

5.10 Bloody Ivory Tower

by *Julia Topik*

Billiards seems an innocuous pastime, a diversion little connected to the currents of world history. But the balls that rolled on the tables of nineteenth-century sportsmen were made of ivory, which had a long history. The tusk of the elephant, first used for decorative purposes more than 20,000 years ago by Stone-Age men, later inspired Egyptians, Minoans, and Greeks to carve figurines, jewelry, and gods. The Bible's King Solomon had an ivory throne. Churches and temples in the Middle Ages were decorated with ivory images.

Then the industrial revolution found new uses for the ancient precious material: billiard balls, piano keys, knife handles, and chess pieces. The volume and value of the trade swelled. By the turn of the twentieth century, more than 1,000 tons of ivory was imported yearly into London, Antwerp, Hamburg, and New York. The gentlemen coolly stroking balls across elegant felt, while the piano gently played in the background, were not aware of part of the story. Ivory's lavish, fine-grained texture and opaque shell was doused in the blood of hundreds of thousands of elephants and millions of Africans. Ivory created colonies.

Colonies were on the mind of King Leopold II, the monarch of Belgium, a rather small country that was devoid of colonies in a mercantilist era. Leopold knew that if he would ever hope to control a territory he would have to look toward Africa, the only continent that had been left almost completely unsettled by the European powers. Eighty percent of the entire land area of Africa was still under indigenous rulers, making the continent "ripe for conquest." He used a series of shrewd diplomatic maneuvers to gain control of his Congo region. As Adam Hochschild remarked in a recent study: "If he was to seize anything in Africa, he could do so only if he convinced everyone that his interest was purely altruistic." In a stupendously ironic and tragic moment in history, he found his allies in the European abolitionist movement! He would reinvigorate the slave trade in Africa after the international traffic in humans had all but died out, exactly the opposite of what the abolitionists sought.

Leopold began to show his interest in Africa at first by voicing his concern over the illegal slave trade that continued to thrive despite the treaties and the proclamations of many powerful European governments. Leopold claimed to help protect Africans by sending his military to rid the area of slave traders and to modernize the Congo. He created the International African Association to open routes into the interior to create hospitals, scientific, and pacification bases. The association purportedly was to establish peace

among the chiefs and procure them just and impartial arbitration in order to abolish the slave trade. Leopold convinced the world that his intentions were purely philanthropic.

But philanthropy does not pay and is a weak foundation for a colony. Leopold's eyes strayed toward the abundant source of ivory in the region: the herds of elephants protected by the tropical forests. However, Leopold had to first control the area before he could start to exploit it.

Leopold started using African mercenaries in 1879 to control the Kongo, Pygmies, Kunda, and other peoples who could not comprehend the idea that someone could own the land that they had inhabited for thousands of years. In 1888, Leopold organized his mercenaries into the Force Publique, which was divided into small garrisons that were usually composed of several dozen black soldiers under one or two white officers. The king gave bonuses to white agents according to the number of men they impressed into the Force Publique and the number of laborers they captured. The white agents usually delivered their "ready and willing" workers in chains.

Leopold ran his territory mostly through military power. He carved out small areas and gave willing Europeans complete control over their inhabitants. The king left white men alone in charge of areas for months at a time; there was little or no punishment meted out to soldiers who mistreated the Kongo.

The natives were brutalized. White men sailing down the Congo River would shoot Lunda or Mongo for sport. They justified their cruelty with their belief that the indigenous people were simply animals, inferior and devoid of human emotion. The common practice in the Congo was to punish the captive peoples with whippings, chaining them to the ground and giving them thirty lashes in a row, sometimes more. Sometimes ears and limbs would be cut off.

With the native Kongo and Lunda cowed, Leopold began to treat both vacant and nonvacant land—as well as everything on them—as his property. His soldiers left piles of dead elephants, and Africans were forced to carry tusks on their backs. The self-proclaimed abolitionist depended on slavery, while cruelly naming it the Congo Free State. Ivory and produce filled the holds of ships sent to Belgium, but returning ships were practically empty when they arrived in the Congo, because the workers in Africa were not being paid. In search of billiard balls and piano keys, the Belgians were stripping the Congo of its resources. This was theft, not development.

Leopold conquered the Congo region behind a badge of justice. He cried out for civil rights and for the abolition of the atrocity called slavery. Yet he ran the territory with a whip. The blood spilled along the banks of the Congo, of the five to eight million Africans and the hundreds of thousands of elephants who were killed, went unseen by his royal eyes. And ever more billiard balls rolled in the elegant parlors of New York, London, and Antwerp.

... The people have not easily accommodated themselves to the altered condition of life brought about by European government in their midst. Where formerly they were accustomed to take long voyages down to Stanley Pool to sell slaves, ivory, dried fish, or other local products . . . they find themselves today debarred from all such activity . . . The open selling of slaves and the canoe convoys, which navigated the Upper Congo (River), have everywhere disappeared. . . . (but) much that was not reprehensible in native life has disappeared along with it. The trade in ivory has today entirely passed from the hands of the natives of the Upper Congo . . .

Complaints as to the manner of exacting service are . . . frequent . . . If the local official has to go on a sudden journey men are summoned on the instant to paddle his canoe, and a refusal entails imprisonment or a beating. If the Government plantation or the kitchen garden require weeding, a soldier will be sent to call in the women from some of the neighboring towns. . . ; to the women suddenly forced to leave their household tasks and to tramp off, hoe in hand, baby on back, with possibly a hungry and angry husband at home, the task is not a welcome one.

I visited two large villages in the interior . . . wherein I found that fully half the population now consisted of refugees . . . I saw and questioned several groups of these people . . . They went on to declare, when asked why they had fled (their district), that they had endured such ill-treatment at the hands of the government soldiers in their own (district) that life had become intolerable; that nothing had remained for them at home but to be killed for failure to bring in a certain amount of rubber or to die from starvation or exposure in their attempts to satisfy the demands made upon them. . . . I subsequently found other (members of the tribe) who confirmed the truth of the statements made to me.

... on the 25th of July (1903) we reached Lukolela, where I spent two days. This district had, when I visited it in 1887, numbered fully 5,000 people; today the population is given, after a careful enumeration, at less than 600. The reasons given me for their decline in numbers were similar to those furnished elsewhere, namely, sleeping-sickness, general ill-health, insufficiency of food, and the methods employed to obtain labor from them by local officials and the exactions levied on them.

At other villages which I visited, I found the tax to consist of baskets, which the inhabitants had to make and deliver weekly as well as, always, a certain amount of foodstuffs. (The natives) were frequently flogged for delay or inability to complete the tally of these baskets, or the weekly supply of food. Several men, including a Chief of one town, showed broad weals across their buttocks, which were

evidently recent. One, a lad of 15 or so, removing his cloth, showed several scars across his thighs, which he and others around him said had formed part of a weekly payment for a recent shortage in their supply of food.

... A careful investigation of the conditions of native life around (Lake Mantumba) confirmed the truth of the statements made to me—that the great decrease in population, the dirty and ill-kept towns, and the complete absence of goats, sheep, or fowls—once very plentiful in this country—were to be attributed above all else to the continued effort made during many years to compel the natives to work india-rubber. Large bodies of native troops had formerly been quartered in the district, and the punitive measures undertaken to his end had endured for a considerable period. During the course of these operations there had been much loss of life, accompanied, I fear, by a somewhat general mutilation of the dead, as proof that the soldiers had done their duty.

... Two cases (of mutilation) came to my actual notice while I was in the lake district. One, a young man, both of whose hands had been beaten off with the butt ends of rifles against a tree; the other a young lad of 11 or 12 years of age, whose right hand was cut off at the wrist. . . . I both these cases the Government soldiers had been accompanied by white officers whose names were given to me. Of six natives (one a girl, three little boys, one youth, and one old woman) who had been mutilated in this way during the rubber regime, all except one were dead at the date of my visit.

[A sentry in the employ of one of the concessionary private companies] said he had caught and was detaining as prisoners (eleven women) to compel their husbands to bring in the right amount of rubber required of them on the next market day. . . . When I asked what would become of these women if their husbands failed to bring right quantity of rubber . . . he said at once that then they would be kept there until their husbands deemed them.

The race was on to extract as much wild natural rubber as possible before organised cultivation stole the market. Apart from financing Leopold's private army and the Force Publique (which took up half the Congo's budget) to control the slave labourers who gathered the rubber, capital outlay was non-existent.

Natives had to search out vines through inhospitable jungle. In Leopold's Congo it was an illegal offence to pay any Africans with money, so other more brutal forms of exhortation were employed. The British vice consul in 1899 gave a terrifying example of how the Force Publique carried out this task:

"An example of what is done was told me up the Ubangi [River]. This officer[s]... method... was to arrive in canoes at a village, the inhabitants of which invariably bolted on their arrival; the soldiers were then landed, and commenced looting, taking all the chickens, grain etc, out of the houses; after this they attacked the natives until able to seize their women; these women were kept as hostages until the chief of the district brought in the required number of kilograms of rubber. The rubber having been brought, the women were sold back to their owners for a couple of goats apiece, and so he continued from village to village until the requisite amount of rubber had been collected." (p161)

Companies operating in the Congo used prison stockades to keep hostages. If the men of the village resisted the demands for rubber it meant the death of their wife, child or chief. The Force Publique supplied military might under contract and each company had its own mercenaries.

In the rubber regions, Africans had to gain a state permit to travel outside their villages. Labourers wore a numbered metal disk, so a record could be kept of their individual quota. Hundreds of thousands of desperate and exhausted men carried huge baskets on their heads for up to twenty miles a day.

An account in 1884 describes the actions of an officer known as Fievez taken against those who refused to collect rubber or failed to meet their quota: "I made war against them. One example was enough: a hundred heads cut off, and there have been plenty of supplies ever since. My goal is ultimately humanitarian. I killed a hundred people... but that allowed five hundred others to live." (p166)

The Force Publique had a combined counter-insurgency role: as a force to suppress the natives and as a "corporate labour force." Their murderous assaults against the native population were described as "pacification", as it was during the Vietnam War. The demand was for labour, and they destroyed all obstacles in their way.

Hochschild quotes the Governor of the Equatorial District of the Congo Free State when the demand for rubber became ferocious: "As soon as it was a question of rubber, I wrote to the government, 'To gather rubber in the district... one must cut off hands, noses and ears.'" (p165)

Following tribal wars, state officials would see to it that the victors severed the hands of dead warriors. During expeditions, Force Publique soldiers were instructed to bring back a hand or head for each bullet fired, to make sure that none had been wasted or hidden for use in rebellions. A soldier with the chilling title "keeper of hands" accompanied each expedition. Force Publique soldiers were slaves who had been press-ganged through hostage taking, or stolen as children and brought up in child colonies founded by the King and the Catholic Church.

The Heart of Darkness

In August 1890, a young trainee steamship officer headed for the Congo basin. His name was Joseph Conrad, the author of the most famous novel to emerge from the European scramble for Africa, *Heart of Darkness*. One of the central characters in the novel is Kurtz, who is in charge of the inner station.

Kurtz is notorious for having a row of native heads surrounding his headquarters. He combines pathological cruelty with an interest in art and philosophy. Hochschild writes that, whilst Conrad must have met dozens of candidates for Kurtz during his time in the Congo, Leon Rom, head of the Force Publique, bares his unmistakable stamp. Rom had a fence round his office with severed native heads on each slat, and a garden rockery full of rotting heads.