



Brussels, February 14, 2020

KING LEOPOLD II AND THE CONGO FREE STATE

The Board of Directors of the Belgian African Royal Union (www.urba-kbau.be), successor of the UROME-KBUOL, has learned through the press that the project to produce a film on King Leopold II's legacy in the Congo Free State (CFS) has been revived.

We do hope that since 2013, the team in charge of preparing this highly controversial theme (see the article of MIKE FLEMING JR on Thursday September 12, 2013) has been able to collect reliable, if not truly scientific data regarding topic.

If the gathering of such reliable data has not been done, one can only hope that unbiased experts will be called upon to help you build a true story as opposed to the kind of documents filled with unfounded accusations so frequently published by the horde of anti-colonial ideologues.

Should you want to learn more about the Congo Free State, we warmly recommend you to read Frederick Starr's 15 articles (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/50567/50567-h/50567-h.htm>) published in the Chicago Tribune (January 20- February 03, 1909).

This self-declared anticolonial American anthropologist spent 13 months in the Congo Basin in order to verify for himself on the spot the accusations leveled against King Leopold II.

Since the beginning of the anti-Leopold II campaign, which originated in the UK during the years 1895/1910, so much has been published by bona fide historians, that their contributions can and may no longer be ignored. Alas, too many pseudo historians and even real but ideologically biased historians do not hesitate, even today, to violate the truth and come up with a manipulated history.

Reacting to this evil, our association recently published a booklet titled: "*Glance at the past*" with an anthology of ignored facts and 'inconvenient' testimonies made by neutral observers from various countries. Four of our members also published a book based on evidence and facts: "*Le Congo au temps des Belges. Une réalité qui dérange. Bilan et réalisations (1885-1960)*," (Editions Dynamedia Bruxelles, 2019). This book refutes the lies relentlessly spread in the campaign of slander, originally launched in the UK and taken over in the USA. (In a further paragraph an attempt is made at explaining the origins of this campaign).

Here are a few facts on topics which are systematically raised whenever the issue of the Congo Free State is being dealt with:

1. Impartial historians agree that ***the reduction in the population*** observed at that time was due to various causes, among which: diseases (sleeping sickness, smallpox, malaria, etc.),

lack of hygiene, prevalent famines and especially to relentless tribal wars, with inherent widespread cannibalism and last but not least to the eastern slave trade practiced for centuries by Arabo-Swahili, like Rimalisa, Rashid and Tippo Tip. While crimes committed by some individuals in the framework of the rubber trade are undeniable and must be condemned, they can certainly not be considered as having had a determining impact on the population's decimation.

2. As the wealthy King of the world's second industrial power at that time, and one of the only Heads of State of the advanced Western world without a colony, **Leopold II was craving to be equal in power to his peers who all had a colonial empire**. After several unsuccessful attempts in different parts of the world, King Leopold II set his sights on the Congo River Basin. The Belgian Government itself was not eager at all to become a colonial power and the Belgian parliament only very reluctantly supported the King's personal endeavor to create an independent state in Central Africa. Belgian sovereignty over the Congo was not considered at all at that time. The Monarch pursued the aim on his own, still hoping that, with time, this state would accrue to the Belgian realm. His real goal was to increase his power in the group of advanced nations, to pacify his Congo Free State, by putting an end to the incessant tribal wars with ensuing atrocities such as cannibalism, poisoning, human sacrifices and mutilation, and by defeating the Arabo-Sawahili slave traders who were decimating the population of the eastern part of the country.
3. With a very cunning diplomatic strategy he managed to convince the other colonial powers to let him set up a State within the Congo River Basin in return for the promise to allow free trade for all nations, the eradication of slavery and the introduction of civilization. The Berlin Treaty of 1885 is absolutely clear in this respect. King Leopold became the Sovereign of the Congo Free State through **diplomatic recognition by all leading States of the time**. There had never been any plan to organize a military expedition to 'submit' the tribes of the Congo. Subsequent to international recognition, the Belgian parliament authorized Leopold II, besides him being King of the Belgians, to also be the Sovereign of the Congo Free State in his personal capacity (this was a current practice of the time. See for example the British practice of allowing the Head of State of the UK to be also the Head of State of Canada, Australia, etc.). The distinction is important and all the official documents signed by Léopold II bear the dual reference: "*Léopold, Roi des Belges et Souverain de l'Etat Indépendant du Congo*". The Government of the Kingdom of Belgium had no say in the dealings of Leopold II in the Congo Free State and hence, does not bear any legal responsibility for the period of the Congo Free State.
4. After having been recognized as the Sovereign of the Congo Free State, he immediately started the **vast process of pacification and development**, putting all his energy and own money into the development of huge infrastructure works in order to unlock this vast territory and to introduce actors of progress : setting up a network of administrators and advanced posts, organizing the 'Force Publique', bringing in missionaries with their education programs, creating a vast transport and communication infrastructure, like for instance the railway from Matadi to Leopoldville and the development and exploitation of the waterways with a large fleet of steamers, prospecting the mining sector, etc. In order to get all this done within a record short period of time, he has been compelled in 1890 to supplement his personal investments with a 25 million gold francs loan from the Belgian Government.

5. In his very first official legal disposition, the “Ordonnance” of July 1 1885, published in the State’s Official Bulletin n° 1 (page 30), *the land issue* was clearly defined as follows: “Article 2. *Nul n’a le droit d’occuper sans titre des terres vacantes, ni de déposséder les indigènes des terres qu’ils occupent ; les terres vacantes doivent être considérées comme appartenant à l’État* », (which translates as follows: « Art 2. *Nobody has the right to occupy vacant lands without ownership title, nor to dispossess the indigenous people from the lands they occupy; the vacant lands ought to be considered as belonging to the State* ») This was a well-established practice in the other colonial areas: see the « Crown Lands in the British Empire. And the principle of state proprietorship of vacant lands ensured that the indigenous people would be protected in keeping their territories.
6. The different tribes were allowed to live in accordance with their own customs and culture. Only practices which were considered inhumane were banned such as cannibalism, mutilation, the burying of a deceased tribal chief together with his living wives and killed servants.
7. It is true that *young men were rounded up* to reinforce the Force Publique (i.e. the ‘National Public force’) and replace gradually the several thousand hired West Africans of the early years, and that tribal chiefs were required to provide manpower for the maintenance of roads, portage and paddling, the development of economic activities and to supply products for export, such as rubber and ivory. Introducing a culture of labor for men, in societies where traditionally only women were tasked for work was in itself a very challenging development. The creation of the Force Publique had nothing to do with the collection of rubber which was mostly in the hands of private companies. The Force, was mainly used in the anti-slavery campaigns against the Arabo-Swahili. One should keep in mind that the ‘Force Publique’ totalled only 6051 men in 1892, 10294 in 1895, 14.799 in 1900, 15.908 in 1905, of whom only a small minority were Belgian leading officers.
8. As on the one hand the sparsely present administration officials were very powerful and not closely controlled and on the other hand, the traders and companies holding vast concessions wanted to become profitable in order to sustain and expand their operations, *several atrocities and brutal abuses were indeed committed*. The use of local “sentries” to supervise the collection of rubber as well as the system of bonuses for official collectors did lead to unquestionable abuses. But it was neither a systematic nor a designed way of operations and definitely not in the King’s intentions: he set up in 1896 a “Commission for the protection of the indigenous people”, which was made of representatives of the Christian religious orders and of the American Baptist missionaries, and was entrusted to communicate directly with the Governor General. As reports of further abuses were bringing frightening elements, he decided in July 1904 to send an International Commission of Enquiry to the CFS, which produced a very candid report after four months of intense contacts, proposing a long list of reforms. Its damning report was integrally published in the official Gazette of the Congo Free State (contrary to the practice in other colonial states). The King endorsed them fully, turning them into no less than twenty four implementation decrees with corrective measures (full text of the report : see www.kaowarsom.be/documents/BOC/BOEIC1905.pdf, see pp 145-299). The results were so astonishing, that a local chief, Manangana from Avakubi, acknowledged the progress in a tasty

message to a Swedish officer (Eskill Sundhagen) as follows: "At the time when the Arabs were ruling our country, they were taking us, our wives and children, as slaves. They burned our villages. The white man never burns villages and when we bring him hens or bananas, he pays us well. He also pays us fairly for the mupira (rubber) that we collect. The white man has put an end to slavery... But we, black people, nevertheless wish that the white men go home, since we are forced to maintain roads and may no longer fight neighboring tribes and eat our prisoners, because if we eat them, we are hanged!".

9. As for **the deeply entrenched tale of the "chopped hands"**, the custom of chopping hands of thieves and mutilation of enemies was a local custom (still prevalent in nowadays conflicts in Africa). The chopping off of hands of thieves had been introduced for centuries in Africa by Arabo-Swahili and was based on the Muslim Sharia law, but the custom had spread to other tribes as was stated by the African American Sowell. The first penal code introduced by Leopold II in 1888, strictly forbade this cruel practice. The report of "The Inquiry Commission" of 1905 is absolutely clear in this respect.

10. **The revenues made from rubber sales** contributed essentially to finance the development budget of the Congo Free State and to repay loans of the heavily indebted King, they did not increase his huge pre-colonial personal wealth. One week's production of rubber went to the state as a form of taxation; the revenue of the other three weeks of the month accrued to the gatherer himself.

It is true that revenues from the rubber trade have been used in Belgium by the King for a number of well-known architectural realizations, which are criticized today. But it was a standard practice in those years for all the colonial powers to develop grand architectural realizations with proceeds from the colonial revenues.

11. It should be noted that **Belgium (Congo Free State/Belgian Congo) was the only colonial power which never engaged in the slave trade** at any stage. Indigenous people were not enslaved but instead liberated from the barbaric slave trade run by the Arabo-Swahili who were responsible for unspeakable atrocities. The King's administration managed to develop peaceful relations with most of the tribes and, together with the Force Publique - a force gradually composed of indigenous people and led in the early years by officers of various European nationalities before it was lead exclusively by Belgians, to establish a peaceful situation over nearly the entirety this vast territory. (Even in 1905, the whole non-indigenous presence in the CFS totaled only 2511 persons of which 1410 Belgians. Those Belgians were in large majority active in the administration, the trading, the religious missions and the private sector).

12. Some writers do not hesitate to claim, without the slightest evidence, that the regime of Leopold II has been responsible for **the deaths of millions of Congolese**. This statement is just a repetition of the accusation of genocide which was never demonstrated because of lack of statistics and knowledge of the size of the population in 1885 when the Congo Free State was founded.

It is a well-known fact that Stanley evaluated the indigenous population size on the basis of a very limited number of observations along the Congo River, and dubious extrapolation calculation methods containing several errors. As a matter of fact, nobody, even today, can provide reliable figures. One could wonder why so many different groups of newly arrived

people in the Congo Free State between 1885 and 1908 (missionaries established in different regions of the Congo, engineers, administrators, etc.), never rang the alarm bells on this issue whereas it was systematically magnified and emphasized, solely by Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian protestants and has not been sustained in the findings of the Independent Commission of Enquiry.

It should be noted that the creation of the Congo Free State was the result of a diplomatic campaign rather than one of a bloody military conquest as was the case for example with the Spanish colonies, or for the war between the US army and the Indian native tribes which were deprived of their lands and locked up in so-called reservations.

It may also be sobering to consider the abuses which were legion in our own American and European 'enlightened' societies of the time, (child labor, exploitation of the labor force, etc.)

Why this anti-King Leopold II / anti-Belgian slander campaign? The British agenda!

At the Berlin Conference, not a single colonial power showed any interest in the Congo Basin. Only later would it appear that this vast territory was of far greater interest than originally thought and that representatives of the colonial powers at the Berlin Conference had been outwitted by the Belgian diplomats. But the British and French were not overly worried as they were quite convinced that the Belgian newcomers on the colonial scene would not be able to manage this vast territory anyhow. But when it finally turned out that the King and his administration were delivering on their promises, the Belgians had to be removed in one or the other way such that the Congo Basin could be split up between the other colonial powers. Which better way to have the Belgians removed than through a campaign of slander?

When the traders in the City of Liverpool saw the center for the trade in colonial products gradually moving to Antwerp, they supported E.D. Morel's Congo Reform Association campaign of vilification. Morel, originally an admirer of Belgian colonization ("The work which the Belgians have accomplished in Tropical Africa will favorably compare with that of any other nation ... In spite of the conduct of half a dozen scoundrels who are to be found in every country under the sun, the Belgians have much to be proud of. We cannot do them full justice") would later admit that in his action against colonization in general, he could not dare to take on the big powers, especially not the British and the French (he had both nationalities) and had to go after the weaker link in the chain.

Some protestant missionaries also had an axe to grind with King Leopold II as, in his drive to civilization the King was heavily relying upon catholic missionaries. The protestant missions which were there first felt aggrieved by what they saw (probably rightfully) as favoritism towards catholic missions.

For other colonial powers this anti Leopold II slander campaign was also a welcome distraction from their own appalling behavior. Isn't it interesting to note that the campaign more or less coincided with the damning (but hidden until recently) Savorgnan de Brazza-report of 1905 on the situation in the French Congo, with the German genocide of the Nama and Herrero peoples and with the British conduct during the Boer War?

In 1904, tired of the accusations of severe misconduct made in the UK against Belgian officers, King Leopold II asked for a libel action to be brought before a London Court. The British

defendants (Burrows and Everett) were condemned for libel as they could not prove their accusations. This case which had a big impact in the UK put an end to the slander campaign at the time.

British consul Roger Casement, on the invitation of an American missionary, brought back what he labeled "the irrefutable proof of Belgian cruelty". He had indeed found a living person (the one and only) who claimed he had his hand chopped off by a Congolese soldier. However, it was later established that the unfortunate young man had been lying as in fact his hand had been clinically removed after an infection caused by an animal's bite. It is noteworthy that Casement's reliability was rather dubious. This Irish diplomat was eventually hanged by the British for treason.

13. King Leopold's *sovereign rights over the Congo were transferred to Belgium in 1908*. The majority in a divided Parliament was narrow, as Belgium was not interested at all and gave preference to its investments in China, Russia, Egypt and South-America! But the Belgian government quickly faced up to its responsibilities and the Congolese people's fundamental rights were reinforced (cf. the "Charte Coloniale" published in the Bulletin Officiel du Congo Belge n°1).

It further developed this vast land, 80 times larger than its own. The "Pax Belgica" reigned everywhere up to the farthest corners of the country. This created the basis for an extraordinary fast and substantial development on all fronts. In the time span of three generations this vast country was propelled into the twentieth century. By the time it reached independence in 1960, the Belgian Congo was the wealthiest country in Africa with a level of development close to the one of Canada and ahead of South Korea at the time.


Above all, the Belgian colonizers managed to establish in the country they ruled, the so called GNW (Gross National Welfare) which consists of the following elements:

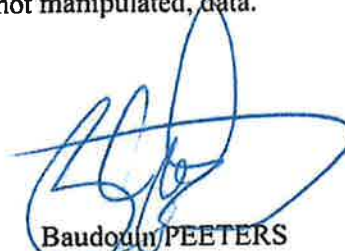
- Peace, order and security everywhere
- Absence of great famines
- Free medical service of high quality dispensed everywhere up to the most remote places
- Free high-quality education

Your project to make a film on this theme provides a real good opportunity to put some historical facts in their context and in their true reality. We remain at the disposal of your team to document their research with first class, reliable not manipulated, data.

Sincerely yours,

For the Board of Directors,


Renier NIJSKENS
Chairman


Baudouin PEETERS
Managing Director

P.S. Please find a list of documents and books which we highly recommend you to consult:

1. *The Fall of the Congo Arabs*, Sidney LANGFORD HINDE, Ostara Publications, 1897
2. *The Truth about the Congo*, Frederick STARR, Forgotten Books, 1907
3. *The Last Journals of David Livingstone, in Central Africa, from 1865 to his death*, David LIVINGSTONE, Horace Wallers, 2 vol., 1866-1868
4. *Across Africa*, Verney Lovett CAMERON, Daldy, Isbister & Co., 2 vol., 1877
5. *The Congo State or the Growth of civilization in Central*, Charles Demetrius BOULGER, Thacker, 1898
6. *The Congo state is not a slave state: A reply to Mr. E.D. Morel's pamphlet entitled "The Congo slave state"*, University of Michigan Library, Jan. 1903
7. *The King Incorporated: Leopold the Second and the Congo*, Neal ASCHERSON, Granta Books, 1963
8. *Leopold II of the Belgians: King of colonialism*, Barbara EMERSON, St. Martin's Press, 1979
9. *New Africa. An Essay over Government Civilization in New Countries and on the Foundation, Organization and Administration of the Congo Free State*, Edouard DESCAMPS, Sampson Low, Marston & C°, 1904
10. *Six years of adventure in Congo-land*, Edward-James GLAVE, S. Low, Marston, Ltd, 1893
11. *Cruelty in the Congo Free State*, Century Magazine, Sept. 1897
12. *Colonialism in Africa (1870-1960)*, Jean STENGERS, Peter Duignan and L.H. Gann, 1969
13. *E.D. Morel's, History of the Congo, Reform Movement*, Roger LOUIS Roger & Jean STENGERS, Clarendon press, Oxford, 1968
14. *The Congo Free State*, Guido DE WEERD, Dynamedia, 2017
15. *Glance at the past*, UROME/KBUOL, 2017
16. *L'Etat Indépendant du Congo (1885-1908)*, André-Bernard ERGO, L'Harmattan, 2013
17. *L'Etat Indépendant du Congo*, Guido DE WEERD, Dynamedia, 2015
18. *Le Congo au temps des Belges*, André DE MAERE D'AERTRYCKE, André VLEURINCK, André SCHOROCHOFF, & Pierre VERCAUTEREN, Dynamedia, 2019
19. *Congo mythes et réalités*, Jean STENGERS, Racine, 2017, pp 307 et 308, (l'historien livre une critique en français de l'ouvrage de HOCHSCHILD. Ce document que vous trouverez en annexe pourrait être traduit en anglais).
20. *Léopold II Le plus grand Chef d'Etat du Congo*, J-P NZAZA KABU ZEX-KONGO, L'Harmattan, 2019
21. *Léopold II Potentat Congolais*, Pierre-Luc PLASMAN, Racine, 2019
22. *Congo. Mémoires à vif*, Luc BEYER DE RYKE, Editions Mols, 2019
23. *Congo, l'autre histoire*, Charles LEONARD, Editions Masoin / Dynamedia, 2014
24. *Congo Belge. La colonie assassinée*, André-Bernard ERGO, L'Harmattan, 2009