



THE GREAT FORGETTING

ONE OF THE MORE eerie experiences for a visitor to the old Soviet Union was strolling through the spacious galleries of the Museum of the Revolution on Moscow's Gorky Street. You could look at hundreds of photographs and paintings of fur-hatted revolutionaries behind snowy barricades, innumerable rifles, machine guns, flags and banners, a large collection of other relics and documents, and find no clue that some twenty million Soviet citizens had died in execution cellars, in manmade famines, and in the gulag.

Today that museum in Moscow has changed in ways its creators could never have imagined. But on the other side of Europe is one that has not changed in the slightest. To see it, take the short walk from the European Union headquarters complex in Brussels to the beginning of the Number 44 tram line. The tram carries you through the shady, pleasant Forêt de Soignes on the outskirts of the city to the ancient ducal borough of Tervuren. In the eighth century, Saint Hubert, the patron saint of hunters, lived here and pursued game in these woods. Today, grandly overlooking a park, in an enormous Louis XV-style palace built by King Leopold II, is the Royal Museum of Central Africa. On a typical day it will be swarming with hundreds of visitors, from schoolchildren filling in blank spots in workbooks to elderly tourists arriving in air-conditioned buses.

The museum houses one of the world's largest collections of Africana. It takes a full day to see all the exhibits, from Stanley's cap to Leopold's cane, from slave manacles to a dugout canoe big enough for a hundred men. One gallery full of weapons and uniforms celebrates the "antislav-

ery campaigns" of the 1890s — against the "Arab" slavers, of course. A plaque lists the names of several dozen Force Publique officers who "rest in African earth." Other plaques in this "memorial hall" have the names of hundreds more white pioneers who died in the Congo. Another gallery holds stuffed wild animals: elephants, chimpanzees, gorillas. An old black-and-white film plays continually on a TV monitor, showing Pende masked dances, the Kuba king at court, Ntomba funeral rites — an Africa composed entirely of exotic costumes and pounding drums. Everywhere, preserved in glass cases, are objects from the Congo's manifold cultures: spears, arrows, pipes, masks, bowls, baskets, paddles, scepters, fish traps, musical instruments.

One temporary exhibit shows a remarkable type of sculpture from the lower part of the Congo River: three-foot-high wooden statues, the chest and neck of each one studded with hundreds of nails, spikes, and tiny razorlike blades. The statues look like bristling, tortured dwarfs. A sign explains that each is an *nkondi*, a fetish to combat witches and other evildoers. Every nail and blade stands for an oath or an appeal for retaliation against an injustice. But of any larger injustice in the Congo, there is no sign whatever. For in none of the museum's twenty large exhibition galleries is there the slightest hint that millions of Congolese met unnatural deaths.

There is no hint of these deaths anywhere in Brussels. The rue Bréderode, where part of the Congo administration and the most important Congo companies once had headquarters, still runs past the back of the Royal Palace. But today the spot where Joseph Conrad had his job interview is occupied by a government tax-collection office. On another side of the palace, a larger-than-life statue of Leopold on horseback stares metallically out at a freeway underpass. And yet the blood spilled in the Congo, the stolen land, the severed hands, the shattered families and orphaned children, underlie much that meets the eye. The ornate, columned Royal Palace itself was renovated to its present splendor with Congo profits, as was the more grandly situated, domed château of Laeken, where the royal family lives, with its stunning array of greenhouses containing more than six acres of glass. Each spring the greenhouses are briefly opened to the public, and thousands of visitors walk past a bust of Leopold, decorated with camelias and azaleas. At Laeken also stands the five-story Japanese Tower, an architectural oddity that Leopold saw at a Paris world's fair, took a fancy to, and bought with his Congo money. Dominating part of the city's skyline is the grandest Congo-financed

extravagance of all, the huge Cinquantenaire arch, studded with heroic statuary; it looks like a swollen combination of the Arc de Triomphe and the Brandenburg Gate, with curving wings added. The arch's massive stone and concrete bulk brings to mind Conrad's description of the unnamed European capital in *Heart of Darkness* as "the sepulchral city." But of the millions of Africans whose labors paid for all this and sent them to sepulchers of unmarked earth, there is no sign.

Brussels is not unique. In Berlin, there are no museums or monuments to the slaughtered Hereros, and in Paris and Lisbon no visible reminders of the rubber terror that slashed in half the populations of parts of French and Portuguese Africa. In the American South, there are hundreds of Civil War battle monuments and preserved plantation manor houses for every exhibit that in any way marks the existence of slavery. And yet the world we live in — its divisions and conflicts, its widening gap between rich and poor, its seemingly inexplicable outbursts of violence — is shaped far less by what we celebrate and mythologize than by the painful events we try to forget. Leopold's Congo is but one of those silences of history.

The Congo offers a striking example of the politics of forgetting. Leopold and the Belgian colonial officials who followed him went to extraordinary lengths to try to erase potentially incriminating evidence from the historical record. One day in August 1908, shortly before the colony was officially turned over to Belgium, the king's young military aide Gustave Stinglhamber walked from the Royal Palace to see a friend in the Congo state offices next door. The midsummer day seemed particularly warm, and the two men went to an open window to talk. Stinglhamber sat down on a radiator, then jumped to his feet: it was burning hot. When the men summoned the janitor for an explanation, he replied, "Sorry, but they're burning the State archives." The furnaces burned for eight days, turning most of the Congo state records to ash and smoke in the sky over Brussels. "I will give them my Congo," Leopold told Stinglhamber, "but they have no right to know what I did there."

At the same time the furnaces roared in Brussels, orders went from the palace to the Congo commanding the destruction of records there. Colonel Maximilien Strauch, the king's long-time *consigliere* on Congo matters, later said, "The voices which, in default of the destroyed archives, might speak in their stead have systematically been condemned to silence for considerations of a higher order." Seldom has a totalitarian regime gone to such lengths to destroy so thoroughly the records of its work. In

their later quests for a higher order, Hitler and Stalin in some ways left a far larger paper trail behind them.

The same kind of deliberate forgetting took place in the minds of the men who staffed the regime. Forgetting one's participation in mass murder is not something passive; it is an active deed. In looking at the memories recorded by the early white conquistadors in Africa, we can sometimes catch the act of forgetting at the very moment it happens. It is not a moment of erasure, but of turning things upside down, the strange reversal of the victimizer mentally converting himself to victim. Take, for example, a moment in the memoirs of Raoul de Premorel, who ran rubber-collecting posts in the Kasai region of the Congo from 1896 to 1901. Here is his description of how he dealt with the alleged ringleader of a mutiny:

I had two sentries drag him to the front of the store, where his wrists were tied together. Then standing him up against a post with his arms raised high above his head they tied him securely to a cross beam. I now had them raise him by tightening the rope until just his toes touched the floor. . . . So I left the poor wretch. All night long he hung there, sometimes begging for mercy, sometimes in a kind of swoon. All night long his faithful wife did what she could to alleviate his suffering. She brought him drink and food, she rubbed his aching legs. . . . At last when the morning came and my men cut him down, he dropped unconscious in a heap on the ground. "Take him away," I ordered. . . . Whether he lived or not, I do not know. . . . Now sometimes in my sleep I think I am the poor devil and half a hundred black fiends are dancing . . . about me. I wake up with a great start and I find myself covered with a cold sweat. Sometimes, I think it is I who have suffered most in the years that have passed since that night.

Sometimes, I think it is I who have suffered most. . . . Throughout history, people with blood on their hands have used such rationalizations. But the process of forgetting the killings of Leopold's Congo received an unexpected boost when Belgium itself was seen as victim instead of conqueror. The world was shocked by Germany's unprovoked invasion of neutral Belgium in August 1914, as well as by German killings of many Belgian civilians in the opening weeks of the war.

During the next four years, first the British and then the American

governments used the sufferings of "brave little Belgium" to whip up war fever in countries that had not themselves been attacked. Newspaper stories, cartoons, posters, and patriotic speeches luridly denounced mass rapes of Belgian women by German soldiers. The Germans, it was said, crucified Belgian babies on the doors of houses. And, in a striking but unconscious echo of the imagery of the Congo reform movement, the press in the Allied countries reported that German soldiers were cutting off the hands and feet of Belgian children. An exiled Belgian writer even wrote a poem on the subject.*

These shocking reports of severed hands and feet were so widespread that a rich American tried to adopt maimed Belgian children; but, even with offers of a reward, none could be found. In the end, the mass rape, mutilation, and crucifixion charges also turned out to be false. During and after the war, though, no one in the Allied countries wanted to be reminded that, only a decade or two earlier, it was the King of the Belgians whose men in Africa had cut off hands. And so the full history of Leopold's rule in the Congo and of the movement that opposed it dropped out of Europe's memory, perhaps even more swiftly and completely than did the other mass killings that took place in the colonization of Africa.



In the quiet village of Hoepertingen, an hour east of Brussels by train, Jules Marchal and his wife live in a modest, rambling house with a small cherry orchard. Once a year they spend a few weeks on ladders, with baskets, harvesting cherries to sell through the local farmers' co-operative. Marchal was born here, and at seventy-three he fits the part of a town

* It ends:

*Et quand ils rencontraient quelque Teuton frappé
Par une balle adroite, au bord d'un chemin proche,
Souvent ils découvraient, dans le creux de ses poches,
Avec des colliers d'or et des satins fripés,
Deux petits pieds d'enfant atrocement coupés.*

And when they [Belgians] find some Hun struck down
By a well-aimed bullet, at a nearby roadside,
Often they find, in the folds of his pockets,
With gold rings and crumpled satin,
Two children's feet, cruelly cut off.

elder: a gold tooth, suspenders, a ruddy, kindly face, white hair. His white mustache gives him a slight resemblance to pictures of Stanley in the explorer's last years. But there the similarity ends.

Marchal is a retired diplomat. In the early 1970s, he was Belgian ambassador to a group of three countries in West Africa: Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. One day he noticed a story in a Liberian newspaper that referred, in passing, to ten million deaths in King Leopold's Congo.

"I was startled," says Marchal. "I wrote to the foreign minister in Brussels. I said, 'I have to write a letter to the editor correcting this story, this strange slander on our country. But I don't know the history of that period. Could you please have someone send me some information?'"

"I waited. But I never got an answer. And that's when my curiosity began."

Marchal is a careful, methodical man, the sort of person who likes to read a book in its original language, to trace a piece of information to its source, to get his history not from someone else's summary, but from the original documents. His interest ignited, he now read enough about early Congo history to discover that finding official documents might not be so easy, given Leopold's week-long bonfire. However, certain crucial papers had escaped the furnace in 1908, and among them were the transcripts — never published — of the testimony given by African witnesses before the 1904–1905 Commission of Inquiry. Conveniently for him, Marchal discovered, this important collection of records had eventually ended up filed in the archives of the Belgian Foreign Ministry, his own employer. He looked forward to examining them.

Marchal next served in another post in Africa, "but the Congo always stayed in my head. There was an air of something rotten about it. I learned that there had been this huge campaign, in the international press, from 1900 to 1910; millions of people had died, but we Belgians knew absolutely nothing about it. And so when I arrived in 1975 for a post at the Foreign Ministry in Brussels, the first thing I did was to go to the ministry archives and ask to see the Commission of Inquiry testimony."

Impossible, he was told. The testimony papers were stamped *Ne pas à communiquer aux chercheurs* — no access for researchers. Marchal protested that it was seventy years after the commission had delivered its report, and that he was of ambassadorial rank. It made no difference. He was not allowed to see the files.

"There was a rule in the Foreign Ministry archives. They were not permitted to show researchers material that was bad for the reputation of

Belgium. But *everything* about this period was bad for the reputation of Belgium! So they showed nothing." Marchal, now obsessed with the subject, had another decade and a half to serve before retirement. He remained in the foreign service, returning to Africa as an ambassador and also working in several desk jobs in Brussels. He devoted all of his spare time to research and writing about Leopold's Congo. After he retired, in 1989, he worked at his project full time. Four decades as a civil servant had given him unusual skill in locating revealing information in government records, and he traveled to every archive in Europe and the United States that had material about this period. He found collections of private papers in Belgium that had been beyond reach of Leopold's fire. He found that often the most revealing material lay in the letters and reports of low-ranking, idealistic young colonial officers, newly arrived in the Congo and shocked that African realities did not match the noble rhetoric they had heard in Europe. He studied the files of missionary societies and of companies that had done business in Africa. He went to Ireland to look at Casement's papers and to visit the beach where Casement had landed on his last, fatal mission.

While Marchal was still a Belgian diplomat, he wrote under a pseudonym — Delathuy, the maiden name of his great-grandmother. "A remarkable woman. But she had been written out of the family history because she had had a child out of wedlock. Her name was never mentioned. It was taboo. Like the history of the millions killed." Marchal wrote his history of Leopold's Congo in his native Dutch, then revised and translated it for a four-volume edition in French. Although virtually ignored in Belgium, his books are the definitive scholarly study of the subject, a magisterial, scrupulously documented account unsurpassed in any language. It might never have been written had he not seen that Liberian newspaper article.

As Marchal describes his work, he seems a man possessed. His voice rises, he gesticulates. He pulls books and papers off his shelves and burrows into drawers to find photographs. The photos are of every house in England where E. D. Morel lived. "Morel has been treated in Belgium as a traitor and a bad man. I want to put him in his rightful place."

It upset Marchal that he had been representing his country for many years while knowing nothing of this piece of its past, and it rankled him even more to be denied access to the archives of his own ministry. At one point, a senior official told him, "You can see the files, but only if you promise not to write anything based on them." Marchal refused the

bargain. Only after badgering ministry officials for eight years was he allowed to look at the Commission of Inquiry testimony. He has published an annotated collection of it as a book.

There was a further reason that Marchal was distressed by what he learned. Before joining the Belgian diplomatic service when he was in his early forties, he had worked in the Congo for nearly twenty years, in its last years as a Belgian colony and its first as an independent country, starting as a young assistant district administrator for the colonial regime. Years later, on first learning about the turn-of-the-century history, Marchal and his wife, Paula, carefully sifted their memories to see whether there were any clues, anything people had said, that could be understood in a new light. He remembered one such episode:

"When I arrived in the Congo in 1948, my very first job was to go around and distribute medals to the village chiefs who had gathered rubber for the government during the Second World War. You know they made everyone go back into the forest then, and tap wild rubber. I had to give decorations to about a hundred chiefs. I had a corporal and six or seven soldiers who went to all the villages with me. The corporal, he said to me, 'The rubber *this* time, that was nothing. But the first time, *that* was terrible.' Only thirty years later did I understand what he was talking about."



In all of Africa, the colonizers wrote the school textbooks; together with widespread book-banning and press censorship, this accomplished the act of forgetting for the written record. In the Congo, throughout the half-century of Belgian rule that followed Leopold's death, textbooks for Africans praised Leopold and his works as lavishly as Soviet schoolbooks praised Lenin. For example, a 1959 text for young Congolese soldiers studying to become NCOs in the Force Publique explained that history "reveals how the Belgians, by acts of heroism, managed to create this immense territory." Fighting the "Arab" slavers, "in three years of sacrifice, perseverance and steadfast endurance, they brilliantly completed the most humanitarian campaign of the century, liberating the decimated and exploited peoples of this part of Africa." As for critics, who go unnamed: "The criticisms emitted in the course of defamatory campaigns undertaken by jealous foreigners . . . were shown to amount to nothing."

This officially decreed forgetting could not, of course, reach all the

way to the villages, where there remains some lore about the rubber terror. But even that collective memory today is more scanty than one would expect. A handful of dedicated anthropologists have helped find and preserve these memories — often a fragmentary local legend about an extraordinarily cruel person from the period remembered as *la guerre du Blanc* [the white man's war], or, in the Mongo language, *lokel*, "the overwhelming." Sometimes, in conjunction with information gathered by witnesses like Casement or the missionaries, the villain of legend can be identified as a district commissioner or rubber-company agent or a chief who collaborated with the conquerors. Sometimes the period of terror is stamped into the language itself. In the Mongo tongue, "to send someone to harvest rubber" is an idiom meaning "to tyrannize."

Relatively little collective memory of the rubber era has survived in rural Africa, because oral tradition is usually a matter of remembering kings, dynasties, victories in battle. And those dynasties which have survived almost always did so by collaborating with the colonial rulers. As Jan Vansina observes in his history of the Kuba people: "No account of those events [the Leopold-era rubber slavery] appeared in the dynastic traditions. The rulers who had benefited from the system were not about to commit this to official memory." In the cities, where many Congolese now live, the process of rapid urbanization itself has brought drastic upheaval. For example, what was, just over a hundred years ago, the small village of Kinshasa is today a sprawling, chaotic metropolis of some five million people, many of them recently arrived from rural areas in a desperate search for work. Such changes have strained and loosened the connecting links by which lore is passed from one generation to another. Traditional cultures have been much weakened, and disappearing with them is the very memory of the forces that first shattered them.



Decades after Leopold's death a curious legend developed in the Congo. The king, it was believed, had not died at all but had come to live in his former colony. He had been transformed into a Catholic bishop, Jean-Félix de Hemptinne, an autocratic nobleman who long wielded great political influence in the Congo. (The legend was clearly sparked by de Hemptinne's large white beard and figure, which were of Leopoldian dimensions.) De Hemptinne was Leopold reincarnated, it was said, or maybe he was the king's illegitimate son, and in this role he was a shadowy figure behind the scenes at pivotal moments, ordering the po-

lice to fire on striking mineworkers in one notorious episode, ordering a judge to be tough on an accused prisoner in another.

It needed no reincarnation, however, for Leopold to leave his mark. History lies heavy on Africa: the long decades of colonialism, several hundred years of the Atlantic and Arab world slave trade, and — all too often ignored — countless centuries of indigenous slavery before that. From the colonial era, the major legacy Europe left to Africa was not democracy as it is practiced today in countries like England, France, and Belgium; it was authoritarian rule and plunder. On the whole continent, perhaps no nation has had a harder time than the Congo in emerging from the shadow of its past.

When independence finally came to the Congo, the country fared badly. Like most other colonial powers in Africa, Belgium was taken by surprise by the demand for self-rule that swept across the continent in the 1950s, igniting mass demonstrations in Leopoldville in 1959 that were bloodily suppressed by the Force Publique. Until then, Leopold's heirs had thought independence might come, but decades hence. Some Africans were being trained for that distant day; but when pressure grew and independence came in 1960, in the entire territory there were fewer than thirty African university graduates. There were no Congolese army officers, engineers, agronomists, or physicians. The colony's administration had made few other steps toward a Congo run by its own people: of some five thousand management-level positions in the civil service, only three were filled by Africans.

King Baudouin of Belgium arrived in Leopoldville to grant, officially and patronizingly, the Congo its freedom. He said, "It is now up to you, gentlemen, to show that you are worthy of our confidence." An angry, impromptu speech in reply by Patrice Lumumba caught the world's attention. Barely a month earlier, an election had made Lumumba a coalition-government prime minister. It was the first democratic national election the territory had ever had. In substance if not form, it would be, for more than thirty-five years, the last. Lumumba believed that political independence was not enough to free Africa from its colonial past; the continent must also cease to be an economic colony of Europe. His speeches set off immediate alarm signals in Western capitals. Belgian, British, and American corporations by now had vast investments in the Congo, which was rich in copper, cobalt, diamonds, gold, tin, manganese, and zinc. An inspired orator whose voice was rapidly carrying beyond his country's borders, Lumumba was a mercurial and charismatic figure.

His message, Western governments feared, was contagious. Moreover, he could not be bought. Finding no sympathy in the West, he asked for help from the Soviet Union. Anathema to American and European capital, he became a leader whose days were numbered. Less than two months after being named the Congo's first democratically chosen prime minister, a U.S. National Security Council subcommittee on covert operations, which included CIA chief Allen Dulles, authorized his assassination. Richard Bissell, CIA operations chief at the time, later said, "The President [Dwight D. Eisenhower] would have vastly preferred to have him taken care of some way other than by assassination, but he regarded Lumumba as I did and a lot of other people did: as a mad dog . . . and he wanted the problem dealt with."

Alternatives for dealing with "the problem" were considered, among them poison (a supply of which was sent to the CIA station chief in Leopoldville), a high-powered rifle, and free-lance hit men. But it proved hard to get close enough to Lumumba to use these, so, instead, the CIA supported anti-Lumumba elements within the factionalized Congo government, confident that before long they would do the job. They did. After being arrested and suffering a series of beatings, the prime minister was secretly shot in Elizabethville in January 1961. A CIA agent ended up driving around the city with Lumumba's body in his car's trunk, trying to find a place to dispose of it. We cannot know whether, had he survived, Lumumba would have stayed true to his rhetoric and to the hopes he embodied for so many people in Africa and elsewhere. But the United States saw to it that he never had a chance. Like millions of Congolese before him, he ended up dumped in an unmarked grave.

The key figure in the Congolese forces that arranged Lumumba's murder was a young man named Joseph Désiré Mobutu, then chief of staff of the army and a former NCO in the old colonial Force Publique. Early on, the Western powers had spotted Mobutu as someone who would look out for their interests. He had received cash payments from the local CIA man and Western military attachés while Lumumba's murder was being planned. Wearing dark glasses and his general's uniform with gold braid and a sword, he later met President Kennedy at the White House in 1963. Kennedy gave him an airplane for his personal use — and a U.S. Air Force crew to fly it for him. With United States encouragement, Mobutu staged a coup in 1965 that made him the country's dictator. And in that position he remained for more than thirty years.

Further U.S. military aid helped Mobutu repel several attempts to

overthrow him. Some of his political enemies he ordered tortured and killed; some he co-opted into his ruling circles; others he forced into exile. The United States gave him well over a billion dollars in civilian and military aid during the three decades of his rule; European powers — especially France — contributed more. For its heavy investment, the United States and its allies got a regime that was reliably anti-Communist and a secure staging area for CIA and French military operations, but Mobutu brought his country little except a change of name, in 1971, to Zaire.

Government-owned media began referring to Mobutu variously as the Guide, the Father of the Nation, the Helmsman, and the Messiah. With American and European approval, the country's wealth flowed mainly into the pockets of the Messiah and foreign mining companies. Mobutu's loyalty to his Western backers made him a popular visitor to Washington, where he shrewdly abandoned his military uniform for civilian dress, a carved ebony cane, and a trademark African-looking leopard-skin hat that had actually been made by an elegant Paris milliner. Ronald Reagan received him at the White House several times, praising him as "a voice of good sense and good will." George Bush greeted him as "one of our most valued friends." He added, "I was honored to invite President Mobutu to be the first African head of state to come to the United States for an official visit during my presidency."

Mobutu and his entourage helped themselves to state revenue so freely that the Congolese government ceased to function. When he ran out of money to pay the army and other state workers in 1993, he printed up a new kind of currency. Because shopkeepers would not accept it, soldiers rioted, looting shops, government buildings, and private homes. Hundreds of people were killed. For years, garbage piled up in heaps, uncollected. A few foreign airlines continued to stop in the country, but they avoided leaving their planes overnight; insurance would not cover it. Government support of schools and hospitals dwindled to almost nothing. The U.S. embassy advised its staff in the capital not to unlock car doors or roll down windows when stopped by police at roadblocks: they should show their papers through the window only, lest their wallets be taken.

Before Mobutu was overthrown, in 1997, his thirty-two years in power had made him one of the world's richest men; his personal wealth at its peak was estimated at \$4 billion. He spent much of his time on his yacht, on the river at Kinshasa, formerly Leopoldville. One of the big lakes he

renamed Lake Mobutu Sese Seko. He acquired palatial homes in France, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and elsewhere. He made no distinction between state assets and his own; in a single year, he dispatched a state-owned jet airliner thirty-two times to Venezuela to ferry five thousand long-haired sheep to his ranch at Gbadolite; while his yacht was being renovated in 1987, he simply took over the most comfortable of the few remaining passenger boats still operating on the river system. And he demanded, and got, a piece of the action in almost every major corporation operating in the country.

It is an oversimplification to blame Africa's troubles today entirely on European imperialism; history is far more complicated. And yet, consider Mobutu again. Aside from the color of his skin, there were few ways in which he did not resemble the monarch who governed the same territory a hundred years earlier. His one-man rule. His great wealth taken from the land. His naming a lake after himself. His yacht. His appropriation of state possessions as his own. His huge shareholdings in private corporations doing business in his territory. Just as Leopold, using his privately controlled state, shared most of his rubber profits with no one, so Mobutu acquired his personal group of gold mines — and a rubber plantation. Mobutu's habit of printing more money when he needed it resembled nothing so much as Leopold's printing of Congo bonds.

"Those who are conquered," wrote the philosopher Ibn Khaldūn in the fourteenth century, "always want to imitate the conqueror in his main characteristics — in his clothing, his crafts, and in all his distinctive traits and customs." Mobutu's luxurious Villa del Mare, a pink-and-white marble colonnaded chateau at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin on the French Riviera, complete with indoor and outdoor swimming pools, gold-fitted bathrooms, and heliport, lay a mere dozen miles down the coast from the estates Leopold once owned at Cap Ferrat. From one cape you can see the other.



What epitaph can we write for the movement that worked so hard for justice in the Congo a hundred years ago?

The Congo reform movement had two achievements that lasted far beyond its own time. First, through the efforts of E. D. Morel, Roger Casement, and equally brave but lesser-known figures like George Washington Williams, William Sheppard, and Hezekiah Andrew Shanu, it put a remarkable amount of information on the historical record. And there it

remains, despite the strenuous efforts of Leopold and his admirers, then and now, to burn it, to ignore it, to distort it with mythologizing. That record of truth matters, especially for a continent whose history is otherwise so filled with silences.

The movement's other great achievement is this. Among its supporters, it kept alive a tradition, a way of seeing the world, a human capacity for outrage at pain inflicted on another human being, no matter whether that pain is inflicted on someone of another color, in another country, at another end of the earth.

When the Congo reformers spoke at hundreds of mass meetings throughout Britain and the United States, they showed slides: photographs of adults and children with their hands cut off, forced laborers at work as porters, a devastated village. LANTERN LECTURE ON THE CONGO ATROCITIES, read an advertisement. "60 excellent Photographic Lantern Slides from Photographs taken by Mrs. Harris, late of Baringa, Congo Free State. Descriptive lecture, revised by the Rev. J. H. Harris & Mr. E. D. Morel." These slides were black and white, approximately three inches square, made for "magic lantern" projectors. Someone who goes in search of those slides today can find them. They rest in two dusty wooden boxes on a storage shelf on the ground floor of a small, low-rent building in south London. The building is the office of Anti-Slavery International, formerly the Anti-Slavery Society, formerly the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, formerly the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. John and Alice Harris ran the society for many years after their work with Morel. In continuous existence since 1839, it is the oldest human rights organization on earth. Today, in that room with the boxes of slides, men and women in their twenties briskly come and go, carrying posters, video cassettes, and bundles of pamphlets — about child labor in Bangladesh and Nepal and Malaysia, women in household slavery in the Middle East, debt bondage in Brazil, child prostitution in Thailand, genital mutilation of women in Africa, the exploitation of immigrant domestic servants in England.

The tradition that is alive in that London office has grown and broadened in the last two hundred years. Today we are less likely to speak of humanitarianism, with its overtones of paternalistic generosity, and more likely to speak of human rights. The basic freedoms in life are not seen as gifts to be doled out by benevolent well-wishers, but, as Casement said at his trial, as those rights to which all human beings are entitled from birth. It is this spirit which underlies organizations like Amnesty International,

with its belief that putting someone in prison solely for his or her opinions is a crime, whether it happens in China or Turkey or Argentina, and Médecins Sans Frontières, with its belief that a sick child is entitled to medical care, whether in Rwanda or Honduras or the South Bronx.

The Congo reform movement at its best not only helped to shape and strengthen this set of beliefs; it went beyond them. Human rights groups today usually deal with results — a man in jail, a woman in servitude, a child without medicine. E. D. Morel talked, as well, about causes: above all, the theft of African land and labor that made possible Leopold's whole system of exploitation. It was this radicalism, in the best and deepest sense of the word, that underlay the passion of the leading Congo reformers and that led Morel and Casement, after their battle for justice in the Congo, to Pentonville Prison.

The larger tradition of which they are a part goes back to the French Revolution and beyond; it draws on the example of men and women who fought against enormous odds for their freedom, from the slave revolts of the Americas to the half-century of resistance that brought Nelson Mandela to power in South Africa. During its decade on the world stage, the Congo reform movement was a vital link in that chain, and there is no tradition more honorable. At the time of the Congo controversy a hundred years ago, the idea of full human rights, political, social, and economic, was a profound threat to the established order of most countries on earth. It still is today.