Heart of Evil

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Recent accounts of the horrific violence occurring in Africa, primarily in the countries of Kenya, the Darfur region of the Sudan, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, bring to mind prior horrors in Congo that took place approximately one hundred years ago. It is estimated that since 1998 the "troubles" in Congo have taken the lives of some 5.4 million people, or more than 8 per cent of the country's population. The killings that occurred between the years 1890 and 1910 are said to have taken the lives of some five to eight million residents, a percentage that is obviously greater, but more difficult to estimate because of the unknown population at that time. A recount of that violence of a century ago cannot be told without including the history of the Congo River.

The first known description of the river appears in the accounts of the Portuguese explorer Diogo Cam, who sailed farther south than any other European explorer had ever gone. This occurred in the year 1482. He described something that astounded him. Around his ship the sea had turned a dark, slate-tinged yellow, and brownish yellow waves were breaking on the nearby beaches. Sailing toward the mouth of an inlet many miles wide, his caravel had to fight a current of eight to nine knots. Furthermore, a taste of the water surrounding the ship revealed that it was fresh, not salt. He had stumbled on the mouth of an enormous silt-filled river, larger than any European had ever seen. Later explorations of the river itself, from its source to the mouth that Cam had discovered, revealed that it is 2,718 miles long, the second longest in Africa, after the Nile. The first explorer to investigate the Congo itself was the Anglo-American explorer and journalist Henry Morton Stanley who in 1876 and 1877 descended the length of the Lualaba-Congo river system to its mouth, traveling more than 1700 miles. The river has its origins in the savannas just south of Lake Tanganyika. Gradually the river widens and picks up speed until it enters the so-called "Gates of Hell," a 75-miles long canyon of impassable rapids. The river emerges again, surrounded by lush tropical rainforest as the Lualaba or Upper Congo. During its journey through the rainforests, the river crosses the equator twice. Because the watershed of the Congo drains from both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, it does not have the great seasonal fluctuations in water levels as other rivers. Its flow is relatively stable because part of its watershed is always in the zone of rain. The Upper Congo ends abruptly with Stanley Falls, a stretch of rapids 60 miles long. Stanley Falls gives way to the Middle Congo, a 1000 mile stretch of navigable river, nine miles wide in some spots. Near the end of the Middle Congo the river slows almost to a stand still for 20 miles, a section known as the Stanley Pool. Here the river is 15 miles wide and the site of the current capital cities Kinshasa and Brazzaville, the capital city of the Republic of Congo. The peace of Stanley Pool is quickly shattered by Livingstone Falls, a series of rapids and cataracts 220 miles long. There are some 32 cataracts, having the potential hydroelectric power of all the rivers and falls in the United States combined. The final 100 miles to the Atlantic Ocean from the end of the falls is fully navigable.

As with many colonial histories, that of Congo is one of monstrous cruelty. The Berlin Congress, convened by Bismarck in 1885, established the King of the Belgians, Leopold II, in personal possession of and sovereignty over the so-called Congo Free

State. Leopold's rule, through his surrogates, was absolute and ruthless, but he had no difficulty in convincing the world that he was doing the work of civilization, bringing "light to the residents who sat in darkness."

One of the first to write openly of the horrors of what was occurring in Congo, the slavery, murders, forced separation of families to ensure the collection of ivory and rubber, armed rape, and other atrocities, was George Washington Williams, an African-American lawyer, journalist, minister and historian, who wrote an *Open Letter* to King Leopold II, recounting the horrors he had witnessed. At the beginning of August 1890, several weeks after he wrote the *Open Letter*, he began the long journey down the Congo to the station of Kinshasa, on Stanley Pool. Either in the waters of the pool or when docked on the riverbank at Kinshasa, William's steamboat crossed paths with a boat that was at the start of its voyage upstream, the *Roi des Belges*, a long and boxy sternwheeler. Williams might have encountered the stocky, black-bearded officer on deck who had just arrived in Congo and was at the side of the captain for the entire trip upstream, learning the river in preparation for taking command of a steamer himself. It is not known if the two met, but they were there at the same time.

This apprentice officer was in many ways typical of the white men who came to Congo at this time: an unmarried young man, in need of a job, who maybe had a yen for adventure and maybe some troubles from his past. Konrad Korzeniowski, born in Poland, had grown up with an image of Africa based on the allure of the unknown. He once wrote "(w)hen nine years old or thereabouts….while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself…'When I grow up I shall go there.'" In his youth, partly spent in France, he had problems with debts, dabbled in gunrunning, and made a suicide attempt. He then spent more than a decade as a ship's officer in the British merchant marine, learning English, although never losing his strong Polish accent. In early 1890, Korzenieowski was looking for a master's berth at sea, but was having no luck. While he was job-hunting in London, he heard much talk of another of Henry Morton Stanley's expeditions to Congo, and began thinking again of the exotic lands of his childhood fantasies. He went to Brussels and applied for work on the Congo River and was accepted.

In conversations that he had with others at that time, and before he took up this new job, the thirty-two year old Korzeniowski showed that, much like almost everyone else in Europe, he believed Leopold's mission in Africa was a noble and "civilizing" one. He said goodbye to his family and sailed for Congo on the ship that carried the first batch of rails and ties that would be used for the railway being built to transport workers into the heart of the country and the natural resources back to the coast for shipment to Belgium. The railway would make the trip alongside the 220 miles of unnavigable waters easier and faster to make than the current means of trekking with porters. Korzeniowski had to make the trek like all those before him, and once he reached the river, he filled his diary with the notes of a businesslike seaman, making long entries about shoals, refueling points, and other items not included on the primitive navigational charts that were available at that time. It would be almost ten years before the aspiring steamship captain managed to get down on paper the other features of the Congo not shown on the map, and by that time the world would know Konrad Korzeniowski as Joseph Conrad.

He spent some six months in Congo altogether, carrying with him the partly written manuscript of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*. The thousand-mile apprenticeship trip upriver, from Stanley Pool to Stanley Falls, took only four weeks, a fast voyage for the time. Sandbars, rocks, and shallow water made navigation tricky, especially far up the river in the dry season, which it was at that time. He later wrote, "The subdued thundering mutter of the Stanley Falls hung in the heavy night air of the last navigable reach of the Upper Congo…" " and I said to myself with awe, 'This is the very spot of my boyish boast'……What an end to the idealized realities of a boy's daydreams!"

At Stanley Falls, both Conrad and steamer's captain became ill. Conrad recovered sooner, and on the first part of the return trip downriver – going with the current, the steamer traveled almost twice as fast as going upriver – he was in command of the *Roi des Belges*. But a few weeks after the voyage ended he canceled his contract and began the long journey back to Europe.

Several bitter disappointments caused his cancellation and return to Europe. At the start of his employment he had hit it off badly with an official of the company he was working for, which probably meant that he would never had been given command of a steamer after all. Then, after coming downstream, he got sick again, with malaria and dysentery, and had to spend time recovering at an American Baptist mission station on Stanley Pool, in the care of a Scottish missionary doctor. He remained so weak that he had to be carried back to the coast and never fully recovered his health. Finally, he was so horrified by the greed and brutality among the white men he saw in the Congo that his view of human nature was permanently changed.

After brooding about his Congo experience for eight years, Conrad transformed it into *Heart of Darkness*, probably the most widely reprinted short novel in the English language, and chosen as one of the Modern Library's hundred best novels of the twentieth century. His nautical notes in his ship's officer's notebook became prose that is probably unsurpassed by any of the other literary travelers to the Congo over the years:

> Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest begin- of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands. You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself be-witched and cut off for ever from everything you had known.

Marlowe, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad's alter ego, is hired by an ivory-trading company to sail a steamboat up an unnamed river whose shape on the map resembles "…. an enormous snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land." His destination is a post where the company's brilliant, ambitious star agent, Mr. Kurtz, is stationed.

Kurtz had collected legendary quantities of ivory, but, Marlowe learns along the way, is also rumored to have sunk into some form of unspecified savagery. Marlowe's steamer survives an attack and picks up a load of ivory and the ill Kurtz. Kurtz, talking of his grandiose plans, dies on board as they travel downstream.

Even though Kurtz is described in brief because of the brevity of the novel, his image has nonetheless remained in the memories of millions of readers, including this one. He is the lone agent far up the great river, with his dreams of grandeur, his great store of precious ivory, and his fiefdom carved out of the African jungle. Perhaps more than anything, at least to this reader, we remember Marlowe, on the steamboat, looking through binoculars at what he thinks are ornamental knobs on top of the fenceposts in front of Kurtz's house, and then finding that each is a head "… black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids – a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth."

The novel has been discussed over the years and these discussions have tended to be in terms of philosophy, of classical myth, Victorian innocence, and even original sin; of postmodernism, post colonialism, and post structuralism. European and American readers, not comfortable acknowledging the genocidal scale of the killing in Africa at the turn of the century have taken *Heart of Darkness* out of its historical context. We read it as a parable for all times and places and not as a novel about one place and one time. Two of the three times the story was filmed, most notably in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, it was not even set in Africa. Conrad wrote that "*Heart of Darkness* is experience….pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case." Whatever the rich levels of meaning the book might have as literature, what is notable is how precise and detailed a description of "…. the actual facts of the case." King Leopold's Congo in 1890 was just getting started in its massive exploitation.

In the novel Marlowe, as Conrad had done, begins his trip with the long walk around the rapids. He writes, "A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps… I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope, each had an iron collar on his neck and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking." These men were the slave laborers starting work on King Leopold's railway around the rapids.

A few pages later, Marlowe describes a spot where some starving railway workers had crawled away from the path to die. Farther along the trail, he sees "… now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path, with an empty water-gourd and his long staff lying by his side," and he also notes the mysterious "….. body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead." This is simply a record of what Conrad saw himself on his walk around the rapids to Stanley Pool. In his diary for July 3, 1890, he noted: "Met an officer of the State inspecting; a few minutes afterwards saw at a camping place the dead body of a Backongo. Shot? Horrid smell." The following day: "Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose." And on July 29: "On the road today passed a skeleton tied up to a post."

In describing the caravans of porters that walked this trail, Marlowe gives a summary of Leopold's Congo economy: "….. a stream of rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire set into the depths of darkness and in return came a precious trickle of ivory."

In 1890, this was the colony's most prized commodity. "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it," says Marlowe. He even mentions Leopold's commission system for his agents: "The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages."

Conrad did not stray from the truth when creating the very charismatic and murderous figure at the center of his novel, one of the twentieth century's most famous literary villains. Mr. Kurtz was inspired by several real people, among them Georges Antoine Klein, a French agent for an ivory-gathering firm at Stanley Falls. Klein, mortally ill, died on shipboard, while Conrad was piloting the *Roi de Belges* downriver. Kurtz also dies aboard ship. Another model closer to Kurtz in character was Major Edmund Barttelot, a man that Henry Morton Stanley had recruited for one of his Congo expeditions. Barttelot had been left in charge of the rear guard in that expedition and had gone insane, biting, whipping and killing people, and was finally murdered. Another Kurtz prototype was a Belgian, Arthur Hodister, who was famed for his harem of African women and for gathering huge amounts of ivory.

However, the many biographers of Conrad have almost all entirely ignored the man who resembles Kurtz most closely of all, according to Adam Hochschild, the author of *King Leopold's Ghost.* Hochschild believes that Captain Leon Rom of the Force Publique, Leopold's personal Congolese army, is the true model for Kurtz: it is from Rom that Conrad took the feature of the collection of African heads surrounding the house.

The "Inner Station" of *Heart of Darkness*, the place Marlowe looks at through his binoculars only to find Kurtz's collection of the shrunken heads of African "rebels," is loosely based on Stanley Falls. In 1895, five years after Conrad visited this post, Leon Rom was station chief there. A British explorer-journalist who passed through Stanley Falls that year described the aftermath of a punitive military expedition against some of the Africans who rebelled against the Belgian rule: "Many women and children were taken, and twenty-one heads were brought to the falls, and have been use by Captain Rom as a decoration round a flower-bed in front of his house!" If Conrad missed this account, which appeared in the widely read *Century Magazine*, he almost certainly would have noticed it when it appeared in *The Saturday Review*, a magazine he admired and read faithfully, when it appeared in its issue of December 17, 1898, only a few days before Conrad's start to *Heart of Darkness.*

It is also possible that Conrad and Rom may have met.

On August 2, 1890, Conrad, accompanied by another agent and a caravan of porters, finished his month-long trek inland from the coast. Five miles before his caravan reached the village of Kinshasa on Stanley Pool, where the *Roi des Belges* was waiting, it had to pass through the neighboring post of Leopoldville. These two stations were only an hour and a half's walk apart. They soon grew together and merged into one city, called Leopoldville by the Belgians and Kinshasa today. When Conrad's caravan, trudging along a path near the riverbank, passed through Leopoldville, the station chief there was Leon Rom. Conrad made no entry in his diary on August 2, the day he would have passed through, and Rom's notebook does not mention meeting an expedition from the coast. If Rom was present it is very likely that they would have met, for there were few Europeans who passed his way.

Heart of Darkness is one of the most scathing indictments of imperialism in all literature, but its author, curiously, thought himself an ardent imperialist where England was concerned. Conrad fully recognized Leopold's rape of the Congo for what it was: "The horror! The horror!" his character Kurtz says on his deathbed. However full of Victorian racism, *Heart of Darkness* remains one of the greatest portraits in fiction of Europeans in their scramble for Africa and for what Leopold once said: "I do not want to risk…..losing a fine chance to secure for ourselves a slice of this magnificent African cake."

What sort of man would refer to his plunder of Congo as a "slice of …magnificent…cake"? What sort of man would order, encourage, or even allow what took place in the Congo for some twenty years? He succeeded his father to the throne in 1865 and remained king until his death. He was the brother of Empress Carlotta of Mexico who was married to the ill-fated Emperor Maximilian, executed by his followers in Mexico. He was also Queen Victoria's first cousin. Leopold's family life was wretched. He increasingly found refuge in the beds of various mistresses and was named in a British courtroom as one of the clients of a high-class "disorderly house," the notorious Rose Cottage flagellation house and brothel in Hampstead, a suburb of London. It is said that Leopold had paid 800 pounds a month for a steady stream of young women, some of whom were ten to fifteen years of age and guaranteed to be virgins. He had serious disagreements with his children, some of whom he never spoke to again, and some who never spoke to him later in life.

Outside of Belgium, he is chiefly remembered as the founder and sole owner of the Congo Free State, a private project undertaken by the King with an enormous amount of planning and deception. The state included the entire area now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo. The extraction of rubber and ivory in the Congo relied on forced labor. He ran the Congo as his personal fiefdom and for him it was simply a business venture. A friend of Henry Morton Stanley, he used Stanley to help him lay claim to the territory he called Congo.

Leopold fervently believed that overseas colonies were the key to a country's greatness and he worked tirelessly to acquire colonial territory for Belgium. His was a small and unimportant country at the time of his rule, and he was inordinately jealous of his larger neighbors and their vast colonial systems. Neither the Belgium government nor the Belgian people were interested in expansion and Leopold decided to begin trying to acquire a colony in his private capacity as an ordinary citizen. The Belgian government even loaned him money for his venture. After a number of unsuccessful schemes for colonies in Africa or Asia, in 1876 he organized a private holding company disguised as an international scientific and philanthropic association, which he called the International African Society.

In 1876, under the auspices of the holding company, he hired the famous explorer Henry Morton Stanley to establish a colony in the Congo region. Much diplomatic maneuvering resulted in the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, at which representatives of fourteen European nations and the United States recognized Leopold as sovereign of most of the area he and Stanley had laid claim to. On February 5, 1885, the result was the Congo Free State (later the Belgian Congo, then the Democratic Republic of Congo, then Zaire, and now the Democratic Republic of Congo, not to be confused with the Republic of Congo). The area he claimed was 76 times larger than Belgium, which Leopold was free to rule as a personal domain through his private army, the Force Publique.

Forced labor was extorted from the natives. The abuses were particularly bad in the rubber gathering, including enslavement and mutilation of the native population, primarily through the amputation of hands. Missionary John Harris of Baringa, for example, was so shocked by what he had come across that he felt moved to write a letter to Leopold's chief agent in the Congo: "I have just returned from a journey inland to the village of Insongo Mboyo. The abject misery and utter abandon is positively indescribable. I was so moved, Your Excellency, by the people's stories that I took the liberty of promising them that in the future you will only kill them for the crimes they commit."

Reports of outrageous exploitation and widespread human rights abuses led to an international protest movement in the early 1900s. The campaign to report on Leopold's "secret society of murderers," led by British diplomat Roger Casement, and former shipping clerk E.D. Morel, became the first mass human rights movement in the world. Morel was a trusted employee of a Liverpool shipping line. A subsidiary of the company had the monopoly on all transports of cargo to and from the Congo Free State. Although the officials with whom he worked had been handling this shipping traffic for years without a second thought, Morel began to notice things that unsettled him. At the docks of the big port of Antwerp he saw his company's ships arriving filled to the hatch covers with their valuable cargoes of rubber and ivory. But when they cast off to steam back to

Congo, what they carried was mostly army officers, firearms and ammunition. He realized that no real trade was being conducted. Little or nothing was exchanged for the rubber and ivory. As Morel watched the riches streaming to Europe with almost no goods being sent to Africa in return he came to the realization that there could only be one explanation for their source: slave labor.

Brought face to face with evil, Morel did not turn away. Instead, what he saw determined the course of his life and the course of an extraordinary movement, the first great international human rights movement of the twentieth century. Seldom has one human being, impassioned, eloquent, blessed with brilliant organizing skills and nearly limitless energy, managed to almost single-handedly put one subject on the world's front pages for more than a decade. Only a few years after his realization that slave labor was the source of the riches on the docks, Edmund Morel would be at the White House, insisting to President Theodore Roosevelt that the United States had a special responsibility to do something about Congo, for after all, it was the United States which first gave diplomatic recognition to Leopold's Congo, a result of his skillful scheming and diplomacy. Morel would organize delegations to the British Foreign Office. He would mobilize everyone from Booker T. Washington to Anatole France to the Archbishop of Canterbury to join his cause. More than two hundred mass meetings to protest slave labor in Congo would be held across the United States. A larger number of gatherings in England – nearly three hundred a year at the crusade's peak – would draw as many as five thousand people at a time. In London, one letter of protest to the *Times* on what was occurring in Congo would be signed by eleven peers, nineteen bishops, seventy-six members of Parliament, the presidents of seven Chambers of Commerce, thirteen editors of major newspapers, and every lord mayor in the country.

Although the killing in Congo was of genocidal proportions, it was not, strictly speaking, a genocide. The Congo State was not deliberately trying to eliminate one particular ethnic group from the earth. Instead, like the slave dealers who raided Africa for centuries before them, Leopold's men were looking for labor. If, in the course of their finding and using that labor, millions of people died, that to them was only incidental. These deaths occurred from murder, starvation, exhaustion, exposure and disease. Since there was no census or other sophisticated means of determining the population of Congo during this time of horror, historians can be more certain of population loss by percentages rather than by sheer numbers, even though it has been estimated that between five and eight million lost their lives. This percentage calculation is similar to what was done in calculating the deaths as a result of the Black Death in fourteenth century Europe. An official Belgian government commission in 1919 estimated that from the time Stanley began laying the foundation of Leopold's state, the population of the territory had "been reduced by half." By half. Major Charles C. Liebrechts, a top executive of the Congo state administration for most of its existence, arrived at the same estimate in 1920. The most authoritative judgment today comes from Jan Vansina, professor emeritus of history and anthropology at the University of Wisconsin and perhaps the greatest living ethnographer of Congo basin peoples. He based his calculations on "innumerable local sources from different areas: priests observing that their flocks were shrinking, oral traditions, genealogies and much more."

His estimate is the same. Between 1880 and 1920 the population of Congo was cut by at least a half.

Leopold struggled furiously to maintain his hold on the Congo, but world opinion was too great against his continuation as sole proprietor of the area. He had originally intended to leave Congo to his nation, but this had all along been a ruse to garner public support within Belgium. Instead of grandly bequeathing Congo to Belgium at his death as he had planned, he understood that he would have to make the change earlier. With his extraordinary knack for making the best of an apparently difficult situation, he began to maneuver. If world public opinion was forcing him to give up his beloved colony, he decided, he was not going to give it away. He would *sell* it. And Belgium, the buyer, would have to pay dearly.

Oddly enough, Leopold had the Belgian government cornered. The Congo reform movement had reached such a level that Belgium's international reputation was at stake. Furthermore, if Belgium didn't take over the colony soon, some powerful country might. France and Germany had long been jealous of Leopold's rubber profits and had their eyes on pieces of the Congo territory.

How much, then, could he expect to get from the Belgian government? He had already borrowed thirty two million francs for his investment in Congo from the government, a sum that was never accounted for. Negotiations dragged on for nearly a year. Finally the king named his price. In return for receiving Congo, the Belgian government first agreed to assume its 110 million francs' worth of debts, much of them in the form of bonds that Leopold had freely dispensed over the years to his favorites. Some of the debt the outmaneuvered Belgian government assumed was in effect to itself

– the thirty-two million francs worth of loans Leopold would never have to pay back. Also as part of the agreement, Belgium also would pay forty-five million francs toward completion of Leopold's pet building projects in Belgium. A full third of this figure would go toward completion of Leopold's royal residence at Laeken, already one of Europe's most luxurious royal homes, where, at the height of the reconstruction, 700 stone masons were at work. Finally, on top of all of this, Leopold was to receive, in installments, another fifty million francs "as a mark of gratitude for his great sacrifices made for the Congo." Those funds were not expected to come from the Belgian taxpayer. They were to be extracted from Congo, where Leopold II had never set foot.