

Excerpt from the “Biographical and Historical Background”

Essay from *Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*

Present-day Zaire, one of the largest nations in Africa, was known as the Belgian Congo from 1908 until 1960, when it gained its independence. The Congo visited by Conrad and by the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* was officially called “L’Etat Independent du Congo” (customarily if roughly translated into English as “the Congo Free State”). But Belgian the Congo was, from 1885 on, thanks to a conference called in Berlin in 1884 by Otto von Bismarck, first chancellor of the newly formed German Empire.

Not that Belgium had opened up the Congo to European exploration, exploitation, and development. The celebrated Scot, Dr. David Livingstone, had gone there in 1856, to be “found” by the Americanized Welshman, Henry Morton Stanley, in 1871. Livingstone and Stanley, moreover, had been preceded by Portuguese, Dutch, and French pioneers. In fact, until 1876, King Leopold II of Belgium had merely sat back and watched with interest. In that year, though, this ambitious and notoriously immoral monarch of a nation less than fifty years old made his first move. He organized a meeting in Brussels to discuss a plan “to open to civilization the only part of our globe where Christianity has not yet penetrated and to pierce the darkness which envelops the entire population.”¹

Bismarck, who had gradually come to realize that no nation would win anything if all were drawn into a territorial, theological, or trade war, eventually called his own conference in Berlin. To the surprise of astute political forecasters throughout the Western world, Bismarck’s 1884 convention resulted in a decision to make the Congo the personal property of Leopold II. All the king had to do was guarantee that all nations would be permitted to trade freely there, that taxes and tariffs would not be collected, and that nations would not be granted monopolies on particular items of trade. Leopold, who ended up shirking most of his commitments, controlled the Congo until he died in 1908. In a will written in 1889, he bequeathed the territory to Belgium in exchange for a government loan of 150 million francs.

Thus, the Congo had been all but Belgian since long before 1908. And it had been ruled by a tyrant whose promise to bring civilization to Africa had turned out to be little more than a cruel joke. Leopold had divided the country into sixteen districts, each governed by a commissioner who rendered the local chiefs impotent. Some of these officials went on to build personal fortunes by collecting taxes from the natives, and since few of the natives had anything to give but their labor, the commissioners were, in effect, slaveholders, and the Congolese were slaves in all but name. Leopold, in turn, received a portion of all profits made by his administrators, so it was in his interest to make sure that when Africans rebelled against the sentries who guarded them while they worked out their taxes, they be taught a swift and brutal lesson.

Reports of atrocities were drifting back to Europe within a few years after Leopold had been granted proprietorship. Baptist missionaries duped by the king’s stated goal of Christianizing the Congo were among the first to cry foul. But the Congo was far from Europe, and the damning reports from scattered missionaries were relatively few and far between. And anyway, people wondered in Europe, wasn’t it inevitable that the lives of some Africans would be lost? When natives rebelled, weren’t the sentries merely protecting themselves, or at worst doing their duty? King Leopold assured his people that their “agents” were “profoundly reluctant to use force.” However, he explained, unfortunate incidents were bound to happen, since many of the sentries were “wretched negroes” with “sanguinary habits” recruited from the local population, natives who were, in other words, prone to turn viciously on their own people.²

Many of the station managers and traders that Leopold refers to as his agents were drawn from the ranks of the Belgian army, and by 1890 they had, with Leopold’s blessing, given the lie to their king’s promise that the Congo would be a free-trade territory. Ivory, the most valuable commodity, had become a Belgian monopoly; non-Belgian traders caught carrying it could be summarily shot, either by Leopold’s army-trained representatives or by their sentries. Among these sentries were natives “freed” from their black slaveowners and offered “protection” by the white invaders. They had to work seven years for their new master, wherever he chose to send them, for whatever wages he sought to bestow, and in whatever conditions he saw fit to provide.

¹ Quoted by Maurice Hennessy in *Congo: A Brief History and Appraisal* (London: Pall Mail Press, 1961), p. 13.

² Quoted by Guy Burrows in *The Land of the Pigmies* (London: C. A. Pearson, 1898), p. 286