

Name: _____ Modern European History Date: _____

Unit 6 –Nation-Building and War
King Leopold in the Congo

The movement among Europeans for control of the African continent is often called the “scramble for Africa” because it happened so quickly, and was so marked by competition among the Europeans. In the 1870s, European nations of Europe were producing goods at a fast pace in their new factories and were running out of people to sell them to. Several European countries struggled to establish “protected” areas of Africa, zones where only they - and no other country - could trade with the local inhabitants. Using European weaponry that outpaced those of the African armies, Europeans began to settle in these “protected” areas and forcibly remove Africans from their homes and from power. By 1883, France occupied parts of what are now Algeria, Senegal, and Gabon and the Congo Republic; Britain had some of Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt, and South Africa; and the Portuguese had some of Mozambique and Angola.



In the midst of the rivalries among the Great Powers of Europe, King Leopold II of the tiny nation of Belgium played the most important role in the story of the Congo. Belgium was overshadowed by its larger, more powerful neighbors and Leopold desperately wanted to build up an overseas empire in order to secure his position in the world. In September 1876, King Leopold hosted the largest gathering of explorers and geographers of the entire nineteenth century. In his opening speech he stated that the goal of the conference was to bring civilization to Africa:

“[Our goal is]...to open to civilization the only part of the globe where it has yet to penetrate.... It is, I dare to say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress.... I was in no way motivated by selfish designs.” - King Leopold II

Most participants left impressed with the king’s dedication to the advancement of humanitarian causes. The king’s real motives were hardly altruistic.

“I do not want to miss a good chance of getting us a slice of this magnificent African cake.” - King Leopold II

Leopold hired American Henry Stanley to secure treaties with the local chiefs of the Congo River basin. From 1879 to 1884, through a combination of trade, trickery, alcohol, intimidation, and violent force, Stanley emerged with over 450 treaties with local chiefs on behalf of King Leopold. Contrary to the original promises, these treaties granted Leopold exclusive trading rights and gave him exclusive control over the land. European leaders had expected Leopold to play the role of the humanitarian administrator creating a just and stable government in the Congo and abolishing the Indian Ocean slave trade. Instead, Leopold began the process of extracting all possible wealth out of the area with no consideration for the people who lived there. Leopold named his new territory, which was the size of Western Europe, the Congo Free State, and took on the title^[SEP] of “King-Sovereign of the Congo Free State.”

On July 1, 1885 the new Free State government of the Congo proclaimed the right to take for itself “vacant” lands not “effectively occupied” by Africans. This one law placed almost the entire territory in the hands of the government, requiring that villages and towns surrender all of their surrounding lands, which they had used for generations for hunting or farming. Only the smallest fields immediately adjacent to their homes could remain theirs.

Leopold faced opposition from the local populations as he took over this vast area in Central Africa. Although some groups were successful in holding off Leopold’s takeover for a time, many were not. For example, the king of the Yeke people, who lived in the mineral-rich Katanga area, refused to turn over his lands to Europeans, but his subjects gave in when their leader was murdered.

“I am the master here, and so long as I live, the Kingdom of Garengaze [Katanga] shall have no other.” - Msiri, King of the Yeke people, shortly before a Free State officer shot him dead

In 1888 in order to deal with such revolts, and^[SEP] to manage the Congo Free State’s frontiers, Leopold put together a military force. The *Force Publique*, as it was known, was made up of officers from Europe and

soldiers from the Congo and other African states. Many of the soldiers were slaves who were chained together when traveling from one location to another. They were fed poorly, not paid well, and often abused by their officers.

In October of 1892, Leopold granted “concessions” to two companies, each given a huge amount of land in the Congo Free State on which to collect rubber and ivory for sale in Europe. These companies, which Leopold largely controlled through friends, were allowed to detain Africans who did not work hard enough, to police their vast areas as they saw fit, and to take all the products of the forest for themselves.

Most demographers estimate that the population of the Congo fell by nearly 50% over the two decades after the rubber trade began. This remarkable decline was due to a variety of factors, including executions, deaths in battles of resistance, separation of husbands from wives for extended periods of time, people fleeing from the Congo Free State to neighboring territories, exhaustion from overwork, and famine created by the fact that people no longer had time, and in many cases, adequate land, to farm.

Workers who did not bring back enough rubber to satisfy the traders were often killed. As proof that they had not misused ammunition, soldiers and agents cut the hands off of their victims after killing them and brought them to their superiors. Sometimes women were held hostage until the men brought in enough rubber to satisfy the state or companies. People were regularly whipped, often to death. To punish people without having to use ammunition at all, agents would often cut the hands off of a live person.

We had to go further and further into the forest to find the rubber vines, to go without food, and our women had to give up cultivating the fields and gardens. Then we starved. Wild beasts - leopards - killed some of us when we were working away in the forest, and others got lost or died from exposure and starvation, and we begged the white man to leave us alone, saying that we could get no more rubber, but the white men and their soldiers said: ‘Go! You are only beasts yourselves.’” - A Congolese refugee

Few Congolese groups could successfully resist. In 1900, the Budja tribe revolted and five agents from the European trading company that now controlled their land were killed. The Free State government took retribution, killing thirteen hundred Budja men. Many Africans resorted to flight as other forms of resistance became impossible. As a result of these evacuations and of the mass killings, many villages were completely depopulated.

“I ran away with two old people, but they were caught and killed, and the soldiers made me carry the baskets holding their cut-off hands. They killed my little sister, threw her in a house, and set it on fire.” - A Congolese refugee

As early as 1891, the British government began to get reports of atrocities committed in the Congo. British African subjects were being recruited to serve in the Force Publique, and upon return to their homes shared their experiences with British officials. Parliament did not want to discuss the issue as Britain was mired in a war in its colony in South Africa. It did not have the energy or the means to deal with what was thought of as another country’s problem. The British Foreign Office looked into the matter and decided that Britain had no jurisdiction over the problem.

British chambers of commerce, while dismayed at the abuses in the Congo, were primarily concerned about the restrictions on free trade. It seemed to them that Leopold’s system, which granted a few Belgian companies access to the area and did not allow the Africans to set prices, did not meet the standards for free trade. The Association of Chambers of Commerce adopted a resolution widely reported in the press that called on the British Parliament to act. The British Foreign Office began to investigate the claims of atrocity and monopoly. In retaliation, the Free State attempted to discredit Britain, accusing it of only looking to take over the Congo and of conducting its affairs in Africa in the same way: with brutality and “murderous and bloody wars against the native populations.”

The Congo Reform Association was formed and from March 1904 until 1913 coordinated efforts to keep the public informed and enthusiastic about the cause, provided accurate information to the newspapers, and pressured the government to take action. Following its first public meeting on March 23, 1904,

meetings and demonstrations spread quickly throughout Britain. People of all social classes, religions, and professions labored for the cause.