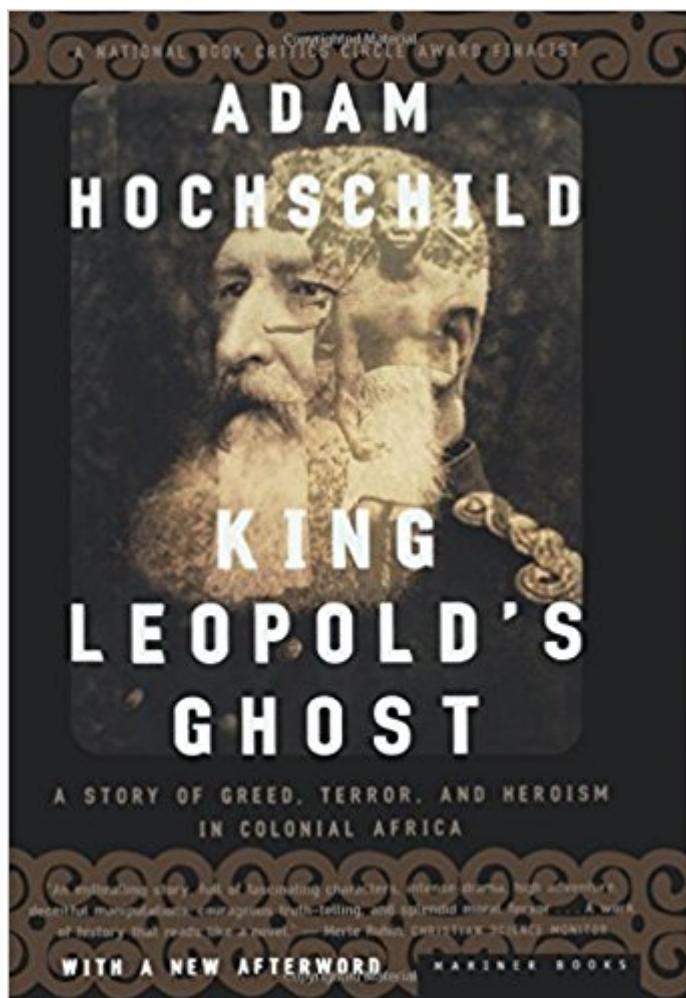


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King Leopold's Ghost: A Story Of Greed, Terror, And Heroism In Colonial Africa



Synopsis

In the 1880s, as the European powers were carving up Africa, King Leopold II of Belgium seized for himself the vast and mostly unexplored territory surrounding the Congo River. Carrying out a genocidal plundering of the Congo, he looted its rubber, brutalized its people, and ultimately slashed its population by ten million--all the while shrewdly cultivating his reputation as a great humanitarian. Heroic efforts to expose these crimes eventually led to the first great human rights movement of the twentieth century, in which everyone from Mark Twain to the Archbishop of Canterbury participated. King Leopold's Ghost is the haunting account of a megalomaniac of monstrous proportions, a man as cunning, charming, and cruel as any of the great Shakespearean villains. It is also the deeply moving portrait of those who fought Leopold: a brave handful of missionaries, travelers, and young idealists who went to Africa for work or adventure and unexpectedly found themselves witnesses to a holocaust. Adam Hochschild brings this largely untold story alive with the wit and skill of a Barbara Tuchman. Like her, he knows that history often provides a far richer cast of characters than any novelist could invent. Chief among them is Edmund Morel, a young British shipping agent who went on to lead the international crusade against Leopold. Another hero of this tale, the Irish patriot Roger Casement, ended his life on a London gallows. Two courageous black Americans, George Washington Williams and William Sheppard, risked much to bring evidence of the Congo atrocities to the outside world. Sailing into the middle of the story was a young Congo River steamboat officer named Joseph Conrad. And looming above them all, the duplicitous billionaire King Leopold II. With great power and compassion, King Leopold's Ghost will brand the tragedy of the Congo--too long forgotten--onto the conscience of the West.

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Customer Reviews

Many of us who have read Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" think of it as an allegory tinged with racism--a tale of a European, Kurtz, who has abandoned the restraints of civilization and has surrendered himself to the barbaric despotism and primitive rituals innate to Africa. Yet Hochschild spends a full chapter of his excellent history reminding us of the novel's historical context: the figure of Kurtz is based on at least one real-life colonial administrator, and the barbarity is not one that is indigenous to Africa but imported from Europe. Conrad's contemporary readers understood that his novel was a condemnation more of colonial tyranny rather than of African primitivism. And the ringleader of these gang of hoodlums who invaded the Congo and massacred its inhabitants was King Leopold II of Belgium. In a tour de force of characterization, Hochschild portrays Leopold as a petulant and greedy monster who decided at a young age that the way to wealth was ownership of an African colony and the subjugation of its inhabitants. Leopold initially made his profits through the exportation of ivory, but his bureaucrats struck gold with the expansion of the international rubber market. The victims were the natives, who lost not only their land and their freedom, but often their lives. There is no pretty way for Hochschild to tell this story: Leopold's officials used unbelievably harsh methods to force the locals to collect rubber--all in the name of bringing them European civilization, Christian charity, and a Western work ethic. In addition to taking wives and children hostage (in subhuman conditions) until the men made their quotas, soldiers would torture or kill the inhabitants if they faltered. One of the most grisly aspects of this calculatingly orchestrated version of modern slavery was the severing of hands--and their collection into baskets as proof of killings--as a means of terrorizing the population. The wonder of it all is that Leopold and his agents managed to keep most of these deeds secret and even disguised his colony as a charity for the benefit of "pagan" African natives. Yet Hochschild's narrative is not simply a gruesome account of the horrors of Leopold's personal fiefdom--which the king himself never once visited. The most fascinating part of this tale is the creation of what might reasonably be called the world's first human rights movement. George Washington Williams, the first and perhaps bravest campaigner, initially sounded the alarm, but he was ignored largely because he was African American. Later rabble-rousers had better success: E. D. Morel, whose suspicions were aroused when he noticed the imbalance of trade to the colony while working at the docks; William Sheppard, a Presbyterian missionary who provided first-hand accounts; and Roger Casement, a British consul who became an important anti-Leopold activist (and who later became an significant figure in the Irish

independence movement whose closeted homosexuality provides a sad coda to his life's story). One of Hochschild's themes is astonishment, only a century later, at the world's amnesia (including his own) regarding these atrocities. Even the thousands of annual visitors to Laeken's Royal Greenhouses and Winter Palace, Leopold's extravagant and luxurious monument, do not realize that this park was literally built with the lives of millions of Africans. Fortunately, thanks to Hochschild's best-selling book, as well as similar reassessments published by European historians during the last twenty years, even the briefest biographical accounts about King Leopold II now portray him as he was: a brutal and gluttonous colonial thug.

King Leopold's Ghost provides a vivid account of an episode in the modern history of Africa that was the epitome of tragedy. In this book, Adam Hochschild concerns himself with the looting of the Congo and the destruction of its peoples by a cousin of Queen Victoria, King Leopold of the Belgians. The story is told through a succession of biographical sketches of the principal villains and heroes, the former being Leopold's accomplices and the latter his opponents. Hochschild, though bent on illuminating a great human tragedy, allows himself and the reader several curious and even piquant digressions. The first suspicion that these digressions are only there to spice up the story is belied when the author manages to make them highly relevant, such as the connection between Leopold's unsuccessful wedding night and his all-consuming desire in the Congo. Hochschild begins this book by reminding us of the figure of Affonso I, the sixteenth-century Christian King of the Kongo, pious son of a ruler converted by the Portuguese. Affonso wrote a series of eloquent letters to the Portuguese king complaining that the slave traders were depopulating his kingdom and even seizing members of the royal family. The Portuguese, however, had meanwhile discovered a traffic more profitable than gold and they were not about to give it up. Leopold, the figurehead monarch of a small country, successfully acquired a realm larger than France, Italy and Germany combined. For many of the new imperial powers, collecting colonies was not particularly profitable, but Leopold, through a strange mix of luck, cunning, ruthlessness and breathtaking hypocrisy, managed to gain a huge fortune. Leopold favored a quick killing in the Congo because it was clear that the boom in wild rubber would eventually be overtaken by the planting of commercial rubber plantations. He joined forces with others to suppress forces within the Congo and bleed it dry. Leopold's Force Publique had an officer corps of well-paid desperadoes recruited from all over Europe, characters resembling Kurtz in Conrad's chilling Heart of Darkness. Leopold's vicious experiment combined some of the latest techniques of European industry steamboats, machine guns and railways with a sure understanding of traditional African bondage and brigandage, and of the ways they could be bent to

his purpose. The slave-traders became the best recruiters both for the Force Publique and for the porters who carried the rubber to the river or to the railhead. Sadly, Leopold's enterprise enjoyed the blessing of the United States despite the fact that it flew in the face of its supposed anti-slavery, anti-colonial and republican principles. The indulgence of Europe's colonial powers was less surprising given the rampant racism and imperialism of the time. There were a few anti-slavery zealots who objected to the "magnificent work of exploration" with which Leopold was credited. (Interestingly, Leopold maintained tight personal control without ever going near the Congo.) The journalist George W. Williams wrote an angry pamphlet denouncing Leopold's brutal regime but died shortly afterwards. Hochschild does not end this book on a comfortable note. Conditions in the Congo barely improved, and the harsh but effective methods pioneered by Leopold were taken up by yet other colonial powers. The outbreak of war in Europe soon furnished its own lessons in industrial slaughter, making Leopold's war on the people of the Congo seem like little more than a dress rehearsal. Although tragic, King Leopold's Ghost is an exemplary piece of history writing: urgent, vivid and most compelling.

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