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King Leopold's Ghost

Interest in African land was first sparked in the late 1400s, by 1860, most African Coastal regions were claimed as colonies of European powers, but the vast interior of the continent remained unknown to Europeans. It wasn't until Henry Morton Stanley, a renowned explorer, ventured through the unknown during his trip to the Congo River. Meanwhile, the King of Belgium, Leopold II was fixated on the idea of obtaining a colony and focused primarily upon claiming the interior of Africa. Moving within the European political paradigm existing in the early 1880s, Leopold gained international concessions and recognition for his personal claim to the Congo Free State.

Leopold privately controlled and owned this land from 1885 to 1908. When Leopold was in power he used his control to strip the country of vast amounts of wealth, mostly in the form of ivory and rubber. The market for these material wealths were extremely labor-intensive and were powered by slave labor, and locals being forced through torture, imprisonment, and terror. In other words, his rule of the vast region was based on tyranny and terror. Under Leopold's direction, Henry Morton Stanley went back to the Congo River and extracted favorable treaties from countless local leaders. As a result a road and eventually a rail line were developed from the coast to Leopoldville. Series of militarized outposts for exporting were established along the Congo River. Natives were forced to gather ivory and rubber so it could be exported. These two materials became economically significant in international trade and the Congo started off to be rich of both. But when there became a dwindling ivory supply Leopold transitioned his exploitative focus to the rubber market. Rubber harvesting is labor-intensive and the reign of

terror continued and even increased. Women and children were imprisoned as hostages to force husbands and fathers to work. Flogging, starvation and torture were routine. Murder was common, tribes resisting enslavement were wiped out; administration officials expected to receive back a severed human hand for every bullet issued. Rape and sexual slavery were rampant. Workers failing to secure assigned quotas of rubber were routinely mutilated or tortured. Administration officials so completely dehumanized local peoples that at least one decorated his flower garden with a border of severed human heads.

Meanwhile, early missionaries and human rights advocates began to circulate news of the widespread atrocities committed in the Congo under the official blessing of Leopold's administration. News of these atrocities eventually led to the country being taken over by Belgium as a colony and changed this land became known as the Belgian Congo. In 1908, Belgium annexed the Congo as a colony and proclaimed a general sea-change in administrative policy. Actual change, however, was nearly imperceptible. The era of World War I shifted attention from atrocities in Africa to European trench warfare. In the post-war era, the global demand for reform was largely forgotten. However, commercial rubber tree farming had become firmly established and the collection of wild rubber became commercially insignificant, just as ivory supplies had been exhausted years earlier. Because of this, the slave labor industries of the Congo diminished in importance and atrocities became far less frequent. Finally, in 1960, the Congo gained independence.