King Leopold’s Ghost Essay, Research Paper

King Leopold’s Ghost tells a story of the Belgian King Leopold II and his misrule of an African colony, named (at the time) the Congo Free State. It is a wild and unpleasant story of a man’s capacity for evil and the peculiar manifestation of it.

In telling this story, Hochschild does a wonderful job of giving detailed descriptions, especially of the colorful individuals involved, both good and bad. His analysis of the situation is very solid, starting with the movement when the Congolese hero (Morel) finds out a very terrible fact and moving on through his (Morel) analysis and actions, all the while telling the story of a treacherous monster. Set in the palaces and boardrooms of Europe and in the villages of central Africa, it tells the story of the tragedy that took place during Leopold’s so called rule, a tragedy that is so familiar to African-Americans, being told of our African brothers residing in the homeland. This “horror” story is just in fact that, a horror story, giving and revealing the utter most secrets of the respected King Leopold. Allow me to take you on a journey, pointing out the King’s determination and, reasoning for what he’d done and the scars he left deep within the heart of the Congo.

In the introduction I stated that Morel was the character that I considered to be the hero of this story, now the main question behind that would be, why? Along with, Who is Morel? His complete name was Edmund Dene Morel; he was a young clerk who worked for a Liverpool based firm where his duties were to supervise the unloading and reloading of the ships arriving in Antwerp, Belgium. As Morel watched the shipments arrive he noticed something, a great amount of ivory and rubber were being transported into Belgium but nothing was being taken out, as the book states: “There is no trade going on here. Little or nothing is being exchanged for the rubber and ivory?with almost no goods being sent to Africa to pay for them, he realizes that there can be only one explanation for their source: slave labor.” (p.2)

With his newfound revelation at hand Morel does not sit still. Demonstrating that he refused to turn a blind eye to what fortune had allowed him to see, he soon becomes active with his newfound knowledge. Soon afterward Morel devoted his life to stopping slavery in the Congo. From the early 1900’s until after the death of Leopold in 1909, Morel, having become a radical human rights campaigner, used the information smuggled out of the Congo by missionaries and Leopold’s employees, to set up the Congo Reform Association (CRA) and mount a campaign that won the support of prominent politicians and churchmen, both in Britain and in the United States. Among these supporters was the highly respected Joseph Conrad (author of Heart of Darkness).

So what about this Mr. King Leopold? As of now you must understand that he has done something far worse than inhabit slave labor and import ivory and rubber to have caused such a controversy across the world? Simply, Leopold wanted a colony, any colony to give his position some leverage; he felt that by owning more than just his small country, that he’d somehow be validated as a King. Since he’d noticed the world flying by him quickly with new developments and technological advancements, not to mention anyone who was anyone owned a piece of the colonialism pie, Leopold just had to have his piece.

Leopold feeling squeezed out by the British, French Empires, and the rising power of Germany, studied forms of colonialism from the Dutch East Indies, to the British possession in Indian and Africa. Leopold’s regime, despite his studies, differed from those of those of his fellow colonialists. Leopold schemed to build himself a forced labor camp on a massive expanse of central Africa and was quite smooth with pulling all of this off. Through methods of bribery, chicanery, brute force and almost supernatural sense of cunning, Leopold had acquired an enormous private colony in Africa and gotten the rest of the worked to accept his claim as legally binding.

In 1884 Leopold gained recognition for the Congo by making a web of bilateral agreements at the Berlin conference in February 1885. The aim of the conference was proclaimed to be “abolishing the [Arab] slave trade, establishing peace among the chiefs and procuring them just and impartial arbitration.” And of course because this was Leopold’s excellent idea he was granted custody of the Congo, to bring civilization to the ignorant savages of Africa. Amount its aims, he convinced the US, Germany and Britain, that not only would he combat the Arabian slave trade but he would also establish Christian outpost on a heathen continent. Soon after Leopold gained possession of the Congo the horror began

Leopold’s main crime consisted of impressing as many Congolese as possible into forced labor and requiring them to turn in quotas of rubber and ivory, with hideous consequences, including mutilation if they failed. One might ask, what would drive a man of such great respect and admiration to inflict that degree of pain on others? The answer in my opinion remains simple, it was all about all about the Benjamin’s baby.

I won’t even ask this next question, but to answer it, getting away with this type of scheme was very well thought out. The text plainly states that, “Unlike other great predators of history? Leopold never saw a drop of blood spilt in anger. He never set foot in the Congo. There is something very modern about that too, as there is about the bomber pilot in the stratosphere, above the clouds, who never hears screams or sees shattered homes or torn flesh.” (p.4) Personally I can’t help but analyze the parallel that Hochschild makes between Leopold and the bomber pilot. I do agree on one hand, but the only difference was that Leopold unlike the pilot did see the broken bones and torn flesh, hence the hands he had brought to him. There are photographs of men , women and children whose hands had been chopped off the text also stated that not only were the hands and heads being cut off but noses and ears as well. (p.165)

Having already established that he never went to the Congo himself, he must have had a right hand man, and he did. This particular gentleman was a fearless yet insecure explorer by the name of Henry Morton Stanley. Leopold enlisted Stanley, a seemingly murderously natured person, to first chart the territory and set up a rudimentary infrastructure of posts and pathways, to the native guides and porters. Stanley’s other tasks consisted of purchasing as much land as he was able to obtain, he was also instructed to, “?place successively under?suzerainty?as soon as possible and without losing one minute, all the chiefs from the mouth of Congo tot he Stanley falls?” (p.70)

Now I know that all of this must sound pretty bad but it’s imperative that I continue, because this is the least of the tasks Stanley fulfilled. He was also sent to purchase all the available ivory and establish barriers and tools on the roads he opened up, make land rights treaties should be as “brief as possible and in a couple of articles must grant us everything.” (p71) Not to mention that Stanley was a tyrant with a hair-trigger temper who routinely murdered the locals, for no apparent reason. He considered native Africans subhuman and thought nothing of destroying villages and impressing their occupants into his service. What a monster huh? I sure think so.

Leopold carved out the boundaries for the huge state and once his ownership of the Congo was secure the rubber boom erupted. Rubber sap was in great demand and the Congo was covered with rubber vines and the abundance of profits from rubber production saved Leopold’s colonial empire.

To keep his colony under control Leopold developed a military dictatorship over Congo, he paid mercenaries, but in 1888 these were transformed into the “Force Publique” and at it’s peak there were members of 19,000 conscripted African soldiers and 420 white officers. The soldiers were slaves who had been press-ganged through hostage taking, or stolen as children and brought up in child colonies founded by Leopold and the Catholic Church.

The Congo region was turned from a preservation society into a grotesque forced-labor camp on behalf of Leopold, running on slave labor, enforced by mostly Belgians driving the local population into slavery as porters, road and railroad builders, ivory hunters and rubber gatherers. A typical tactic was to burn down a village and kidnap the women and hold them until the men agreed to whatever demands were made of them. Discipline was arbitrary, fickle and often fatal. Hochschild identifies in the text that, “the soldiers?attacked the natives until able to seize their women; these women were kept as hostages until the chief of the district brought in the required number of kilograms of rubber. The rubber having been brought, the women were sold back to their owners for a couple of goats apiece, and so he continued from village to village until the requisite amount of rubber had been collected.” (p161)

Those that refused to cooperate with the officers faced a punishment installed by the officer known as “Fievez” the text give the example of this stating that, “a hundred heads cut off, and there have been plenty of supplies ever since.” (p.166)

It saddened my heart and practically swept he breath from my lungs to grasp the mental picture of theses traumatized men, possibly haven starved for days and severely malnutrition, strapped, chained, and bound to one another, walking in syncopation, all the while straining their necks and possibly giving themselves a headache for the sake of possibly saving a limb, or a family member.

Another horror of this was the during the expeditions, force publique soldiers were instructed to bring back a hand or head for each bullet fired, to make sure that none were wasted or hidden for use in rebellions. Hochschild goes on to point out that the killing of the Congolese was not an elaborate program of the ethnic genocide, it nonetheless represented murder on a grand scale. This massacre, as I like to call it, killed between five and eight million Africans and I can’t help but think of how devastating that must have been to their entire nation.

In the early 1900’s (1908 to be specific) when Moral began to publicize the events taking place in Leopold’s Congo, Leopold attempted to destroy the evidence. For eight days the furnaces in Leopold’s Brussels headquarters were at full blast, as Congo State archives were turned to ash. He sent word to his agent in the Congo to do likewise. Therefore the entire Belgian State followed the “Politics of Forgetting,”.

As it may have been so easy for them to forget I am quite sure that the residence of the Congo have not. The ghosts are unhappy there, I presume, and the gallons of slain blood have turned into hard clay but they have not forgotten. Considering it was in the early 1900’s, it is most amazing and almost surreal to grasp the realization that in a time when black’s in America were coming into their own, getting educated, and even going to the lengths of forming Greek organizations, that their fellow brother in Africa were being brutally mutilated and stripped of their humanity.

Hochschild has done an exemplary job of writing this book by gathering details and evidence not to mention the wonderful writing skills that he’s displayed throughout the entire book. In my opinion, the account of shocking and brutal nature of Belgian colonial rule, is worth reading on it’s own, if only to remind us of the horror of the colonialism from which the US has recently escaped. And anyone with an interest in the way we car for or mistreat other humanbeings may find a great deal of food for thought here as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hochschild, a renowned journalist has taken on Stalin and Russian psyche in previous books. He has been criticized the almost exclusive focus of the CRA movement on Belgium, citing comparable brutality by the US in the Philippines, the British in Australia, the Germans in what is now Namibia.

Bibliography

Hochschild, Adam “King Leopold’s Ghost:a story of greed, terror, and heroism in colonial Africa.

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