Leopold II and the Belgian Congo: A Brief History

Prepared by Michael McLaughlin

Lesson Overview
This resource is designed to compliment instruction on "New Imperialism" in World and European History. Most survey texts provide a sentence or short paragraph on Leopold II and the Belgian Congo; this historical profile places Leopold in context and fleshes out the story of the worst genocide in history before the Holocaust. Students read this independently before a short class discussion in which we tied the reading in with concepts and terms in our unit on new imperialism such as: mother country, economic motivation, and Scramble for Africa.

Lesson Details
Subject area(s): History, World History, African History, European History
Grade Level: High School
Resource Type: Close Reading/Reflection

Special Learners
This resource was developed with the following special learners in mind:
- Traditional Classroom
- Homeschooled Students
- Gifted Learners

Standards Connection
The teacher who prepared this lesson determined that this lesson meets the following standards:
- colonialism
- congo
- genocide
- colonization
- colonies

Lesson Materials
Additional materials for this lesson can be accessed at https://sophiainstituteforteachers.org/curriculum/lesson/leopold-ii-and-the-belgian-congo. Materials include:
- Leopold_II_and_the_Belgian_Congo_Historical_Profile

The author of this lesson shared it with other educators within the Sophia Institute for Teachers Catholic Curriculum Exchange. Find more resources and share your own at https://www.SophiaInstituteforTeachers.org.
Lesson Plan

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by Michael C. McLaughlin

Leopold II was the King of Belgium. Many of his relatives sat on the other thrones of Europe, most notably his cousin Victoria was the Queen of England. He was pretty jealous of their wealth and realized that his cousins and their nations were wealthy because they had participated in the lucrative process of imperialism. Leopold wanted a colony too; however, the Belgian people did not want one because they felt that as a small country, a colony would be too difficult to manage: it would cost a great deal of money to start up and many people would be required to leave Belgium to administer the colony. Leopold still wanted one though, so he sent explorers to Africa to see about acquiring a personal colony. He learned that the Congo region was pretty rich in resources and so he formed a philanthropic organization called the International Association of the Congo. This group was the mask for Leopold’s true aim of getting his own personal colony.

In 1884-1885, Leopold’s delegates at the Berlin Conference manipulated the powers of Europe to let the IAC administer the Congo, promising free trade to all the powers. Leopold had already, however, prevented this free trade from being a reality by making deals with the tribes in the Congo that they would only trade with his agents. Thus, Leopold acquired the Congo, a region 32 times the size of Belgium, as his own personal property.

Leopold got very wealthy off of ivory from the elephants in the Congo as ivory was all the rage in Victorian Europe – a middle class home needed a piano (ivory keys!), and ivory was very popular for jewelry, combs, etc.

Over in America in the 1890s, a man by the name of Dunlop was experimenting with rubber and learned that if you heat it up, you can do a great deal of things with it, including making tires. The rubber boom began. Rubber trees were planted in South America, but they would take 15 years to mature. If someone else had rubber, they could make a lot of money in this 15-year window – they would have a monopoly.

It just so happened that Leopold’s Congo was loaded with rubber. So, realizing that he had a 15 year monopoly on rubber before he faced competition from the South American trees (competition drives down prices), he sought to obtain as much rubber as possible and would do anything to get the rubber. To obtain his rubber, he forced the native Congo people into labor. To get them to do the work, he threatened them with death, dismemberment (especially hands), and holding their families hostage. In total, 5-10 million Congo people were killed and many more were impacted by the burning of villages and farms, exposure to the elements, starvation, and mutilation. This was the biggest genocide in history prior to the Holocaust. Leopold was able to keep all of this from the world; furthermore the world didn’t really ask any questions because of the need for rubber.

When missionaries and others started to document the “horror” and the “red rubber terror,” Leopold was able to use his control over the media to silence their stories. In the late 1900s, however, George Eastman perfected a film developing process (starting the Kodak Company) and people began to go to

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the Congo with cameras. Leopold could not deny this evidence (though he certainly tried to!). The world was thus forced to recognize that all was not well in Leopold’s Congo. The world sent in an international committee to investigate and they concluded that genocide was indeed occurring. Leopold was eventually forced in 1908 to give up his colony. He sold it to the nation of Belgium (which he controlled – so he effectively still controlled the Congo AND had a great fortune transferred from the Belgian treasury to his own personal accounts) and then died in 1909. The administrative structure of the colony never changed so some of the abuses continued even after the world thought that they had put an end to them – that with the outbreak of World War I in 1914 the attention of the European nations transferred from their overseas colonies to their own backyards.