

Joseph Conrad and Heart of Darkness

Introduction:

"I sit down religiously every morning, I sit down for eight hours every day -- and the sitting down is all. In the course of that working day of 8 hours I write 3 sentences which I erase before leaving the table in despair...it takes all my resolution and power of self-control to refrain from butting my head against the wall. I want to howl and foam at the mouth but I daren't do it for fear of waking that baby and alarming my wife" (from a letter to Garnett; March 29, 1898).
(Heart of Darkness was published less than one year later.)

Novel's inspiration and background:

"Heart of Darkness is no more a direct representation of conditions in the Congo in 1890 than it is of Conrad's actual experiences there; but it is an expression of the essence of the social and historical reality of the Congo Free State as his imagination recreated it" (138).

When asked in 1923 if Kurtz was a real person, Conrad responded: "I saw him die." The man who Conrad "saw die" must have been Klein (an agent of a mining company in the Congo), who died of dysentery on board of their boat. There must have been so escape from the sights, sounds, and smells of a man in the last stages of dysentery -- a disease marked by its repulsive physical manifestations (usually an imaginable degree of emaciation); this may have supplied Marlow's description of Kurtz: "the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving...an animated image of death carved out of old ivory" (134).

As for his own personal commentary on the exploitation of Africa by Belgium colonialization, a letter to his friend Roger Casement (wrote of "real" atrocities done in the Congo), will suffice:

[The black man] shares with us the consciousness of the universe in which we live -- no small burden. Barbarianism per se is no crime...and the Belgians are worse than the seven plagues of Egypt insomuch that in that case it was punishment sent for a definite transgression; but in this the...man is not aware of any transgression, and therefore can see no end to the affliction (160).

This was, in many respects, contrary to the philosophy of the turn of the century: progress. Some quote snippets:

•"The ultimate logic of [Herbert Spencer's beliefs] was the assumption that progress would eventually lead to man's self deification" (163).

•"Finally, men will master the forces of nature; they will become themselves architects of systems, manufacturers of worlds. Man will be perfect; he will then be a creator; he will then be what the vulgar worship as a god" (Winwood Read's The Martyrdom of Man, 1872).

Poem - Auden

" In Father's Footsteps "

Our hunting fathers told the story
Of the sadness of the creatures,
Pitied the limits and the lack
Set in their finished features;
Saw in the lion's intolerant look,
Behind the quarry's dying glare,
Love raging for the personal glory
That reason's gift would add,
The liberal appetite and power,
The rightness of a god.

Some Thoughts on The Heart of Darkness

- Marlow finds "surface truths" saving; Kurtz can never find these truths.
- "There was nothing above or below him."
 - about Kurtz, kicked loose from Heaven and Hell?
 - pre-Christian, primal energy?
- Satan is thinkable/ defines our moral universe; this is unthinkable.
- Marlow is impelled/ driven to search out Kurtz by attraction to this man/demon in order to take the "talisman" from his lips, i.e. the revelation, "The horror! The horror!" But instead Marlow takes back the word "love."
- Kurtz is a hero? who shows the limits of the human spirit.
- Is this about spiritual isolation/ negation/ nihilism?
- "There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies." – Marlow
- When Marlow finally meets up with him, Kurtz is a breathing skeleton, an all-but fossilized being like "an animated image of death carved out of old ivory."
- He is living corpse, withered body, leaving only a speaking soul, the eloquent and brutalized/ brutalizingly corrupt Voice, the Voice that sways to do anything, go anywhere, i.e. "Exterminate the brutes."
- He is death as lie incarnate, death and delusion, even delusion about death. Think of the "supermen" and "super races" of this century. Hitler. Amin.
- "The River That Swallows All Rivers" (title of an article.)
- Congo travels 3000 miles to the Atlantic Ocean. 5th longest in the world. Crosses equator twice. Rains into it year round; it is never dry or low. 2nd most powerful flow.
- King Leopold's Congo Free State (Belgian King) 1885-1908
 - tree rubber (sap) harvest
 - slow, labor-intensive process/ very lucrative
 - Europeans recruited soldiers from cannibal Lualaba tribes to serve as "emissaries" and enforcement agents for the trade company
 - women and children starved to death as hostages as incentives for better harvesting
 - bullwhip floggings, often fatal
 - punitive village raids/ killing, rape

- mass village executions
 - dismemberment
 - smoked buckets of hands used as currency to replace shortfalls in rubber, undelivered food, lower numbers of forced labor gangs
- 20 years of Leopold's personal rule killed 5 million people in the Congo
- Finally brought to light by missionaries (American and British) and reporters.

 THE NEW YORKER



"Can a rising tide lift a boat that has a huge hole in the bottom?"

Election Day (USA)

TUESDAY
NOVEMBER 8

Notes on *King Leopold's Ghost*

Excerpted from Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999, pages 225-233.

"...[A]lthough the killing in the Congo was of genocidal proportions, it was not, strictly speaking, a genocide, " in that "the Congo state was not deliberately trying to eliminate one particular ethnic group from the face of the Earth." Rather, "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."

There were "four closely connected" causes of death between 1885 and 1910, with the greatest loss of life in the 1890s.

1. Murder

"Although outright murder was not the major cause of death in Leopold's Congo, it was the most clearly documented. "

- "When a village 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. "
- "In 1896, a German newspaper, the *Kolnische Zeitung*, published, on the authority of 'a highly esteemed Belgian,' news that 1308 severed hands had been turned over to the notorious District Commissioner Leon Fievez in a single day. The newspaper twice repeated the story without being challenged by the Congo state."
- "In 1899, a state office, 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 the 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....[Roi] informed me that in six months they, the State, on the Momboyo Rover 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 altogether killed more than 1300 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...is impossible, but...when we remember that soldiers were severely punished for 'wasting' bullets on nonhuman targets. ...[R]evealing documents from the A.B.I.R. concession company" show that "in the year 1903, a *single* one of the 35 rubber-collecting posts in A.B.I.R. territory was sent a total of 159 firearms and 40,355 rounds of ammunition."

- Swedish missionary E.V. Sjoblom wrote, "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...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 man 160 hands and they were thrown into the river.'"
- "...a Swedish officer of the Force Publique, Lieutenant Knut Svensson...noted in his diary a death toll of 527 people in 4 and ½ months' time from 1894-5. (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.)"
- "From the diary of Louis Leclercq, another Force Publique officer: '21 June 1895....Arrived at Yambisi...village abandoned...sent several groups of soldiers to scour the area; they came back ...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 3 prisoners in the morning, 3 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 expressed of despair, or 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...District Commissioner Jules Jacques" sent the following memo. "These people...have...cut some rubber 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."

2. Starvation, exhaustion, and exposure

People fleeing burning villages and the soldiers hunting them down had no food or shelter, as the soldier took their animals and burned their crops. Rather than clear areas for rubber processing, soldiers would burn villages, and rather than forage for food, they would raid and plunder a village.

- "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" living near the Congo's borders escaped. The French colonial that some 30,000 refugees crossed into French territory by 1900.
- Most fled into the forest. "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...are sleeping in the forests without shelter.”

- "...[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 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!'"
- "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 3 to 10 a day."

3. Disease

"As with the decimation of the American Indians, disease killed many more Congolese than did bullets. "

- "The local people had no time to build up immunities—as they largely had to malaria. 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 or as soldiers" were exposed to smallpox and sleeping sickness, as well as lung and intestinal infections.
- "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 15-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...Once contracted by humans, sleeping sickness becomes highly contagious. It can cause fever, swelling of lymph glands, a strange craving for meat, and a sensitivity to cold. At last come the immense lethargy that gives the illness its names."
- The malnourished and exhausted population was especially vulnerable to disease. "Charles Greban de Saint-Germain, a magistrate at Stanley Falls, wrote in 1905; "Disease powerfully ravages an exhausted populations, and it's to this cause, in my opinion, that we must attribute the unceasing growth of sleeping sickness in this region..."

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...in the Lake Mai Ndombe district...was surprised by the

almost total absence of children between the ages of 7 and 14" [between 1896 and 1903]. "He estimated that the population had dropped by 60 % and wrote that "...[a] lower percentage of birth 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." Given the climate of conscription, starvation, slavery and terror, families were torn apart and "simply stopped having children."

"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 14th Century Europe, they can be more confident of the percentage than they are of absolute numbers. They have, after all, no census data." The estimates made in the Congo "by those who saw it firsthand agree with some of those made by more scientific methods today."

In 1919, an official Belgian commission estimated that from about 1885 until 1919, the population of the Belgian Congo 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 populations 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 10 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 10 million people."

Heart of Darkness: Reading Plan

Heart of Darkness contains three parts. The novel is a "frame" story, with three significant settings: London, Brussels, and the Congo. An unidentified narrator tells us a story he has heard from a fellow shipmate, Charlie Marlow, aboard the *Nellie*. That is, this unidentified narrator tells us the story he has heard Marlow tell, as the crew of the *Nellie* wait one evening for the tide ("flood") to turn on the Thames River in London. The Thames River is heavily influenced by the tide, and in Conrad's day (the story was completed in 1899, and was based heavily upon Conrad's own African experience in 1890), ships departed as the tide began to recede. During the course of the story, the unidentified narrator from time to time reminds us of this "frame" device, by discussing Marlow or the others who are listening to "one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences."

Part I deals with the London beginning on the Thames, Marlow's trip across the English Channel to Brussels, and his subsequent voyage to Africa. In fact, he lands at the coastal station (Boma) of the company, and travels inland to the central station (Kinshasa) in Part I. At the central station, he learns of Kurtz and begins to work on salvaging and repairing his sunken steamboat.

Part II chronicles Marlow's expanding understanding of "the merry dance of death and trade" begun in Part I, and of the individuals involved in it. Most of all, Part II narrates the journey from the central station to the inner station to encounter Kurtz, and ends just as the steamboat approaches the inner station and they have met with the "harlequin" figure of the Russian who has become "Kurtz's last disciple." From this Russian, Marlow learns of Kurtz's "unsound methods" and his forays into the interior in pursuit of ivory. The journey upriver to the inner station also features an "attack" by indigenous peoples loyal to Kurtz, and death of Marlow's helmsman, an African with whom Marlow had established a "subtle bond."

Part III brings the obligatory scene, the encounter of Marlow and Kurtz, and Marlow's late-night retrieval of Kurtz, who attempts to return to his god-like role among the native peoples on shore. As the steamboat departs the next morning, the "pilgrims" on board savagely shoot a magnificent native "woman with helmeted head" waving on shore in sadness at the departure of Kurtz. Marlow sounds the steamer's whistle as well to disperse the natives on shore. Kurtz dies on the return voyage, and is buried in "a muddy hole" unceremoniously. Part III ends with Marlow's illness and subsequent recovery, and his return to Brussels in possession of Kurtz's papers. He visits Kurtz's Intended and lies to her about Kurtz's final words, telling her Kurtz died saying "your name." In the final paragraph of Part III, the unidentified narrator once again sees Marlow as a "Budda" figure, repeating an image he uses in Part I.

This three-part division of *Heart of Darkness* suggests dividing the novel into three reading segments or assignments. In the widely-used Pelican edition, the assignment breaks down as follows:

- Part I: page 15-55...40 pages
- Part II: page 55-90...35 pages
- Part III: page 90-124...34 pages

As you read, consider the following issues central in *Heart of Darkness*:

1. Kurtz as representative of the modern Western mentality
2. Conrad's criticism of colonialism
3. Marlow's adventure as initiation into reality: ritual voyage
4. The novella as mythic-archetypal pattern: the descent into the underworld and the return of the hero
5. Character contrasts and "doubles": Kurtz vs. Marlow, Kurtz's native "goddess" vs. his English fiancée

SETTINGS AND CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL (Settings, main characters in boldface type)

PART I

1. **LONDON**, Thames River: the Director of Companies hosting "We four": the unidentified narrator, the Lawyer, the Accountant, and **MARLOW**. Note the Accountant playing with dominoes, "toying architecturally with the bones," an early example of the novel's **symbolic** nature. Novel begins on board the *Nellie*, as the crew waits for the tide to run toward the sea.
2. **BRUSSELS**, headquarters of a "Continental concern, that Trading Society." Marlow's aunt, important mention of Fresleven, the man Marlow will replace, two women knitting black wool, secretary, doctor
3. **FRENCH STEAMER**, enroute Africa (shelling continent meaninglessly)
4. **COASTAL STATION** (Boma: "we anchored off the seat of the government")... Marlow there for ten days: Chief Agent (sick); Chief Accountant, who makes first reference to Kurtz (and keeps "correct entries"); six blacks chained together("criminals"); uniformed black guard; dying black with white worsted around neck in "Inferno."
5. **MARCH TO CENTRAL STATION** (Kinshasa)...takes fifteen days: "white companion" for Marlow on march, sick; Marlow sees "middle-aged negro with a bullet hole in forehead."
6. **CENTRAL STATION** (Kinshasa) Marlow there some three months: "stout excitable chap with black moustaches"; manager of station (no learning, no intelligence, never ill..."inspires uneasiness"); young agent ("forked little beard and a hooked nose," brick maker by trade, "papier-mache Mephistopheles"); 16-20 "pilgrims"; old hippo with "charmed life"; foreman (boiler-maker, pigeons as hobby, beard down to his waist); Eldorado Exploring Expedition...uncle of manager = leader (fat)

PART II

English half-caste clerk.

7. **CONGO RIVER**...journey to inner station, to Kurtz: "twenty cannibals"("we had enlisted some of these chaps on the way for a crew"); savage fireman; **hut with neatly stacked woodpile, fifty miles below inner station; pilgrim with**

sandy hair, red whiskers... "a little fat man"... pink pyjamas... he and two others grab winchesters in presence of-- natives on shore in forest; "headman" of cannibal crew hopes to "Eat 'im," if natives are killed; helmsman (educated by "my poor predecessor"); fireman again; helmsman (speared); pilgrim in pink pyjamas; first reference to Intended; pilgrim in pink pj's; manager

8. **INNER STATION**... "some sort of building... half buried in high grass": "**harlequin**" on shore, wearing "motley"--Russian... had written "ciphers."

PART III

Skulls on posts (heads of "rebels"); **KURTZ** (enters on stretcher, carried by "group of men"); "wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" on shore-- apparently Kurtz's African passion; agent buttoned up inside an ulster; Marlow tracks Kurtz through grass on shore; return to steamboat.

9. **CONGO RIVER**... return with Kurtz aboard: pilgrims have "their little fun," shooting "woman with the helmeted head" from the steamboat, the "fierce river demon"; Kurtz in pilot house... wants shutter closed... in dark... Marlow brings candle (note chiaroscuro, tenebrist setting, a la Caravaggio painting)... "Mistah Kurtz--he dead"; pilgrims "bury something in a muddy hole." Marlow's illness.
10. **BRUSSELS**... "I found myself back in the sepulchral city": Marlow's aunt; "spectacled man" from company; Kurtz's cousin; journalist; **Intended**, behind glassy mahogany door; dusk encounter in her quarters; Marlow's lie.
11. **LONDON**... Thames River, on board *Nellie*... return to "frame"... Marlow in "pose of a meditating Buddha"; Director notes loss of "first of the ebb."

HEART OF DARKNESS

A guide to the classic novel by Joseph Conrad

Below is a list of the most noteworthy symbols found throughout *Heart of Darkness*, as well as their meanings and implications in the novel.

- **Congo River** - Marlow's journey on the Congo River can be said to represent a journey into one's inner spirit. As Marlow progresses further up the river in his search for Kurtz, he begins to learn more and more about himself. He comes to realize that he probably has more in common with the natives than the smug Europeans who have come to civilize them. At the end of his journey, Marlow learns that everyone has a dark side to them, but that some people can conceal it better than others.
- **ivory** - The ivory symbolizes greed and the destructive nature of man. The managers and agents of the Company are so obsessed with obtaining ivory that they forget about their morals and so-called civilized ways.
- **white worsted** - Marlow discovers the white worsted wrapped around a negro's neck at the Outer Station. The fabric can be said to represent the attempt of the Europeans to colonize the natives, and the strangling effect it has on them.
- **Kurtz's painting** - The painting at the Central Station is perhaps the most extensive symbol in the novel. The painting is of a blindfolded woman carrying a lighted torch, which distorts her face. The woman likely symbolizes the Europeans who have come to civilize the natives. The torch she carries represents the European customs and values that they try to force upon the native Africans. The woman is blindfolded because the Europeans cannot "see" the negative effects that their customs have on the natives. Her face has become distorted because, to the natives, the European customs seem rather repulsive.
- **Eldorado Exploring Expedition** - This group is symbolic of the Whites' search for something that cannot be attained. Eldorado is historically known as a city of gold that never actually existed. However, the prosperity that could possibly be gained was so overwhelming for this group that they felt compelled to risk their lives for it.
- **candle on the steamship** - Marlow brings a candle into Kurtz's quarters as Kurtz is dying on the ship. The candle is symbolic of Kurtz's losing struggle for life. When Kurtz finally

submits to death, Marlow blows out the candle.

- **Kurtz** - Kurtz represents man's dark side and what can happen when it envelops you completely. Kurtz's prolonged exposure to the untamed regions of the Congo has removed all his ties to civilization. He no longer feels satisfied with just being a mere mortal, so instead transforms himself into an omnipotent being. Kurtz's descent into madness is firmly established with his disturbing final words, "The horror! The horror!"
- **General Manager** - The manager symbolizes all the immorality of European colonization. It is no coincidence that he ran the most disorganized and deplorable station in the region. The manager led his station not through intelligence and acumen, but rather, through his ability to stay healthy and invoke uneasiness. He was not interested in actually colonizing the region. His only concern was to attain as much ivory as possible.

Motifs of the novel - entering the haze:

Themes

repentance

moral awareness - it "seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me -- and into my thoughts" (HOD, 51).

civilization v. Wilderness

imperialism

journey - novel as an allegory for a descent into hell

penetration

destiny / fate

crucible - Conrad believed that people who never confront evil never grow up spiritually.

religion - Buddha, Christ

sacrifice

alter-ego

archetypal figures - Kurtz; native mistress of Kurtz

truth v. belief - "One of Marlow's functions is to represent how much a man cannot know" (Watt, 174)

impressionism - "Poor blind idiots. They want to see everything clearly, even through the fog." -Monet

effect of narrator - Marlow's delayed decoding: "Sticks, little sticks, were flying about -- thick: they were wizzing by my nose...[minutes later] Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!" (HOD, 110).

symbols - "All great creations of literature have been symbolic...A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion." -Conrad

- journey

- characters (Kurtz, helmsman, etc.)

- objects (ivory, Marlow's bloody shoes, rivets, pilgrims' staves, heads on the posts, the river, colors-esp. yellow)

- incidents (Marlow's job interview, grove of death, etc.)

- atmosphere (light and darkness)

- scene (on the Congo, stations, jungle/wilderness, etc.)

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

For Luck
Genocide With Spin Control: Kurtz Wasn't Fiction

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" is frequently read as an allegorical or Freudian parable while its murderous hero, Kurtz, the renegade white trader who lives deep in the Congo jungle behind a fence adorned with shrunken heads, is regarded as a Nietzschean madman or avatar of colonial ambition run dangerously amok.

As Adam Hochschild's disturbing new book on the Belgian Congo makes clear, however, Kurtz was based on several historical figures, and the horror Conrad described was all too real. In fact, Mr. Hochschild suggests, "Heart of Darkness" stands as a remarkably "precise and detailed" portrait of King Leopold's Congo in 1890, just when one of history's most heinous acts of mass killing was getting under way.

Under the reign of terror instituted by King Leopold II of Belgium (who ran the Congo Free State as his personal fief from 1885 to 1908), the population of the Congo was reduced by half: as many as eight million Africans (perhaps even 10 million, in Mr. Hochschild's opinion) lost their lives.

Some were beaten or whipped to death for failing to meet the rigid production quotas for ivory and rubber harvests, imposed by Leopold's agents. Some were worked to death, forced to labor in slavelike conditions as porters, rubber gatherers or miners for little or no pay. Some died of the diseases introduced to (and spread throughout) the Congo by Europeans. And still others died from the increasingly frequent famines that swept the Congo basin as Leopold's army rampaged through the countryside, appropriating food and crops for its own use while destroying villages and fields.

Although much of the material in



Mikhail Lemkhin/Houghton Mifflin

KING LEOPOLD'S GHOST
A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa

By Adam Hochschild

Illustrated. 366 pages. Houghton Mifflin. \$26.

"King Leopold's Ghost" is second-hand — the author has drawn heavily from Jules Marchal's scholarly four-volume history of turn-of-the-century Congo and from "The Scramble for Africa," Thomas Pakenham's wide-ranging 1991 study of the European conquest of the continent — Mr. Hochschild has stitched it together into a vivid, novelistic narrative that makes the reader acutely aware of the magnitude of the horror perpetrated by King Leopold and his minions. It is a book that situates Leopold's crimes in a wider context of European and African history while at the same time underscoring the peculiarly modern nature of his efforts to exert spin control over his actions.

As depicted by Mr. Hochschild, the people in "Ghost" emerge as larger-than-life figures, the sort of characters who might easily populate a Victorian melodrama were it not for the tragic and very real consequences of their actions. Leopold himself comes across as a cartoon-strip megalomaniac, a mad, greedy king obsessed since adolescence with the idea of running a colony of his own and intent throughout his career on cloaking his lust for money and real estate in honeyed talk of philanthropy and human rights.

As for Henry Morton Stanley, the world-famous explorer whom Leopold retained as his agent, he is depicted as a Dickensian bully and chronic liar who allowed his own monumental celebrity to be used by Leopold for the worst possible ends. He eventually persuaded hundreds of Congo basin chiefs to sign over their land and their rights to the King of the Belgians.

With the sheaf of treaties Stanley had acquired firmly in hand, King Leopold embarked on a worldwide lobbying campaign to win diplomatic recognition of his new colony. He succeeded in winning this recognition, Mr. Hochschild argues, by playing one great European power against another and by portraying his control of the Congo as a kind of benevolent protectorship that would bring a civilizing influence to the continent while thwarting the malign designs of Arab slave-traders eager to exploit the same region.

In actuality, Leopold saw the Congo as his personal domain (his power as sovereign of the colony was not shared with the Belgian Government) and as a rich source of rubber, ivory and other natural resources that could fatten his coffers at home. Mr. Marchal, the Belgian scholar, estimates that Leopold drew some 220 million francs (or \$1.1 billion in today's dollars) in profits from the Congo during his lifetime. Much of that money, Mr. Hochschild suggests, went to buying expensive dresses and villas for Leopold's teenage mistress, a former call girl named Caroline, and building ever grander monuments, museums and triumphal arches in honor of the King.

Those profits came at the price of terrible suffering by the Congolese people. Not only was their land summarily annexed — most of the chiefs who signed Stanley's "treaties" had no idea what they were signing — but they were also coerced into the arduous job of gathering rubber for Leopold's men as well. Those who refused or failed to meet their quotas were brutally whipped, tortured or shot, Mr. Hochschild reports; others saw their wives and children taken hostage by Leopold's soldiers.

Mr. Hochschild writes that hostage-taking and the grisly severing of hands (from corpses or from living human beings) were part of the Government's deliberate policy — a means of terrorizing others into submission. As the "rubber terror" spread through the Congolese rain forest, Mr. Hochschild adds, entire villages were wiped out: hundreds of dead bodies were dumped in rivers

and lakes, while baskets of severed hands were routinely presented to white officers as evidence of how many people had been killed.

Mr. Hochschild writes about these horrifying events with tightly controlled anger, and he brings equal passion to his account of the small band of protesters who orchestrated resistance to Leopold's rule. Those protesters include Edmund Denon Morel, a British shipping company employee who brought the King's crimes to world attention; George Washington Williams, a black American journalist who chronicled the grisly conditions in the Congo in an open letter to King Leopold; and Roger Casement, an Irish member of the British consular service who sent home a torrent of dispatches:

For the Congo, the civilizing influence of the King of the Belgians.

condemning both specific atrocities and the entire way the colony was run.

The efforts of these men and others helped bring international pressure to bear on Leopold, and in 1908 he turned over the Congo — in effect sold it — to the Belgian Government.

Leopold, in the meantime, tried to insure that his crimes would never make it into the history books. Shortly after the turnover of the colony Mr. Hochschild writes, the furnaces near Leopold's palace burned for eight days, "turning most of the Congo state records to ash and smoke." "I will give them my Congo," the King is quoted as saying, "but they have no right to know what I did there."

With this book, Mr. Hochschild, like other historians before him, insures that King Leopold has not gotten away with his efforts to erase the memory of his brutal acts.

ON THE WEB

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170-mile Congo route can now take weeks

Road to main port has become swamp

By Arnaud Zeitman
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MBANZA-NGUNGU, Congo. — The lucky few who made it out scrawled thankful words across their windshields in mud. "The end of the nightmare," wrote one. "Freedom, finally," wrote another.

You'd think they'd survived a small war — and in fact, a dozen or more people are said to have died during the past month. But no — it was just a traffic jam in the Central African nation of Congo.

Few aspects of life reflect the collapse of this country more starkly than the 170-mile stretch of shattered pavement that runs from the capital, Kinshasa, to the Atlantic Ocean seaport at Matadi.

Two decades ago, truck drivers made the journey in two hours. These days, it can take as long as a month.

"This is simply not right," said truck driver Alexandre Mosaku, who has a wife and four children waiting for him at home while he waits to get through the mud. "Our country is great, rich and full of minerals. Why should we suffer like this?"

Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled Congo for 32 years before being overthrown in 1997, did little to develop the vast nation. His successor, Laurent Kabila, did even less. Kabila was assassinated on Jan. 16 and succeeded by his son, Joseph.

Today, most roads are little more than narrow dirt tracks hacked out of the bush or forest. Motor vehicles are still a rarity outside major cities.

The problem has been compounded by the war.

Since neighboring Rwanda and Uganda sent in troops 2½ years ago in support of rebels, the country has been split in two, with vital road, river and air links to the food-producing east — now controlled by rebels and the foreign troops — cut off.

Rwandan troops held Matadi port for a few weeks at the war's debut and battled their way up the road toward the capital, but were forced out after Angola and Zimbabwe stepped in to back the government.

Years of heavy rains have slowly eaten away at the Kinshasa-Matadi road — the only route possible to transport vital foodstuffs and construction materials shipped from abroad.

The most formidable stretch is a 650-foot-long patch at Mbanza-Ngungu, a small town about 90 miles southwest of Kinshasa, that rains have converted into a nearly impassable, 3-foot-deep swamp. Thousands of trucks have become stranded simultaneously.

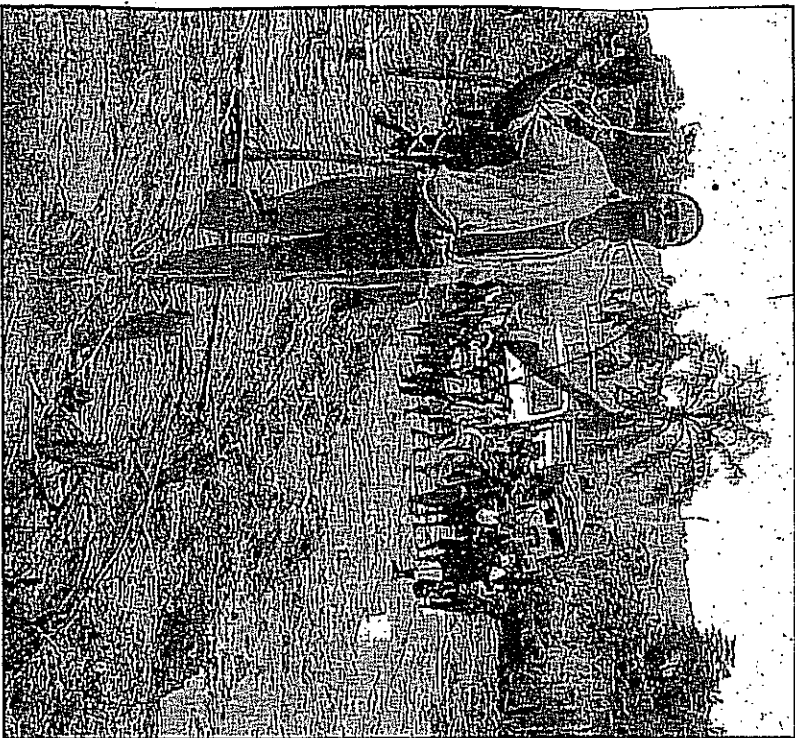
The lucky ones have been

dragged through the bog by massive dump trucks, initially sent by the government with loads of stones to help make the road passable. The gravel made little difference, and the enterprising dump-truck drivers, sensing an opportunity, began charging about \$20 for a pull-through.

For the less fortunate, there is only one option — to wait. On both sides of the swampy road, drivers have spent days — that turned into weeks — sleeping in their truck cabs, chewing uncooked rice, hoping the hot sun would dry out the mud enough for them to pass.

The hours of boredom are interspersed with danger — many have died of snakebites and typhoid.

"It is full of snakes here; 12 people have already died," said 38-year-old Konde Matoto, stuck at Mbanza-Ngungu for two weeks already. "I have run out of cash, so I have not eaten a real meal since I have been here," he said last week, showing his skinny belly to prove how much he'd suffered.



Frustration is a common emotion along the swamped remains of what was the major road connecting the Congolese capital with the country's main port. Arnaud Zeitman / Associated Press