

16.9 European Imperialism in the Congo

Source: Hochschild, A. (1999). *King Leopold's Ghost* (NY: Houghton Mifflin).

Background: At an 1884-1885 conference of European powers held in Berlin, King Leopold of Belgium was made ruler of a “Congo Free State” established on the southern bank of the Congo River in central Africa. For the next thirty years there was controversy in Europe about who was responsible for conditions in the Congo. Examine the cartoon, read the statements by world leaders and Belgian officials in the Congo and answer questions 1 – 4.

Questions

1. What does King Leopold of Belgium and President Arthur of the United States claim is the purpose of European involvement in the Congo?
2. What do Belgian officials stationed in the Congo witness?
3. What is the point of view of the cartoonist about events in the Congo?
4. In your opinion, based on these statements, what was actually taking place in the Congo?

A. King Leopold of Belgium presented his vision of the goal for European expansion into Africa at a Geological Conference in Brussels in 1876. “To open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples, is, I dare say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress . . . It seemed to me that Belgium, a centrally located and neutral country, would be a suitable place for such a meeting . . . Need I say that in bringing you to Brussels I was guided by no egotism? No, gentlemen, Belgium may be a small country, but she is happy and satisfied with her fate; I have no other ambition than to serve her well” (44-45).

B. United States President Chester Arthur discussed Belgian involvement in the Congo in his 1883 “State of the Union” address to Congress. “The rich and populous valley of the Kongo is being opened by a society called the International African Association, of which the King of the Belgians is the president . . . Large tracts of territory have been ceded to the Association by native chiefs, roads have been opened, steamboats have been placed on the river and the nuclei of states established . . . under one flag which offers freedom to commerce and prohibits the slave trade. The objects of the society are philanthropic. It does not aim at permanent political control, but seeks the neutrality of the valley” (78).

C. In 1896, a Belgian government official described conditions he witnessed for African porters transporting goods along the Congo River. “Unceasingly we meet these porter . . . black, miserable, with only a horribly filthy loin-cloth for clothing, frizzy and bare head supporting the load . . . most of them sickly, drooping under a burden increased by tiredness and insufficient food – a handful of rice and some stinking dried fish . . . They come and go like this by the thousands . . . requisitioned by the State armed with its powerful militia, handed over by chiefs whose slaves they are and who make off with their salaries, trotting with bent knees, belly forward, an arm raised to steady the load, the other leaning on a long walking-stick, . . . dying along the road or, the journey over, heading off to die from overwork in their villages” (120-121).

D. Stanislas Lefranc was a Belgian prosecutor who witnessed the beating of African children and adults who were considered disobedient or disrespectful of Europeans. “The station chief selects the victims . . . Trembling, haggard, they lie face down on the ground . . . two of their companions, sometimes four, seize them by the feet and hands, and remove their cotton drawers . . . Each time that the torturer lifts up the *chicotte* [whip], a reddish stripe appears on the skin of the pitiful victims, who, however firmly held, gasp in frightful contortions . . . At the first blows the unhappy victims let out horrible cries which soon become faint groans . . . In a refinement of evil, some officers, and I’ve witnessed this, demand that when the sufferer gets up, panting, he must graciously give the military salute” (121).

