King Leopold's Ghost Makes a Comeback

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In the early 1990s, award-winning writer Adam Hochschild was sitting on a plane, reading a book, when he came across a footnote citing Mark Twain's involvement in a worldwide movement against Congolese slave labor. The note said that during Belgian King Leopold II's claim to the Congo five to eight million people lost their lives. Yet Hochschild, an historian and advocate of international human rights, had never heard anything about the atrocity. Sitting there, it occurred to him that an entire history had been erased.

"King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa," which will appear in paperback this month, is the result of Hochschild's startling discovery and his subsequent years of research. It is the kind of history that comes about rarely, for it achieves a basic tenet of historical writing: the retrieval of a buried past. Hochschild describes how between 1884 and 1907 Leopold, frantic to carve for himself a colonial empire, lay claim to the Congo under the most paradoxical of guises --humanitarianism --while actually letting loose a system of terror in which entire Congolese villages were forced to harvest rubber or face death by their Belgian overseers.

Yet this is only half the tale assembled in "King Leopold's Ghost." Hochschild is able to reconstruct the largely untold history of the Congolese genocide through the work of several men--Europeans and Americans, black and white--who risked much to unmask Leopold's crimes. Hochschild calls these efforts "the first great international human rights movement of the twentieth century," and his descriptions of figures like Edmund Morel, a British shipping clerk who uncovered Leopold's billion-dollar system of slave labor, and George Washington Williams, a black American who was the first to report on the atrocities in the Congo, give his history the narrative expanse one finds in a novel. It also allows him to situate his story within the wider context of European and African history -- to show colonialism as not something that just took place in Africa but that had worldwide consequences with which we still must grapple.

AlterNet talked to Adam Hochschild about the reaction to his provocative book, the history of the Congo and the political landscape of the post-colonial era.

It's an unusual thing when a book about African history makes a bestseller list. Yours reached the #10 spot on the nonfiction bestseller list among independent bookstores nationally this month. Why?

AH: Publishers, like reporters, practice herd behavior. They think in categories. King Leopold's Ghost was offered to 10 publishers. Nine turned it down. They thought people weren't interested in African history. And that may be true. But I deeply believe that if you have a good story, and can tell it in a way that brings characters alive, that brings out the moral dimension, that lays bare a great crime and a great crusade, people will read it. And they have. The book has been or soon will be published in half a dozen countries so far, and there are in total well over 100,000 copies in print.

What has been the reaction to the book in Belgium?

AH: It's been fascinating to watch. It was published in both French and Dutch, the country's two

languages, and became the #1 bestseller in each. The reviews were very nice, but the old colonials were absolutely enraged. There are tens of thousands of Belgians who had to come home in a hurry when the Congo became independent in 1960, and for them King Leopold II is a great hero. If you read French, you can follow their attacks on the book on the Internet. There's also a website where Congolese students in Europe have been talking about the book. One posted an anguished message saying that when he quoted some figures from it in making the oral defense of his thesis, his thesis chairman promptly flunked him. So you can see that the wounds of that whole colonial relationship are still very raw. Faulkner, speaking of the American South, said it best: "The past is not dead. It's not even past."

How do you explain the erasure of the Congolese genocide? What does it say about the West's attitude toward the colonial period in Africa?

AH: Americans and Europeans are accustomed to thinking of fascism and communism as the twin evils of this century. But the century has really been home to three great totalitarian systems--fascism, communism and colonialism--the latter practiced at its most deadly in Africa. In the West we don't want to recognize this because we were complicit in it. Countries that were democratic in Europe conducted mass murder in Africa--with little or no protest from the U.S.

You wrote there is something very modern about the fact that Leopold never saw the holocaust he set into motion. Would you elaborate on that?

AH: A white Southerner living on a plantation 150 years ago would see slaves in the fields, and might see them being sold, beaten or whipped. But in the age of globalization, we seldom come face to face with the worst suffering. It is the genius of something like the student campaign against Third World sweatshops, for example, to start drawing some of those connections. These are the same kind of connections that the heroes of the Congo reform movement tried to draw: to make Americans and Britons realize that the rubber in their auto and bike tires was gathered by slave labor half a world away. What fascinates me about the Congo reform movement was that it faced some of the same problems anti-globalization activists face today.

In your chapter "Meeting Mr. Kurtz," you document how Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness was based not on fictional imaginings, as literary scholars and school teachers have long deduced, but on Conrad's actual experience in the Congo in 1890. How do you account for this oversight on behalf of literary scholars and historians?

AH: College and high school English teachers would like to have us believe that Heart of Darkness is about the evil in us all, rather than the evil of a particular place and time. Well, as befits a great work of literature, it is about us all, but it is also very much about a particular place and time--where Conrad himself spent six hellish and memorable months. I didn't intially intend to write much about Heart of Darkness, but after immersing myself in the history of the Congo in that era, I gradually began to see that virtually *everything* in Heart of Darkness is based on things and people Conrad saw directly or heard about--and sometimes we can even figure out who he heard it from. His biographers have missed much of this, because they've concentrated mainly on Conrad's letters and diaries, which are skimpy for this period. After publishing an early version of the Conrad chapter in The New Yorker, I did get a couple of helpful letters from two Conrad scholars who share my interest in the specific history behind the book. Such people are rare. Most English professors would rather pontificate about its universality.

Why was it that so many witnesses turned a blind eye to the atrocities in the Congo while Edmund Morel, who became Leopold's most feared foe, didn't? How can we understand Morel's accomplishment?

AH: Morel to me is one of the great heroes of the century. Not just because of what he did regarding the Congo, but because of his extraordinarily brave stance--for which he went to prison at hard labor--protesting British participation in World War I. He was one of these people who had the ability to follow his own conscience when *everybody* else around him was accepting the myths of the day, or else having a few doubts but not voicing them. Such men and women are great treasures. He had an internal moral compass that always pointed true north. I wish one like that for us all.

The United States has had a long involvement in the Congo, beginning when Leopold orchestrated the Arthur administration's recognition of a Congo under his "protection." What was particularly galling about Leopold's lobbying campaign and the U.S.'s complicity in it? Do similarities exist between the international lobbying efforts of 100 years ago and today?

AH: It is quite amazing that the United States was the first country anywhere to officially recognize Leopold's personal claim to the Congo. This allowed him to persuade the major European countries to do the same. The U.S. wasn't directly involved in the Scramble for Africa at that point, but the recognition--the result of Leopold's brilliant Washington lobbying campaign--sure helped it along. And so much of this campaign involved things that still go on today--money being passed quietly under the table, wining and dining of Senators and Representatives, and the lavish entertaining of the President himself on vacation. In this case, it was a Florida orange plantation owned by Leopold's friend and lobbyist, Henry Shelton Sanford.

Historians of Africa have argued that perhaps no country in Africa today displays the consequences of European colonialism as harshly as the Congo. After the country achieved independence in 1960, it reeled from one tragic situation to the next: the CIA-led assassination of President Patrice Lumumba; the three-decades long dictatorship of Mobuto Sese Seko; and the recent genocide in Rwanda that has spilled over into the Congo. How much did the Congo's colonial experience lead to the political, social and economic instability we see there today?

AH: For some 80 years--first under Leopold, and then in a more orderly and less murderous way under the Belgian colonial administration--the Congo had the experience of being plundered, for the profit of those overseas. No one should be surprised that this was followed by more decades of plunder, at the hands of Mobutu and the multinational corporations he was in league with. And let's not forget the devastation wrought by slavery--both indigenous African slavery and the transAtlantic slave trade--for centuries before then. Democracy is a pretty fragile plant under the best of circumstances, and none of the Congo's heritage has been fertile soil for it to grow in.

The Congo reform movement shares a sobering similarity with the recent movement to prevent genocide in Kosovo, namely that even with mass activism the killing and devastation was enormous. Given this, how hopeful can we be about the effectiveness of human rights movements?

AH: No great movement achieves all it sets out to. But I'm still glad for the intervention, late, timid and bungled though it was, in Kosovo. More people would be dead or homeless otherwise. And I'm still glad for the Congo reform movement--probably even more people would be dead if it had not existed. Part and parcel of any struggle for human rights is that you'll only achieve a small part of what you're aiming at. But you still have to do it. Otherwise we'd make no progress at all.

Your previous book, The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin, also documents a system of terror and mass murder and the ways in which a horrible period of history was erased. What

fascinates you about falsified or buried histories?

AH: Maybe the question what draws me to terror and mass murder emotionally should be left to the psychiatrists. But what draws me to these things intellectually is the mystery of seeing and denial. How is it that Stalin could send some 20 million Soviet men, women and children to their deaths--millions of whom remained true believers to the very end? How is it that thousands of people worked on the docks of Antwerp for years, watched ships arrive from the Congo loaded with cargoes of valuable ivory and rubber, then turn around and sail back to Africa carrying mainly soldiers and firearms, and thought nothing of it? Then E.D. Morel came along, stood on the dock, and deduced: this means the ivory and rubber is being gathered by slave labor. Evil has long fascinated people--or there would be no market for storytelling, from the Greek playwrights onward. I'm also fascinated by who recognizes evil for what it is and who doesn't.

Africa watchers in the U.S. constantly comment on their struggle to follow events on that continent. How do you keep abreast of events in the Congo and Central Africa? What newspapers and journals to you rely on? What are their shortcomings?

AH: For southern African news, The Mail and Guardian of Johannesburg is excellent. Le Soir of Brussels (www.lesoir.com) probably pays more attention than any U.S. publication. The New York Times and the Washington Post each have several correspondents in Africa, but how well they cover the news varies wildly with the quirks and personality of each correspondent. There are few Western correspondents in Africa, which is bad in one sense, but in another it's good because there's relatively little reportorial herd behavior--there's no herd. Some of these reporters are good, some are abysmal. You have to read them carefully and figure out.

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