years. Unlike Belgium, there was no parliament to answer to, no constituencies, no journalists. He had a free hand. And he would use it to extract a tremendous fortune from the Congo through the savage brutalization of the Congolese, while all the while proclaiming to the rest of the world that the Congo Free State was a philanthropic project to better their lives.

I've already touched on some of the difficulties that had left the Congo region largely unexplored until this time. New technologies gave Leopold opportunities to exploit the Congo that were unavailable to his predecessors. Stanley had already built a trail up from the coast into the Congo Plateau. Ultimately there would be a train, although that would take a long time to build. Once you were up on the plateau, where the river is navigable, steamboats opened up the African interior. And although the Congolese had old-style firearms, as we have already seen, the vastly more effective rifles of the late 19th century rendered these all but useless.

Leopold spent the early years raising investment money. The Congo Association divided its territory into regions, and granted exclusive rights to subsidiaries to exploit those regions. Each subsidiary was 50% owned by the Congo Association, with the other 50% to be sold to investors. Leopold pitched the project as a valuable investment or a worthwhile charity, depending on his audience. He even tried to sell Congo bonds to the Pope.

And after he gave the Belgian parliament a few years to forget he had promised not to ask them for any money, he went to them and asked them for money, which they granted – an interest-free loan. Leopold also went back to the major powers and asked for (and was granted) the right to impose tariffs, in spite of the Congo supposedly being a free-trade area, because he needed the money (for the benefit of the Congolese, of course).

From the beginning, Leopold claimed all vacant land in the Congo for his company. He never defined what “vacant” meant, but in practice it meant “any land that Leopold wanted”. The Association also claimed the right to impress any Congolese laborer at any time. Because once Europeans got off the riverboats, they would still need the traditional hundreds of porters to carry their stuff. Porters were chained together at the neck in long trains, which was justified on the grounds that Africans were lazy and had no work ethic, so they had to be taught, and it was all for their own good.

Impressed Congolese laborers were theoretically entitled to be paid, although their pay was often nothing more than the food they were fed during their period of service. And the quantity of that food was such that many of them starved to death. One witness reported that 300 men were impressed in a Congolese village, and marched off into the jungle to serve as porters, and not one of them ever returned home.

Initially, the most valuable commodity to be gotten from the Congo was ivory. Ivory has always been used for carving. We forget nowadays how valuable it was for everyday objects in a world that did not have plastics. Ivory was used to make handles for pistols, knives, tableware; it was used in the manufacture of musical instruments, most notably piano keys; and many other everyday items, from dentures to billiard balls.

And there was never enough of it to satisfy the demand. By the late 19th century, chemists were already experimenting with early forms of plastics to use as a substitute, but it would take decades more before ivory became obsolete.

Leopold organized the notorious Force Publique to impose order in the Congo, keep the workers in line, and suppress the many revolts the Congo Free State experienced. The Force's officers were Europeans,

but the rank and file were Congolese. Why did some Congolese serve in the Force Publique? Some were evil and corrupt, no doubt; others probably judged they would rather hold the lash than feel it.

Which brings me to the *chicotte*, a whip used to punish slaves. The *chicotte* appears to have originated in the Dutch East Indies, was imported to South Africa by Afrikaners, was adopted by the Portuguese in their African territories, and from thence made its way into the Congo. In its Congolese form, a *chicotte* is a long whip made of a thick strip of hippopotamus rawhide, twisted into a spiral so that it's chock full of sharp edges.

Congolese were punished by being stripped naked, pinned to the ground face down in a spread-eagle position, and then lashed on the buttocks. Every blow drew blood. Generally, they screamed for the first few blows, then it died down to groans and sighs. 25 lashes, which was a minimal punishment, usually led to unconsciousness. 100 lashes was often fatal. European overseers often added to the punishment by doing creative things like rubbing salt or pepper into the wounds, or demanding that the victim be pulled to his feet and salute immediately afterward.

Leopold did not spare Congolese children. He established three "orphanages" in the Congo, which were really more like military academies. They mostly took in boys, who mostly were orphaned because their parents had been killed by the Force Publique. These orphan boys were marched overland to the orphanages, and then those who survived the marches lived under the discipline of the *chicotte*. The minority who survived all of that and made it to adulthood were then enrolled in the Force Publique.

A Belgian lawyer who came to Leopoldville to serve as the town magistrate reported hearing the screams of children one Sunday morning shortly after his arrival. When he investigated, he found a group of about 30 boys aged from 8-12, crying out in terror as they watched their group being whipped with *chicottes* one by one – 25 lashes each. It seemed that a group of boys had laughed at a white man on the street, and so it was decreed that every servant boy in the town be given 50 lashes – 25 today, and 25 on Monday.

Even so, Leopold's project struggled for many years. The best thing that happened to Leopold (and the worst thing to the Congolese) was when a Scotman living in Northern Ireland named John Dunlop invented the inflatable bicycle tire. Bicycles had already been invented by this time, but they gave you a bumpy ride and they weren't very popular for that reason. Inflatable tires were a boon for the bicycle, and within a few years would become standard equipment on automobiles as well. And as a result, demand for rubber skyrocketed.

Around the world, rubber tree plantations were being established, but in the Congo, they had rubber vines that were ready to harvest today. It was great for Leopold, but he also realized that the rubber supply was going to increase in a few years once these plantations got going, so it was essential to squeeze as much rubber as possible out of the Congo as quickly as possible. Congolese men were impressed to go out into the jungle and collect impossibly large quantities of rubber. Often, their wives and children were held hostage to ensure their compliance. Even when they could meet the quotas, the loss of all this labor meant that no one was working the village farms.

And with the rubber craze came the unique horror of the Congo. Force Publique men were being issued bullets to use as needed to enforce King Leopold's will, but the officers didn't trust the men, and demanded proof that the bullets were being used properly. This proof took the form of a human right hand. A right hand was demanded in exchange for every bullet. The result was a grisly trade in human hands. If a member of the Force lost a bullet, or used a bullet for hunting game, all they had to do was find some innocent civilian, cut off his or her hand, and present it to an officer. Human hands were traded by the thousands. There was a black market in human hands. People took to smoking piles of human hands to preserve them for trade and transport.

Photographs of Congolese with missing limbs became commonplace. If you search for them on the Internet right now today, you can find dozens of these photographs. Among the Congolese, the rumor spread that westerners harvested human hands for food.

It was the photographs that did Leopold in. The photographs and the eyewitnesses who spoke out. They are the heroes of this story.

[music: Liszt, *Three Funeral Odes*]

Droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets. I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour; without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

There are actually two sets of heroes in our story. One set is of the many Congolese who fought back. There were about a dozen revolts against Leopold in various parts of the Congo, and mutinies within the Force Publique. Some of these revolts lasted for years. I wish I could tell you more about them, I wish I could give you the names of their leaders, and I wish I could tell you what great offenses were done against them and their people that sparked the uprisings.

But I can't. I can't because they were all put down. I can't because the Congolese didn't have their own written languages in which to record their stories. Perhaps some survived. Perhaps some found their way deep into the jungle, where they could hide and where Leopold never reached them. We may never know. But don't say they didn't revolt. Don't say they accepted their condition. And don't say they were mindlessly xenophobic, because many of them embraced and even supported foreign missionaries, even as they fought against Leopold.

But in the end, it was not Congolese arms that brought down Leopold's rule. It was the shock and revulsion of the western world when the news got out. And getting the news out required westerners to visit the Congo, observe the horrors firsthand, and report them to the world.

We should not be surprised that there were people who reported. The surprising thing is how many thousands of foreigners passed through the Congo during the period of Leopold's rule and never said a word. Many of these were employees of the Congo Association, of course, and that was a pretty good gig. You might be just a bookkeeper or clerk in Europe, but hop a steamer for the Congo and you can rule over a Congolese village like an emperor. A whole community, with slaves and servants and concubines to do whatever you command. And you can do anything you want to them – up to and including torture and murder – without the slightest fear of consequences. So of course, those people didn't say anything.

One of the first who did say something was George Washington Williams. Williams was an American born in Pennsylvania in 1849. When the U.S. Army began accepting African-American soldiers during the Civil War in 1864, the 14 year old Williams lied about his age and enlisted. After the war, Williams became a Baptist minister, a lawyer, a legislator, and a writer. Williams was also in the habit of calling himself "Colonel Williams", although he never earned that rank. He wrote an 1,100-page work entitled *The History of the Negro Race in America*, the first-ever work of African-American history. W.E.B. DuBois, about whom I will have more to say in a future episode, called Williams "the greatest historian of the race".

When Leopold founded the Congo Free State and got American recognition, Williams bought into the idea of repatriating African-Americans to the Congo. So he went there to check the place out for himself. But what he found shocked and appalled him. In 1890, he wrote an open letter to King Leopold, making a series of accusations concerning his administration of the Congo, which were substantially correct and nicely summarized the objections to Leopold's rule. He wrote about the fraudulent treaties, the stolen land, the rape, and the torture and the murder. He called out Leopold's humanitarian claims, pointing out that despite all of Leopold's boasts, there were no schools or hospitals being built, and for all Leopold had to say about the evils of the slave trade... well, how could chaining Africans together by the neck and forcing them to carry white people's goods for hundreds of miles through the jungle be called anything else?

Even the men of the Force Publique, constantly subjected to strict discipline under the lash of the *chicotte*, were hardly more than slaves themselves. Williams tells a story of two Belgian army officers riding on a riverboat on the Congo who spotted a native paddling in a dugout canoe some distance away, and made a £5 wager over which one of them could kill him with their rifle first. It took only three shots before the man was dead.

Williams followed up his broadside with more letters: to the President of the United States, to the Secretary of State and other high officials of the U.S. government, demanding action. In one of his letters, Williams appears to have been the first person to use a phrase that will, alas, find all too frequent application in the history of the 20th century: "crimes against humanity".

Williams's charges got a hearing in American newspapers, but King Leopold didn't take this sitting down. He hit back. He used diplomatic channels to assure foreign governments that Williams was a liar. Exposés appeared in the Belgian press accusing Williams of blackmailing the king, labelling him an "unbalanced negro" and calling him out as a "pseudo-colonel". Unfortunately, Williams died of tuberculosis on his

way home from Africa, and that ended his campaign, much to Leopold's relief. But Leopold would resort to similar smear tactics against his other critics, complaining, for instance, that Protestant missionaries who criticized his treatment of the Congolese were motivated by anti-Catholicism.

One such missionary critic was the African-American Presbyterian missionary William Sheppard. Because Sheppard was black, and was able to speak the Kuba language, he was able to win the trust of rural Congolese who had learned to flee from or kill any white man they encountered. Sheppard took down their stories and reported his findings to the Presbyterian Church in America, and they were published in church newsletters, which led to his being sued for libel in the Congo. But by that time, the international uproar had grown great enough the court did not dare convict him, and acquitted him on a technicality instead.

I've already mentioned Joseph Conrad and his novel *Heart of Darkness*, first published as a serial in 1899, and then in book form in 1902. But Leopold's most dangerous opponent was a man who never set foot in the Congo: Edmund Morel.

Morel was born in Paris in 1873, but became a British citizen, and at the age of 18 got a job with a Liverpool shipping company, Elder Dempster. Because he could speak French, Morel was sent to Belgium from time to time to review the shipping accounts.

Still in his early 20s, Morel would review the books and ledgers and would find in them all that was necessary to expose the crimes of the Congo. You see, ships coming from the Congo and docking at Antwerp were carrying hugely valuable cargoes of rubber and ivory. But what were they taking back to the Congo on their return voyages? Nothing for the Congolese. Nothing remotely comparable in value to what was being extracted. In fact, it was mostly rifles and ammunition and uniforms – and chains and shackles. The tools of subjugation and oppression.

In 1902, Morel resigned from Elder Dempster and began a campaign to oppose Leopold's rule in the Congo. In 1903, he founded a magazine, *West African Mail*, to publicize the campaign against Leopold. In 1904, he founded the Congo Reform Association. The new organization was supported by prominent British and Americans like Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain, Booker T. Washington, and Arthur Conan Doyle. The British chocolate magnate William Cadbury, who was a Quaker, bankrolled Morel's efforts. British, Swedish and American missionaries, including William Sheppard, sent photographs and eyewitness accounts, which Morel published in his magazine.

In May 1903, the political pressure in Britain had grown to the point where the House of Commons unanimously approved a resolution calling for the Congo to be governed with humanity, and accusing Leopold of going back on his promises. The very next day, the British Foreign Office sent a cable to its consul in the Congo Free State, Roger Casement.

Roger Casement was born in County Dublin in 1864. His father was a Northern Irish Protestant army officer, his mother an Irish Catholic. He lost both parents by the age of 13. At 16, the orphaned Roger went to work for Elder Dempster, the very same Liverpool shipping company that Edmund Morel would work for later, and by the age of 19, he was in the Congo. He helped oversee construction of that rail line

up the rapids from the Atlantic coast to Leopoldville. In 1890, he met a Congo River steamboat captain named Joseph Conrad. Casement and Conrad got along well; each regarded the other as a man of intelligence and perception, and they commiserated in their disillusionment in discovering that the Congo Free State was more like the Visigoths sacking Rome than the noble humanitarian project they had both been led to expect.

Casement joined the British Colonial Service in 1892, and served in what is today Nigeria. Later, he transferred to the Foreign Service and served as the British consul at Lorenço Marques in Portuguese East Africa. In 1900, the Foreign Service made him the first British consul in the Congo Free State. Characteristically, King Leopold insisted on having Casement to lunch at his palace in Brussels before he left for the Congo, but Casement already knew the situation in the Congo well enough not to be taken in by Leopold's charms.

Casement was 36 years old by this time, and he was getting tired of Africa. He had taken an interest in his native Ireland, and was an ardent Home Ruler, so much so that his British colleagues learned never to broach the subject of Ireland whenever Casement was around. Most Europeans he met in Africa thought he was pretty eccentric. He wrote poetry, but he could seldom get it published. He wanted to write a book on Irish history, but his posting in Africa made that impossible. But he was a hard worker, and from the moment he arrived in the Congo, he began bombarding the Foreign Office in London with long, detailed reports about the injustices of Leopold's rule, much to the Foreign Office's annoyance.

He was frustrated that his foreign service career was not advancing as he would have liked. By now he should have been getting more comfortable postings in places like Germany or Italy, but the Foreign Office kept returning him to Africa. No doubt his reputation as a crank and his background as an Irishman who was vocal about Home Rule had something to do with it. There may also have been rumors that he was gay, which he most definitely was. He was gay, he was not ashamed of it, and he was pretty promiscuous, although he managed to keep this part of his life a pretty close secret.

We know this because we have his diaries. In addition to stories about his travels and his views on the Congo and on Irish Home Rule, Casement carefully documented his hookups with young men, generally including a name, an amount paid (if he paid money, which he often did), and a terse summary of the encounter, such as: "Agustino. Kissed many times. \$4." Or, "Down and oh so quick. About 18." Or, "São Palo. Antonio. \$10. Loved mightily." Well, you get the idea.

Casement was well aware of the prosecutions of other gay men of his time, including fellow Irishman Oscar Wilde, which we also know because he also wrote about these things in his diary. He must have realized he was taking a big risk by committing his own private moments to paper like that. And that, I believe, is what Mike Duncan calls "foreshadowing".

Anyway, in the wake of that House of Commons resolution, the Foreign Office immediately thought of Roger Casement, the author of all those long, cranky memos about King Leopold, and tasked him to do a thorough investigation of the Congo Free State. Casement did his work diligently, spending weeks crisscrossing the Congo, hiring his own riverboat so Leopold's employees couldn't control his itinerary, and sometimes walking for days through the jungle to interview victims. He produced a damning 40-page

parliamentary report in 1904, detailing the kidnappings, torture, and murder that were routine in the Congo.

You have to wonder: To what degree were Roger Casement's personal experiences as an Irishman working for the British Crown, and as a closeted gay man in an age of cruel persecution of gay men, the explanation for why he was able to empathize with the suffering of the Congolese, and feel outrage at the crimes committed against them to a degree few other white Europeans could manage? And you have to wonder how much longer Leopold's rule would have lasted had there been no gay Irishman around to call foul.

Anyway, Casement's report created an international furor. The foreign service of the most powerful country in the world was now on the record accusing Leopold of the most awful crimes you could imagine. The Italian and French governments followed up with their own investigations in the Congo and drew similar conclusions. Finally, the Belgian parliament did its own investigation and produced a report that, if anything, was even more detailed and more damning than Casement's.

In 1908, the Belgian government annexed the Congo. This would improve the lot of the Congolese, but the Congo would remain an unhappy nation for the rest of the century.

Before Leopold turned over control of the Congo, he had his staff in both Brussels and in the Congo set to work burning the records of his administration. "I will give them my Congo," Leopold reportedly said, "but they have no right to know what I did there." As a result, many of the stories of the people in the Congo during this time have been erased from the record.

And there has been little interest in remembering Leopold's crimes afterward. Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the 20th century know that Belgium is going to become involved in a world war, and then in another world war, and then in an almost third world war. The narrative of innocent, neutral-but-plucky Belgium standing up to stronger and more brutal nations made good propaganda, but it also made it necessary to sweep Leopold's crimes under the rug. Adam Hochschild calls this "The Great Forgetting". Today, Leopold is more often remembered in Belgium as "the Builder King", after the many buildings and monuments he constructed. Just don't ask too many questions about where the money came from.

How many Congolese died during Leopold's administration? Estimates range from 3 to 10 million. The Belgians, of course, will tell you that there were also many deaths under other colonial regimes, such as Britain's or France's or Spain's or Portugal's, not to mention the number of Native Americans killed in the U.S. And they're right.

The amount of wealth Leopold gained from the Congo is estimated at over one billion dollars in today's money. He put this money into a byzantine network of accounts and foundations with the goal of keeping it out of the hands of his three daughters and the Belgian government. In the final decade of his life, when he was in his 60s and 70s, he took a mistress, who was only 16 years old when they first met, and spent huge amounts of money on her. She would bear him two illegitimate sons. He died in 1909, leaving the throne of Belgium to his nephew and a tangle of finances that would take 15 years of litigation to sort out.

There were lawsuits between his daughters, his mistress, and the Belgian government. The government ended up with most of Leopold's wealth (we think). As Hochschild points out, in the course of all this litigation, there was no one in the courtroom to make the argument that the money should be refunded to the Congolese.

We'll have to stop there for today. I'm going to need to take a week off to do some researching and writing, so there won't be an episode posted next week, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we return to the United States and check in with Theodore Roosevelt. That's in two weeks, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In 1931, a monument to Leopold II was built at the Belgian coast town of Ostend. The monument includes a statue of Leopold on a horse, and looking up at him from below, there are statues of grateful Congolese and Belgians. In 2004, an anarchist group cut off the right hand of one of the Congolese statues to memorialize Leopold's crimes. The Ostend City Council decided to keep the statue that way and not try to repair it.

[music: Closing Theme]

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