

CONGO UNDER KING LEOPOLD II

I. Genocide

The policy of Leopold II in the Congo Free State has recently come under attack in the British media, and more particularly in the BBC documentary “White King, Red Rubber, Black Death”. More than 10 million Congolese are said to have died under the rule of Leopold II, in his colony. These media claim that numerous deaths and cruelties ought to be ascribed to the system of licensing that King Leopold II had set up for the exploitation of rubber. The indigenous people were claimed to have been weakened and some even killed by forced labour for the exploitation of rubber in Congo. The reign of Leopold II is described as “genocidal”.

- First of all, the use of the term ‘genocide’ is debatable in this context. ‘Genocide’ can only be used if there is a clear intention to destroy a population on nationalistic, ethnic, racial or religious grounds. Neither King Leopold II nor his administrators ever ordered the extermination of the Congolese population, or of some groups of it. On the contrary, the Congo administration needed the local labour for the cultivation of rubber and therefore had no interest in decimating it.
- The alleged 10 million deaths caused by King Leopold’s reign are also highly implausible. The number of victims is calculated by subtracting the estimated number of the population at the end of his rule (less than 10 million) from the estimated figure at the beginning of Leopold’s rule (20 million). However, these numbers are based on rough estimates which are, at best, very inaccurate and, at worst, totally incorrect:
 1. The first official and trustworthy demographic data about Congo did not appear until the fifties. In 1958, Congo officially counted 13,540,182 natives¹. It is therefore very unlikely that Congo would have counted more than 10 million people at the beginning of the century. By comparison: the indigenous population of French Equatorial Africa was estimated to be 15 million at the beginning of the 20th century. Afterwards this estimate was reduced to a mere 3 million natives. Of course, the difference between these two numbers is not the result of genocide². Furthermore, the first estimates of the native population in Congo were made by H.M. Stanley and were based on the extrapolation of the population density along the Congo River. However, the inland of Congo was (and still is) much less populated than the riversides.

¹ *Statistics 1958*. In: **Belgian Congo**, Vol. II, published by the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi Information and Public Relations Office, Brussels, 1960

² Sic Prof. LUC VELLUT, *Université Catholique de Louvain*, as stated in the RTBF debate broadcasted on April 8, 2004

2. Even the most densely populated countries of Africa, Egypt and Nigeria (which nowadays both have a population of more than 100 million souls, compared to the current 52 million inhabitants of Congo) did not have a population of 20 million by the end of the 19th century. The neighbouring country of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) counted at that period less than half a million inhabitants for a country a quarter the size of Congo.
 3. Another reason why the accusation of “genocide” is out of proportion and unrealistic, is the fact that only 175 agents were in charge of the exploitation of rubber in Congo at the beginning of the 1890s. Most of them were not Belgian and a considerable number of them quickly succumbed to tropical diseases.
 4. Finally, the cultivation of rubber was geographically restricted to the equatorial rainforest around the northern Congo basin and to a lesser extent to the Kasai region (totalling one fifth of Congo’s territory). The estimated 10 million deaths for the **whole** of Congo cannot be ascribed to the Belgians, simply because at the beginning of the colonisation, they were not even present or active in the whole of Congo.
- Even if demographic changes would have taken place in certain regions of Congo, they cannot solely be attributed to the reign of Leopold II. Other factors that have to be taken into account are: migration, tropical diseases and slave trade (which had been taking place in many parts of Congo before the reign of King Leopold II and which he made great efforts to completely eradicate). Mr Elikia M’Bokolo, one of the experts who contributed to the BBC documentary, also confirms this fact. Although in the BBC documentary he ascribes the 10 million deaths to the reign of Leopold II, he writes in one of his previous publications that the exact reason for these deaths cannot be clearly determined (emigration, tropical diseases, colonial rule) and that further research is necessary³.

II. Personal actions of Leopold II

In the BBC documentary, Leopold II is portrayed as a power-mad person, driven merely by avarice. His actions are compared with those of Adolf Hitler.

Abuses certainly did take place in Congo. Leopold II wrote in a letter of 3 January 1899 to colonel Liebrechts, officer of the Congo Free State that « *Ces horreurs doivent cesser ou je me retirerai du Congo. Je me refuse à me laisser éclabousser de sang et de boue; il faut absolument que cessent tous les abus* ». The Congo Free State also issued several orders to stop the abuses in Congo (e.g. by limiting the number of hours that the indigenous people had to carry out duties for the administration to 40 hours a month, by imposing minimum wages to be paid for these duties and by adjusting the required rubber production to the environment (degree of forestation, distance to the village...)⁴. However it must be acknowledged that these orders were not systematically implemented.

³ Sic Prof. LUC VELLUT. Idem

⁴ *Law of November 18, 1903*

It was Leopold himself who decided in 1904 (after negative comments in the British press) to set up an investigation committee composed of a Belgian, an Italian and a Swiss magistrate. This committee was given total freedom to carry out investigations in Congo and its results were published in the 'Official Bulletin of Congo Free State'⁵. The Committee's conclusions were much more detailed than those provided by the press. For instance, the investigation committee of 1904 condemned the excessive use of military expeditions, particularly for the levying of taxes or for the punishments of crimes. Especially the missions of indigenous patrols without European escorts were heavily criticised. It was during such expeditions in particular that the majority of abuses were committed. The committee confirms however that there did exist a prohibition for indigenous patrols to operate without a European commander, but it acknowledges that this prohibition was frequently ignored⁶. The committee also confirms that some abuses were prosecuted by the justice system in Congo Free State (which had only been created shortly before), albeit not always in an efficient manner⁷.

The results of these investigations were published without reservations.

III. Chopped off hands

One of the things that shocked public opinion at the end of the 19th century, were the pictures of chopped off hands of local people. Claims were made at the time that Belgian agents ordered to chop off the hands of dead fighters as evidence that the indigenous soldiers did not use their ammunition to shoot game. It was also said that some of the victims' hands were cut off while they were alive as a type of punishment.

In its findings, the investigation committee acknowledged the fact that such abuses took place, but concluded that there did not exist any active policy to cut off the hands of defeated opponents. It was not a practice ordered or imposed by Congo Free State or by Leopold II, but was the result of individual acts, based upon prior existing local customs⁸. Mutilations were not introduced by the Belgians, but already existed and still do in some parts of Africa – they occurred not only in the Congo, but for instance also recently in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Taking the “scalp” of the enemy is not even peculiar to Africa.

The Belgian government admits that individual abuses took place in Congo, but rejects the accusations that circulate in the press. That is the reason why next year the Africa Museum in Tervuren is organising an exhibition, which will portray an independent and realistic picture of Congo under colonial rule.

IV. Other facts

a. It is sometimes claimed in the press that certain documents dating from those days are being kept secret by the Belgian State (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in particular).

⁵ *Bulletin Officiel de l'EIC*, N° 9-10, sept.-oct. 1905

⁶ *Bulletin officiel de l'état indépendant du Congo*, N° 9&10, p. 214

⁷ *Bulletin officiel de l'EIC*, N° 9-10, p. 221

⁸ *Bulletin officiel de l'EIC*, N° 9&10, p.222-226

In fact, Belgian archives are publicly accessible after a time span of 50 years. Personal information is only released after a period of 100 years to safeguard individual privacy. This implies that all documents dating from before 1904, including those relating to Leopold II personally and others, and which are in the hands of the Belgian State, can be freely consulted.

b. In the media (and in the BBC documentary) it is occasionally claimed that all the documents from the personal archives of Leopold II, which provide a damaging picture of his rule in the Congo, have been destroyed.

A substantial part of Leopold II's personal archives have been preserved thanks to the care of M. Goffinet, the king's assistant. These documents are known as the "archives Goffinet" and are accessible. In fact, the press does use documents from the king's personal archives that point to some negative aspects of his rule⁹.

V. Bibliography

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⁹ The BBC documentary "White King, Red Rubber, black Death" for example quotes and shows several personal letters of King Leopold II to confirm their thesis about the personal wrongdoings of Leopold II.