**Colonization in the Congo Activity**

**Background Information: The Scramble for Africa**

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, the nations of Europe as well as the United States were producing goods at a fast pace in their new factories. In fact, they 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. Sometimes Africans would accept these “protections” because they thought that they would be protected from neighboring, hostile groups. Instead, Europeans began to settle in these “protected” areas and forcibly remove Africans from their homes and from power. The advances of European weaponry outpaced those of the African armies. 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. All of these areas were on the coast of the African continent.

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. This leader of a country overshadowed by its larger, more powerful neighbors wanted desperately to build up an overseas empire in order to secure his position in the world. He thought that a great opportunity existed in Central Africa, a region in which other European countries had not shown interest.

***How did one man end up controlling most of Central Africa as his own territory?***

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

The conference ended with the formation of the International Africa Association, an organization meant to coordinate the remaining exploration of Central Africa and to help open the interior of Africa to the benefits of trade with Europe. 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 failed to interest the Belgian Parliament in his scheme to acquire a portion of Africa, but he did hire Henry Stanley, an American man, to continue his exploration and to secure treaties with the local chiefs of the Congo River basin. At the same time, the French explorer Pierre de Brazza set out on a similar quest in a different part of the Congo basin, creating a rivalry that held the European public’s attention for several years.

From 1879 to 1884, Stanley made his way across Central Africa signing treaties with local chiefs on behalf of King Leopold. Through a combination of trade, trickery, alcohol, intimidation, and violent force, Stanley emerged with over 450 treaties. Contrary to the original promises of the International Africa Association, these treaties granted Leopold exclusive trading rights and gave him, or his designated corporations, exclusive control over the land. Elsewhere in Central Africa, Brazza used more honorable methods to secure trade agreements for France. The rivalry between King Leopold and France marked the opening chapter in the “scramble for Africa.” Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, and King Leopold all began to turn their attention to the vast areas that any European power had yet to claim.

***Why was the Berlin Conference organized?***

To reduce the possibility of conflicts arising among the European powers, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck arranged for an international conference to be held in Berlin in 1884. The conference was intended to provide a kind of organization to the “carving up” of Africa that had begun several years before. Bismarck was not especially interested in Africa, but he recognized that his country’s position in Europe could be improved through careful manipulation of events in Africa.

***“Here is Russia and here is France, with Germany in the middle. That is my map of Africa.”*** - Chancellor Otto von Bismarck

Bismarck gave the French his word that he would support their claims against the British in Africa. He hoped in turn that this would improve his own country’s relations with France. By doing so, Germany could instead direct its attention against its main enemy, Russia, a country with no interests in Africa.

The Berlin Conference allowed for the “partition” of Africa. Over the next twenty years all of Africa except Liberia (which was a colony of black immigrants from the United States) and Ethiopia (which retained its independence by defeating Italy in battle) would be sliced up among the Europeans like the “magnificent cake” Leopold had envisioned years earlier. Britain and France took the two largest pieces, adding to their already sprawling colonial empires. These takeovers often involved violent suppression of African resistance.

Leaders of the other European powers 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. The participants expected he would create the conditions in which missionaries and businessmen could do the work of “civilizing” Central Africa. Instead, Leopold began the process of extracting all possible wealth out of the area with no consideration for the people who lived there.

Three months after the Berlin Conference ended its work, Leopold named his new territory, the size of Western Europe, the Congo Free State. King Leopold took on the title of “King-Sovereign of the Congo Free State,” a role considered completely independent of his position as King of the Belgians, as the Belgian government had no interest in running a colony.

**Establishing Control** **Over the Congo**

One of the first decrees of the new government, issued on July 1, 1885, gave the state 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 new Free State government. The law required 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. Putting this law into practice and placing government administrators across the territory became a difficult task for Leopold. He had few people to manage the huge area, inadequate funds, and a great deal of resistance from the local populations.

***How did the Congolese react to the new government?***

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. 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

Meanwhile, as more and more Europeans made their way inland to trade, many of the river-based Congolese trading groups, such as the Bobangi and Boloki, resisted the competition. The European steamships operated by the Free State government and private companies posed a major threat to the canoe-based trading systems of the local peoples. Bobangi traders responded to the new invaders with force. In one location, they raided and burned a Free State trading post twice. Agents of the Free State responded to this resistance with military actions called “pacification campaigns.”

***The expedition has destroyed all the*** ***villages between the mouth of the Kasai [River] and Bolobo. The fields are all ravaged. The inhabitants had defended themselves and a great many were killed.”*** - a European trader

In order to deal with such revolts, and to manage the Congo Free State’s frontiers, Leopold put together a military force in 1888. The *Force Publique*, as it was known, was made up of officers from Europe and soldiers from the Congo and other African states. The Force Publique became the largest military force in Africa, and took more than half of the Free State’s funds. 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.

***How did the Swahili traders in the east respond to King Leopold’s new reign?***

In addition to small attacks from Congolese villages and kingdoms, Leopold found widespread resistance to his rule from the Swahili in the eastern area of his territory as well. Tippu Tip and his fellow raiders were “stealing” Leopold’s wealth by bringing ivory and slaves to the east coast of the continent as they had done for dozens of years. These slave raiders resented the new restrictions that Leopold’s rule placed on them. It took many months of warfare between the raiders and the eight-thousand-strong Force Publique to put down the Swahili uprisings.

After the defeat of the slave trading states in 1893, Leopold and his Force Publique set about establishing control over the extensive Congo Free State. Often this process meant violently suppressing the troops themselves, who acquired weapons and fought against their officers.

**Profit-Making in the Congo**

Although very few outside the Congo region knew it yet, Leopold’s endeavors there had little to do with the well-being of the people. Most of Europe was convinced he was engaged in a grand humanitarian effort. He regularly assured people that he was investing vast sums of his personal wealth in projects supposedly undertaken for the good of the Congolese people.

***What were the “concession” companies?***

In October of 1892, Leopold granted “concessions” to two companies. Each company was 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 of his, 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. Although legally they were separate from the state, in practice they had all the same resources at their disposal.

Later, a large portion of the land (a quarter of a million acres) in the center of the country went to Leopold himself. He named that area *Domaine de la Couronne*, literally, “Field of the Crown.” Although the concession companies and the *Domaine* paid taxes to the state, their ability to use the Congolese to extract resources from the land enabled them to begin to make vast sums of money. They forced out private traders, and destroyed the already weak Congolese economies.

***What effect did the rubber trade have on the Congolese?***

The effect of the rubber trade on the population of the Congo was more devastating than the European slave trade had been years earlier. Most demographers estimate that the population fell by nearly 50 percent 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.

Most of the rubber the Congolese collected came from vines, which could not recover quickly from harvesting. As a result, people had to go farther and farther into the forest to reach new vines. When people did not bring back enough rubber to satisfy the traders, punishments were brutal. Members of the Force Publique as well as state officials and company agents frequently killed people who did not bring in enough rubber. 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. Other people were regularly whipped, often to death. Frequently, to punish people without having to use ammunition at all, agents would cut the hands off of a person still alive.

***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

Because the trade in rubber had destroyed local economies, few Congolese groups could successfully resist. In 1900, the Budja tribe revolted against the European trading company that now controlled their land. Five of the company’s agents were killed. The Free State government then took retribution, killing thirteen hundred Budja men. Fighting continued until 1903, when the tribe was finally subdued. 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

**Early Reports of Atrocities**

As early as 1891, the British government began to get reports from its posts in West Africa 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. The British Foreign and Colonial Offices, however, were reluctant to speak up against Leopold’s tactics. If Britain began to force Leopold to make changes, the Foreign Office reasoned, Leopold might be persuaded to make deals with the French in retaliation, thereby increasing French power in Africa. The possibility of such a situation alarmed the Foreign Office and convinced it that no action was the safest course.

Parliament did not want to discuss the issue. There were fears in the Foreign Office that any reconvening of the Berlin Act signatories would lead to some sort of resettlement about the Congo that could put Britain at a disadvantage. Additionally, Britain at this time 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. There is evidence, though, that the Foreign Office looked into the matter and decided that there was no legal argument it could make that the Congo was violating the Berlin Act, and that Britain therefore had no jurisdiction over the problem.

***“I do not think that...we could do more than make a formal remonstrance on the ground that they were not fulfilling their treaty obligations*** ***as defined by the Berlin Act.... We have no further remedy short of the employment of actual force.”*** - British Foreign Office, 1900

**The British Parliament’s** **Involvement**

In May 1902, a meeting convened in London among members of several British chambers of commerce and the Aborigines Protection Society. This meeting was widely reported in the press, and aroused quite a bit of interest in the British public. Shortly thereafter three books appeared on the shelves addressing the situation in the Congo, and less than a year later, in March 1903, the Associated Chambers of Commerce met to discuss the issue again.

The chambers of commerce of London, Liverpool, and Manchester, England were concerned about the restrictions on free trade in the Congo. These organizations, while dismayed at the abuses in the Congo, were primarily interested in ensuring that they and their counterparts world-wide would be able to conduct trade in the region freely, as the Berlin Act promised. 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.

***How did the Association of Chambers of Commerce force action?***

The Association of Chambers of Commerce adopted a resolution calling on the British government to do something. This meeting, again widely reported in the press, created public pressure on the British Parliament to act. At a debate in the House of Commons in May 1903, the members of Parliament voted to issue a resolution which would require the British government to consult with the other signatories of the Berlin Act to see if anything should be done. One MP stated during the debate that “the Government would be very ill-advised if they went contrary to public opinion in this matter.”

*This cartoon, which portrays Leopold as a serpent, was published in a British magazine.*

***“Resolved, That the Government of the Free State having at its inception, guaranteed to the Powers that its native subjects should be governed with humanity, and that no trading monopoly or privilege should be permitted within its dominions,*** ***this House requests His Majesty’s Government to confer with other Powers, signatories of the Berlin General Act by virtue of which the Congo Free State exists, in order that measures may be adopted to abate the evils prevalent in that State.”*** - British Parliament Resolution passed May, 1903

***How did Leopold react to the accusations levied against the Free State government?***

The British Foreign Office asked the British Consul in the Congo, Sir Roger Casement, to investigate the claims of atrocity and monopoly and then to write a report. While Casement was in the Congo, the Free State authorities swiftly issued a retort to the British Note. The Free State Note attempted to discredit Britain, accusing it of only looking to take over the Congo. It also accused Britain of conducting its affairs in Africa in the same way: with brutality and “murderous and bloody wars against the native populations.”

***What did the Casement Report contain?***

Casement spent three and a half months traveling throughout the interior of the Congo. Rather than relying on the steamboats owned by the Congo Free State, he rented his own boat from American missionaries. This allowed him to travel wherever he pleased instead of relying on the authorities, who could have controlled his whereabouts.

Casement’s report, while it deplored the atrocities, did begin with praising the Europeans for “intervening” in the “chaotic and disorderly communities” of “one of the most savage regions of Africa.” The report noted the extensive steamship line and well-constructed railway. It commented, however, that the steamships used by the Free State and the concession companies were better cared for than the Congolese people. Over dozens of pages Casement recorded testimonies from victims of abuse.

***“Communities I had formerly known [Casement last visited in 1887] as large and flourishing centers of population are today entirely gone, or now exist in such diminished numbers as to be no longer recognizable.”*** - The Casement Report

Casement and journalist E.D. Morel founded the Congo Reform Association. From March 1904 until 1913, this group 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.