THE ROLE OF CHURCH MISSIONS IN THE SYSTEMATIC DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL LIFE IN THE BELGIAN CONGO FROM 1885-1960

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Liberal Studies

By

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April 20, 2010
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ABSTRACT

Belgium ruled the Congo from about 1885 until 1960. During this period, many Congolese were killed, as the Belgians exacted cruel control of the land and resources. The Catholics and other missionaries received funding from the Belgians, and later became proxies for Belgian rule in the Congo. Even though Protestant missionaries run missionary schools, Catholics controlled the educational system and benefited from Belgian benevolence to support their efforts. The paper will research the ongoing work of the Church during this period of Belgian rule in the Congo.

When King Leopold annexed the Congo as his personal property in 1885, he subsidized and funded the Belgian Roman Catholic Church to help them set up missions in the Congo. In fact, the Church became an apparatus of
Belgian control so much so that the locals could not distinguish between the colonial administration and the Catholic Church. The mission of the Church, according to the Colonial administration was to “civilize the local population.”

In writing this thesis, an examination of Marvin Markowitz’s “Cross and Sword”, Ch. Didier Gondola’s “The History of Congo” and Wellington Wack’s “The Story of The Congo Free State” provided primary information for the paper. Substantive information about Belgian Congo is also contained in “King Leopold’s Ghost” written by Adam Hochschild, and a historical account of the Congo documented by David Renton, David Seddon and Leo Zeilig.

Several protestant missionaries also voiced their concerns about the level of brutality exerted by the Belgians, after being exposed to the realities of Belgian administration. The Congo Reform Association was formed to spread the news about Belgian atrocities in Congo, and gained the support of prominent people such as Mark Twain and Arthur Conan Doyle. Notably the Catholic Church has a history of acknowledging and apologizing for acts in which it was involved directly or indirectly. Some of its apologies include its
participation in the Crusades, the Holocaust and most recently, the sexual abuse scandals. Despite the depth of its involvement in administering the Congo, and knowledge of the brutal methods used by the Belgians in that colony; I did not find any documented evidence of the Catholic Church expressing or acknowledging any role regret in Congo during Leopold’s ownership of the territory.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to dedicate this thesis which culminates reaching an important milestone first and foremost to my two young sons, Gabriel and Benjamin. When I had doubts about being accepted into the program, Jaclyn encouraged me to apply nonetheless. Thank you for all your support. As an immigrant from Ghana, I relied on the spiritual support from my immediate family when times were tough and I felt like giving up on my dreams. For this I thank my parents, Abraham and Gifty; and my siblings, Maame Efua, Nana Yinka and Nana Amankwah.

Special thanks go to Dr. Anthony Tambasco, firstly for calling me on the phone and inviting me to meet with him to discuss my interest in the program. Importantly, I wish to thank Dr. Gregory Havrilak for being my mentor and guiding me through my thesis, and especially for encouraging me to write about a subject that I was passionate about. Finally, I thank Ms. LaVerne Page of the Library of Congress for pointing in me in the right direction with my research.
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CHAPTER ONE
BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BELGIAN CONGO BEFORE BELGIAN ENTRY

Congo is located in Central Africa. It geographically spans the Congo River Basin and is bordered by The Republic of Congo, Zambia, Rwanda, Central African Republic, Angola, Sudan and Uganda. The region has a very lush rainforest with an array of over 10,000 plant species. ¹ This region has the world’s second largest inflow of water called the River Congo, which is a rich source of marine life and biology. Based on its geography and shared boundaries, it is a very heterogeneous tribal territory. As a result, tribes located in the southern most part of the country have more in common with neighboring countries such as Angola, than they with tribes near Kinshasa, in the central part of the country, or the mineral-rich Katanga region.

The Bantu people are known to be the earliest migrants to this region around 1000 B.C. Their flight was from the Benue area in Nigeria. ² The pygmies were already well settled yet were relegated into a secondary societal role by the Bantu speakers during this period. Other migrants to the area

² Ibid., 22.
included the Sudanese people from Darfur, who integrated with the Bantus. Bantu and Sudanese integration created other sub-tribes such as the Gbandi, Zande and others. The diversity of such tribes also led to societal integration, which created new languages and other forms of societal norms and religious practices. As time went on the Bantus established themselves as the dominant group in this area. Archeological evidence of their settlements was found in Stone Age sites near Lake Kivu dating to 700 BCE. ³

The economics of the area was dominated by agriculture and iron technology, which the Bantus brought with them. The use of iron technology enabled them to create tools useful for large-scale agricultural production of sorghum, millet and other crops. Prior to Bantu arrival, the inhabitants of this area survived on subsistence agriculture. They advanced the agricultural practice and focused on creating surpluses of foodstuff, which they traded with neighboring tribes. In return, they got pottery, grains and other items which improved their livelihood. Later on, Bantu iron technology spread into the Eastern part of Africa and enhanced the agricultural production of the tribes in those areas.

In the 15th century, the Portuguese led by Diogo Cao arrived in Congo and eventually established a trading relationship with the Congo Kingdom. The Portuguese realized that the River Congo could be a great source of trade and staked the territory on behalf of the King of Portugal. At the time of Diogo Cao’s arrival, Nzinga Nkuwu was the ruler of the Congo area, which was inhabited by more than three million people. He later converted to the Catholic faith and became known as King Joao I. The Kingdom was recognized as a source of beneficial trade by the Portuguese. During this period, Congo gained diplomatic status with the Portuguese. Documentation from King Affonso’s (ruled Congo from 1506-1543) records shows that the Kingdom indeed had political relationships with Europe. In his letters, written by literate Congolese, he showed displeasure with the slave trading activities of the Portuguese in this region. One of his letters from 1526 states:

Each day the traders are kidnapping our people...children of his country, sons of our nobles and vassals, even people of our own family...We need in this kingdom only priests and schoolteachers, and no merchandise, unless it is wine and flour for Mass...It is our wish that this kingdom not be a place for the trade or transport of slaves.  

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4 Gondola, Congo, 31.

His records also show decisions made in reference to war and other critical state matters.

King Affonso I proved to be a strong statesman and ruler of the empire and expanded his influence across the region. He successfully established diplomatic relations with The Vatican and Portugal. Affonso I was keenly aware that there were flaws to dealing with the Portuguese, so he astutely decided to focus on using the Portuguese to improve his Kingdom. He focused on ensuring that his subjects learned masonry, woodworking and science from the Portuguese. When he died in 1545, his successors lost control of the empire and had to deal with frequent intrusion into their political affairs by the Portuguese.  

At its peak, the Congo Kingdom spread across modern-day Angola in the South, and all the way into Congo-Brazzaville in the West. Its territory also included land near Katanga and Lake Victoria in East Africa. The Congo Kingdom was a well established socio-political system, and research records

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6 Gondola, Congo, 34.
and oral traditions show that the empire was well established, at least for two centuries before Portuguese arrival in the 15th century.\footnote{Ibid., 35.}

The Portuguese exploited the region for their own economic interest and begun to influence and limit the Congo Kingdom from establishing relationships with other European Kingdoms. After the Portuguese settled in Brazil, they relied on importing slaves from the Congo region (which is now Angola and Democratic Republic of Congo), to fuel their expansion in Brazil. This transformed the Congo Empire from one that relied on citizen’s service to the state, to one that was based on ruthless exploitation and brutal slave trade. At the peak of Portuguese slave trade from Congo to Brazil, at least ten thousand people were exported per annum. The slaves sent to Brazil worked in mines and harvested coffee for the Portuguese.\footnote{Ibid., 32.}

The interference of the Portuguese led to warfare amongst the various tribes and a protracted battle between the Bakongo who ruled the empire and the Jagas. The Jagas had attacked the Bakongo because of the latter’s attempt to restrict and regulate slave trade. The Jagas were clearly more warlike in

\footnote{Ibid., 35.}
\footnote{Ibid., 32.}
contrast to the peaceful and politically sophisticated Bakongo tribe. These battles spread across various tribes and fragmented the social fabric of reasonable peace and coexistence that had been established centuries prior.

By 1571, the Bakongo who mainly ruled the Congo Kingdom realized it was vital to their survival to trade with the Europeans. Years of strife and war with their neighbors weakened their sense of military security. By the 17th century there had been so many wars in the area and the Congo Empire was increasingly weakened. Tribal immigrants to the area formed new kingdoms such as the Kuba and the Bushong. The system of monarchy used by the Kuba was based on a four-year rotational system. Women were allowed to stand for office in this kingdom which shows the political sophistication of the tribe.⁹

Many other kingdoms such as the Luba flourished across the Congo region from the 15th century until the late 19th century. The arrival of the Arabs and their rising influence in trade destroyed the strength of the Luba Empire. Further divisions were rampant in other parts of the Luba Empire. Clearly, the region was not and is still not hegemony. The onslaught of Portuguese influence hastened and widened conflicts and fractured any sense of peaceful

⁹ Ibid., 15.
coexistence and socio-political order. The area known as the Congo has always been made up of several autonomous tribes that cohabited and traded with each other. There were occasions of severe civil strife and war between these tribes. Some tribal practices included polygamy and instances of cannibalism. Nonetheless, these tribes had intricate traditional practices and were self-governing.

In Chapter Two, we will show how the Europeans begin to show interest in Africa as a source of imperial expansion, and raw materials to fuel the industrial revolution and economic expansions in Europe. Belgium was a small country without the political muscle of France or the United Kingdom. King Leopold II, the King of Belgium, had imperialistic ambitions and cleverly disguised his intentions, because of historical fears based on Belgium being dominated by neighboring countries. When Stanley, discovered the Congo, he found King Leopold to be a willing partner in this endeavor, leading to the eventual annexation of Congo as the personal property of the Belgian King.
CHAPTER TWO

HOW CONGO BECAME THE PRIVATE PROPERTY OF KING LEOPOLD

Explorers from Western Europe and America had visited the Congo Basin since the Portuguese first came in the 15th-16th centuries. It is well documented that Colonel Taunt, a US naval officer, explored the area before it became the Congo Free State, a private property of King Leopold. The Congo River had long been an area of interest to European explorers and Captain James Tuckey of the British Navy was no exception. He led an expedition upstream on the Congo River in 1816, but died, as did many members of his crew who succumbed to yellow fever. They had not been able to unlock the mystery of the Congo River started by the expeditions of Diogo Cao, about three centuries earlier.¹

By the middle of the 19th century European explorers begun to make inroads into unlocking the mysteries of the Congo River as a viable source of trade and economic expansion for European powers. Henry Morton Stanley, a

¹ Gondola, Congo, 47.
Welsh journalist, became the reference point for the ruthless foray of Europeans into Africa for the purposes of establishing colonial powers and exploiting the land and resources of the African people. Foreign explorers had long known the River Nile in North Africa since the period of the Roman Empire, and new explorers such as David Livingstone who sought to explore the area more so they could understand it better. During his sojourn into Africa, and particularly up the River Congo, which he mistook for the River Nile, he succumbed to illness as did many of his men.

Since Europe at that time was in a “Scramble for Africa”, driven by what Ch. Gondola describes as “antislavery zeal, the need for raw materials, Christian evangelism, desire for personal glory, and a craving for exoticism”\textsuperscript{2} concern for David Livingstone’s whereabouts in 1871 led to Henry Morton Stanley leading an expedition to find Livingstone. Stanley finally found Livingstone in Ujiji near Lake Tanganyika in East Africa after eight months of trekking across the continent\textsuperscript{3}. News of this reached Europe and cemented Stanley’s reputation.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., 48.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
After finding Livingstone, Stanley came back to England in 1872 and started preparation for a second expedition into Africa. He arrived in Zanzibar in 1874 and then spent another three years trekking until he reached Congo. His expedition included local Zanzibaris who were subject to whips and chains to ensure that they worked hard in carrying the load and boats needed by the expedition. Many of his men succumbed to the treacherous travel conditions and the harsh topography of the land. Nearly half of his men lost their lives during the journey to the Coast of southern Congo. Stanley became the first European to survive and share his exploration, proclaiming he had found the secret to discovering the River Congo⁴.

News of Stanley’s exploits guaranteed he would be the toast of society in Europe and possibly become a very wealthy man. When he returned to Europe, he spent time sharing the economic potential of the region by proclaiming in one his speeches to industrialists in the following:

There are 40,000,000 naked people beyond that gateway, and cotton spinners of Manchester are waiting to clothe them…Birmingham’s foundries are glowing with red metal that shall presently be made into iron-work in every

⁴ Ibid., 49.
fashion and shape for them...and the ministers of Christ are zealous to bring
them, the poor heathen, into Christian fold.⁵

This statement by Stanley is very indicative of the mode of European
Colonization across most of Africa, which took the form of using Christian
missionaries as an indirect extension of the Colonial governments.

A forty-two year old Belgian monarch named King Leopold finally met
a Henry Morton Stanley, who was then in his mid-thirties in 1878. He had
keenly kept up with Stanley’s exploration of Africa and was interested in
learning more from Stanley.⁶ Belgium was a tiny country, which had seceded
from the Netherlands and maintained a rather neutral political stance in
Europe. They were careful not arouse any suspicions from their much
stronger neighbors.

King Leopold had long been looking for a colony to annex for over
twenty years and had scoured lands in North Africa and Asia with no success.
He even thought about buying the Philippines and Taiwan but with no

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Henry Wellington Wack. The Story of the Congo Free State: Social, Political, and
Economic Aspects of the Belgian System of Government in Central Africa. (New York: Putnam,
1905), 65.
tangible success. Belgium held no major imperial expansionists agenda as the French, British or the Dutch, so the Congo was an appealing prospect for the Belgian King. More importantly, since Belgium was a part of the Netherlands until it seceded in 1830, it did not have a nationalistic fervor akin to the French and fought to maintain a sense of national identity often fraught with tensions between the Flemish and French speakers.

This meeting proved to be mutually beneficial as the King could annex the Congo to enhance his little Belgium, and for Stanley, the prospects of a big payoff was tempting, since King Leopold made it clear he was prepared to spend whatever it took to get Congo. In addition, the French had also shown interest in annexing the Congo, so it was imperative that King Leopold used a humanitarian guise to edge out the competition.7 He created the Committee for Studies of the Upper Congo, which was later called the International Association of the Congo, which embarked on a purported humanitarian trip to the Congo. This expedition led by Leopold’s agent was under the guise of exploring how Belgium could assist in civilizing the Congo. Since he had been a lifelong student of the African terrain, Leopold was aware that Arab slave

7 Wack, Congo Free State, 578.
trade still existed in and around the Zambezi area very close to the Congo. Since slavery had been abolished in the 19th century, Leopold viewed this as an opportunity to stamp out this abominable evil. This proved to be a very clever approach used by King Leopold since his exploration remained undisturbed by the richer and more powerful British and French who had already begun establishing a strong colonial presence in Africa.

He then invited renowned geographers from across various European countries to Brussels, where he hosted a conference in 1876. Wellington Wacks records that Britain sent five delegates, four represented Germany, and France sent two. Italy and Russia sent one each and two members represented Austria. Leopold’s clever message was focused on helping civilize the Congo region. The central theme of his speech was focused on “…geography and philanthropy, nothing political or personal obtruding itself upon their deliberations” 8 At the end of the three-day conference, the delegates agreed on a declaration that allowed the Congo area to be explored in accordance with Leopold’s stated objectives. This group came to be known as The International Association for the Exploration and Civilization of Central Africa (IAECCA)

8 Wack, Congo Free State, 11.
with King Leopold as the appointed President\(^9\). National subcommittees of the IAECCA flourished in Spain, Austria and even the United States\(^10\). He had succeeded in getting international consensus in support of his interest in the Congo region.

Henry Stanley Morton was perhaps one of a few people to know that Leopold’s real agenda for the Congo was to exploit economic and imperial interests. Stanley set up base in the territory around the River Congo and the land around the river basin and neighboring territories. This area was now to be known as the Congo. The artificial territory that was masterminded by Leopold had no regard for African traditional societies that had been in existence in the area for many years. There were many different tribes that had cohabited under various political systems without infringing on the cultures and lands of neighboring tribes. Leopold’s ambition was to lump all of these tribes together, with his only regard being exploitation of the land. In fact, it is reported that Stanley was told that in regards to Congo:

\(^9\) Ibid., 12.

\(^10\) Ibid., 13.
It is a question of creating a new State, as big as possible, and of running it. It is clearly understood that in this project there is no question of granting the slightest political power to the Negroes. That would be absurd. The white men, heads of the stations retain all power. They are the absolute commanders....

The force in which Stanley begun his exploration into Congo on behalf of King Leopold included blasting rocks through the Crystal Mountains during their construction. This earned Stanley the contemptuous name, *Bula Matari* (which means breaker of rocks in KiCongo).

During this period, Leopold had to contend serious interests in the Congo region from rival European powers. The Portuguese had laid claim to Stanley Pool, at the mouth of the Congo River, which would inhibit access to the coast if Leopold succeeded in annexing the Congo. The French had also laid claim to neighboring Brazzaville, since they had seen the economic potential of this region. There was an Anglo-Portuguese conference held in 1884 to discuss British and Portuguese interests over the mouth of the River Congo. Much to the relief of Leopold, there was no binding ratifications adopted at this meeting. Any agreements adopted between the British and the

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12 Ibid., 4.
Portuguese would have damaged Leopold’s ambitions of annexing Congo. Leopold was helped by the popular renouncement of the conference by the French and the Germans.

In November of 1884, the Great Powers of the West gathered in Berlin at the behest of Prince Bismarck, to discuss the “African question”. Representatives of Portugal, United Kingdom, Belgium, France, Denmark, Italy, the Netherland, Russia, Spain, Sweden Norway, the United States, Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary attended the conference. At the conference there was a discussion of commerce and economic interest, and a focus on the probable welfare of the natives of Africa. The discussions on trade focused on creating a legal framework, governed by articles for the purpose of seamless trade in the African territory. Some of the European powers, particularly, the Portuguese representative seemed to want to claim “…the honor of having introduced the elements of civilization into Africa…” 13 This is of course contrary to the fact that the Africans already had established civilizations as described in Chapter one’s focus on Congo before the entry of Western explorers.

13 Wack, Congo Free State, 25.
After about ten sessions the committee nominated by the powers who attended the conference came up with a General Act in reference to Africa and particularly, Central Africa. The Act recognized King Leopold as the benefactor of the Congo Basin and its immediate surrounding areas. The General Act also had provisions that partitioned the Congo Basin between France (Congo Brazzaville), Portugal (Angola) and Belgium (Congo- Kinshasa or what is now known as DRC). The agreement also made for free trade in that area, with particular emphasis on access to the coastal areas for trading purposes. "Europeans were still used to thinking of Africa’s wealth mainly in terms of its coastline, and there was remarkably little conflict over ceding to Leopold the vast spaces he wanted in the interior"14. King Leopold suggested funding for this project would come from three revenue streams, namely; an allocated fund from his personal finances at one million francs a year. Export duties and taxes were projected to bring in another five hundred thousand francs per year. Once this was ratified by the Belgian parliament, his official title on the Congo document was to read “His Majesty Leopold II, King of the

Belgians’. This was done to ensure that there was no questions about succession and bequeathal of the property when he died, and also to clearly demonstrate that Congo was to be the personal property of the King.\textsuperscript{15}

Interestingly, a few months after the Berlin conference ended in 1885, a United States Navy ship travelled to the coast of Congo and gave a twenty-one-gun salute in recognition of King Leopold’s territory and its new blue flag centered with a golden star.\textsuperscript{16} Leopold’s had succeeded in winning international recognition for his new property.

Chapter Three will explore factors leading to the arrival of the Protestant and Catholic missionaries and their role in the religious life of the people of Congo. Missionaries initially visited the Congo in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century and converted many of the local tribes to the Catholic faith. By the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, several explorers had visited the River Congo and surrounding areas.


CHAPTER THREE
ENTRY OF CHURCH MISSIONARIES

After Diogo Cao discovered the river Congo in 1482, he met with
the Nzinga Nkuwu, King of the Congo, and encouraged him to allow the
Portuguese to live and trade with his people\(^1\). This led to an influx of
Portuguese missionaries, soldiers and politicians to his kingdom. By 1500,
Nzinga Nkuwu converted to the Catholic faith and begun a dynasty
steeped in Catholicism. During this period, Christianity was viewed as an
elite religion in Congo, and the Portuguese Catholic sects such as the
Franciscans, Jesuits and Augustinians fought for access to the Congolese
royalty. These religious conflicts caused strife within Congolese society,
since it was anathema to local traditional practices. Those who favored
Christianity were viewed as modernists, whereas proponents of local
customs were labeled pejoratively as traditionalist. Congo’s rulers
believed they could use Christianity as a unifying tool, but the external

\(^1\) Renton, Seddon and Zeilig, *The Congo*, 12.
influence from the Portuguese caused political conflicts, which exacerbated the inherent divisiveness due to tribal differences.²

During Portuguese slave trade in the 16th century, the Catholic clergy openly condoned and participated in this trade³. Portuguese missionaries were sent to Congo to convert the local population at this time. They however realized that the converts could be a source of slave labor and profit and started to use them for their own profit (The Church)⁴. The Portuguese missionaries also used slave labor to cultivate large agricultural plantations for their own benefit. Some of the produce such as tobacco was exported for profit. This system of trade begun to systematically destroy the Congo social order and introduced chaos to an otherwise well-run Congo empire. All this is attributed to the ruthless greed of the Portuguese. In addition to pleading with the King of

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³ Gondola, Congo, 32.
⁴ Hochschild, King Leopold’s Ghost, 15.
Portugal, King Affonso sent emissaries to the Vatican to tell the Pope about the Portuguese slave trade in Congo.\(^5\)

Henry Morton Stanley’s travels to the Congo opened the floodgates for active missionary activities after his exploits to the Congo. The Baptist Missionary society of London (BMS) set up its operation in the Congo by 1877-78. Its operations spread to Matadi, Kinshasa, Lukolela, Takussu and other parts of the Congo. By the turn of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) Century, it was represented by over twelve British missionaries who were supported by countless natives’.\(^6\) Their primary mission was to spread the word of God with the aim of converting the locals to Christianity. The French missionaries of the Holy Ghost mission led by Father Prosper-Philippe Augoaurd settled in Boma near the lower basin of the River Congo in 1880.

The work of the BMS begun to spread across Congo and King Leopold soon learnt of their plans to build missionaries across the Congo River. As a result, he adopted a friendly attitude to the BMS since he


realized they could be of strategic value in his acquisition and rule of the Congo and could also neutralize any efforts by the Portuguese to foray into Congo.\(^7\) He even subscribed to their newsletter called The Missionary Herald as part of his efforts to engage with the BMS. Stanley Pool was an expanse of water which gave strategic entry to the Congo River and BMS established a base there. King Leopold specifically advised Henry Stanley to adopt a congenial attitude towards them. This is evidenced by documentation in their publication where they state:

> On coming down the river we found Mr. Stanley with his camp, and he most kindly placed a tent at our disposal, and offered to run us down river the next morning to the Isangala Falls. I cannot speak in too high terms of Mr. Stanley’s kindness to us- his interest in the little journey we had taken, his inquiry after his old friends at Stanley Pool, and his offer to help us with stores if we were short.\(^8\)

By 1883 several other missions such as the American Baptist Union, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Swedish Missionary Society, Garenganze Evangelical Mission were present in the Congo. These missionary societies were mostly from the United States and Western Europe.

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\(^8\) Ibid., 2.
King Leopold, a practicing Catholic, lobbied the Catholic Church of Belgium to join him in his civilizing quest of the Congo\textsuperscript{9}. He engaged with the Belgian Jesuits, Scheutist Fathers and others unsuccessfully in 1879. During the period, Cardinal Charles Martial Albemand Lavigerie who founded the White Fathers approached Leopold for help in expanding his work in Africa. The King acquiesced with the caveat that he would have authority in selecting the sites where the Church would set up missions in the Congo, and also ensure that his missionary staff was primarily Belgian. His primary concern was control of the Congo and a church infrastructure that would support his work there.

An Apostolic Vicariate of the Congo was officially set up in the Congo by 1888. This was the sum of continuous pressure mounted by King Leopold on the Vatican to aid his efforts in the Congo\textsuperscript{10}. In 1884, King Leopold sent an emissary to Rome, led by The Archbishop of Malines to persuade the Church to help set up a training post for the purpose of training priests who would be assigned to Africa. He was successful in

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 3.
getting this project approved and set up with the University of Louvain in Belgium. He was able to make a convincing case because he shrouded his imperialistic urges in a philanthropic cloak.

The Indigenous Congo tribes were pantheistic and believed in a connection between the spiritual and ancestral world. When the pressures of colonialism became unbearable, they turned to spiritual leaders to guide them. Some of the stresses the indigenous people encountered included depopulation because of the spread of sleeping sickness between 1890-1913, Spanish influenza in 1918 and of course the killings of the natives by the Belgians and their agents. Reports suggest that more than seventy-five per cent of the local population was lost to the aforementioned factors in 1885-1921. 11 These factors led to the rise of the indigenous prophetic movement in Congo.12

Simon Kimbangu gained renown as one of the leaders of the prophetic movement. He was born in 1889 and worked as a house help for the Belgians. It is reported that he received a spiritual calling in 1918 but


12 Markowitz, Cross and Sword, 12.
did not heed to it. He was affiliated with the Baptist missionaries (BMS).

In April day in 1921, during a stroll in his home village, he overheard a
woman scream out in pain and he went in and was able to heal her by
invoking Jesus Christ. He used the bible and the teachings of Christ whiles
incorporating several traditional practices which came to be known as
Kimbanguism.\(^{13}\) His worship services included singing and dancing
“…and his disciples read the bible, sang protestant hymns, danced, and
engaged in grotesque contortions”.\(^{14}\) He however adopted protestant rules
such as disavowing polygamy, secular dancing, and alcoholic beverages.

The colonial administration initially viewed this indigenous
movement as a religious matter and not related to the administration of
the colony. With the popularity of Kimbangu’s methods spreading,
workers began shirking job responsibilities so they could visit Kimbangu
for help with their problems. Additionally, indigenous people begun
leaving the Catholic and Protestant churches to attend Kimbangu’s church
services. The colonial government begun to take notice because it was

\(^{13}\) Renton, Seddon and Zeilig, *The Congo*, 64-5.

\(^{14}\) Korieh and Njoku, *Missions*, 79
affecting economic activity and Kimbangu’s activities could galvanize the people to take political action. The administration attempted to arrest him at one of his religious gatherings, but he escaped and went into hiding. He later turned himself into the local administration at Nkamba in 1921. The Belgians accused him of attacking the authority of the colonial government and sentenced him to death. His sentence was later commuted to life in prison. He had however started a spark in the local prophetic movement which grew from strength to strength.

The Congolese adapted the beliefs of Christianity to their traditional beliefs. The movement started by Kimbangu continued to grow from strength to strength across the country. This was a threat to the security of the colonial administration because of the fear of nationalism and revolt by the natives.

In chapter Four, we will explore the direct link of influence between the Catholic missionaries and the colonial administration. The Protestants had significant impact in the systematic development of socio-religious life in Congo, but there is no question that the Catholic Church was in a comparatively superior position. King Leopold invited the
Catholics to formally set up schools and churches in the Congo and to assist with supporting the colonial administration.
CHAPTER FOUR

ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BELGIAN ADMINISTRATION OF THE CONGO

After the establishment of Congo Free State as a personal property of King Leopold in 1885, he actively courted the Catholic Church to set up missionaries in Congo. He believed they could help him with his mission of civilizing the Congolese people. This was an important component in Leopold’s strategy because he had convinced several western powers of his humanitarian intent for the Congo. He had made it absolutely clear that he was interested in Congo strictly for the purpose of helping rid the area of backwardness and the Arab slave trade.

By May 1906, a concordat (agreement) was signed between the Congo, under Leopold’s control and the Holy See. The primary provisions of the agreement stated that the Catholic Church would receive state subsidies. The agreement also had broad inclusion of the Catholic Church to the jurisdiction of the State. Their main role was to continue with their religious training across the country. Nonetheless, the governor-general “…was to be informed...
of the appointment of the superior in charge of each school”¹ (Markowitz 1973, 7). This demonstrated the firm control the Belgians exerted over the total domination of the Congo. The Concordant also made provisions for the church to be responsible for geographic and ethnographic studies that were to be reported to the Colonial administration. Other provisions in the Concordat between The Catholic Church and Belgian Congo made provision for the Catholics to build schools for the purpose of educating the Congolese.²

Belgium was a country dominated by the Catholic faith, so it made sense for King Leopold to want Catholic missions in the Congo. The role of the Catholic Church, as far as Leopold was concerned, was to help in his mission to civilize Congo. Jesuits and missionaries from the Immaculate Heart of Mary had a particularly prominent presence in Congo.

The Concordat signed in 1906, guaranteed the Catholic Church an allocation of about two hundred hectares of land, which was the sole property of the Church. Markowitz states that missionaries in one of three ways obtained land in the Congo “(a) by outright purchase or lease from the

¹ Markowitz, Cross and Sword, 7.

² Ibid., 7.
Congolese; (b) by free agents from the government; or (c) through government concessions”.

Since most of Congo was not navigable, it was prudent to use the services of locals who would carry goods and materials to places where animals could not go. This was called porterage, and the Roman Catholic missions helped the Belgian administration to manage the use of African labor for carrying goods. Catholic priests operated the porterage scheme set up by the colonial administration. This is significant because the use of African labor was forced in most parts of the country\(^3\) (Gondola 2002, 65). The colonialists viewed this system as absolutely necessary for the success of transporting goods across the country. Nonetheless, it was a brutal example of the use of slave labor, overseen and managed by the Catholic Church.

The Catholics were responsible for the education of children who were affiliated with the large corporations present in the Congo. Organizations such as Societe-Generale de Belgique had substantial economic control over resource extraction activities in Congo. Their control was supported by the

\(^{3}\) Markowitz, *Cross and Sword*, 41.

Colonial administration in collusion with the Catholic missionaries. The Catholic Church represented a sense of stability that the Belgians and their agents believed were important in helping them satisfy their economic pursuits in the Congo. The Catholic Church was in effect tasked with the civilizing mission of educating the local population.

As part of his systematic control of the colony, Leopold was adamant about setting up children’s colonies. These colonies within the larger Congo were to serve as farms for the complete religious and vocational education of the children of Congo. In addition, they were to receive military training at one of such children’s colonies set up in Leopoldville. These colonies were to become sources of good soldiers for the Force Publique. These children’s colonies were to be under the direct supervision of the Belgian Catholics with direct financial and logistical support from the colonial administration.

As Adam Hochschild says, children’s colonies were set up with ruthless precision across the country and “Leopold subsidized the Catholics lavishly and sometimes used his financial power to deploy priests, almost as if

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5 Markowitz, *Cross and Sword*, 42.
they were soldiers, to areas where he wanted to strengthen his influence”6 (Hochschild 1998, 134). Since Belgium was a Catholic country and the Catholics in Congo were mainly Belgian, it appears they were obliged to follow the orders of the King since they were his subjects. Clearly, his financial support of the Church gave him further control and aided his ability to be more controlling of the Catholic’s administrative activities in the colony. On matters of religion, it appears that the administration did not interfere with the Catholics on that issue.

Orphans and social outcasts became the primary targets for these colonial missionary schools.7 Also, when Belgian soldiers raided villages, they frequently brought surviving women and children to these mission schools. Incidentally, many of these children were orphaned because their parents had been killed in these raids, or had been executed by the Belgians. A large section of the Congo population also perished to the many deadly diseases that plagued the country, as a result of a direct interruption in maintaining

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7 Ibid.
their agricultural lifestyle, since they were forced to work on rubber extraction for the Belgians.⁸

Discipline was maintained in these colonies by frequently whipping the children with the *chicotte⁹* (whip made from the hide of a hippopotamus), and chained for hours if they misbehaved. There is no question that these schools served as farms to later populate the ranks of the Force Publique. The Catholic missionaries were to serve the primary mission of ensuring that these children became loyal in mind and spirit to the cause of the Belgians.¹⁰ This was the only way to ensure they would be good soldiers and agents of the Belgians. It is in effect no surprise, that the Congo natives who were part of the Force Publique were able to exert wanton violence on behalf of the Belgians on their own people.

The Catholic approach to higher education in Congo was to develop people who would be of service to the colonial administration. They were certainly very cautious about systematic en masse higher education, which

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⁹ Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 120.

¹⁰ Markowitz, *Cross and Sword*, 14.
could create a native elite and possibly threaten the Belgian power structure. The *petit* and *grande* seminaries were focused on preparing Congolese for priesthood. After World War II, the Congolese begun to agitate for improved educational opportunities, so they could have access to better opportunities and overcome societal prejudices and obstacles to progress. During this period, there was a migration of Congolese from the rural areas to urban locales such as Kinshasa that had administrative positions that required higher education.

After a series of meetings, culminating with a plenary session of Catholic Bishops in 1945, the Belgians made the decision to make institutions of higher education available to the Congolese. In 1948, the administration set up a policy that would create higher education opportunities for the masses and a separate one for the growing elite. This led to the creation of Ecole des Sciences Administrative a Kisantu in 1947, which trained several Congolese to take up colonial administrative posts, albeit, not commensurate with their level of education. The Jesuits ran the University with subsidized support from the colonial administration. The University was shut down in 1956.

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11 Ibid., 69.
because of staunch opposition from Auguste Buisseret, Minister of Colonies.

The short-lived University trained many Congolese who rose to positions of prominence after independence in 1960, such as Theodore Idzumbuir, who became the country’s United Nations ambassador.

Catholics were very instrumental in advocating for the presence of institutions of higher education, despite their parochialism and differences with the Protestants. Markowitz supports this by stating:

Much of the credit for the establishment of academic secondary and university education for the Congolese must go to a small group of Catholic missionaries, led by Father Van Wing and the promotes and administrators of FOMULAC and later, of CUCL. These missionaries and professors pushed, prodded, cajoled, and threatened a formidable opposition consisting of a coterie of colonial interests in Belgium and the Congo.  

The Catholics were clearly instrumental in setting up a system where African clergy were trained in Belgian Universities and this was later extended to non-clergy students.

The Belgian Catholics often viewed the mission of the Protestant missionaries as anathema to Catholic views. They believed the best way to

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12 Ibid., 75.

13 Ibid, 39.
counteract the spread of Protestantism in Congo was to invite British Catholics into the Congo. This is worth noting because the Protestant missionaries primarily came from England and the United States. The apostolic nuncio of Brussels, Cardinal Vanutelli wrote to the Mill Hill Fathers of England, encouraging them to set up missions in Congo to halt the growth of the Protestants. It is clear that the Belgians were opposed to British presence in Congo; however British Catholics with Vatican support could be valuable for the cause. Pope Pius X’s support for these actions buttresses the fact that the Vatican viewed the success of Catholics in Congo as an important issue for the Church.

Most of the Protestant missionaries who were from America and the United Kingdom viewed the marriage of the Church and State as dangerous and autocratic.\footnote{Ibid.} A clear separation of Church and state dominated the secularist countries where the missionaries came from. As a result, it was normal for them to agitate for less influence or perhaps a distance between the colonial administration and the church. The colonial political structure was dominated by Catholics. Nearly all the governors-general of the Belgian
Congo from 1908-1960, with the exception of Maurice Lippens, were Catholics. There is no clear evidence that their political decision-making authority was absolutely informed by their religious affiliation. Nonetheless, Markowitz reports that more than ninety percent of the colonial administrators in the 1950s, were Catholics. The table on the following page provides an illustration of the religious affiliations of the successive governors who represented the Belgian crown in Congo.
### Religious and Political Affiliations of Governors-General, 1908-1960

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Dates of Office</th>
<th>Religiopolitical Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baron Theophile Wahis</td>
<td>1908-1912</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felix Fuchs</td>
<td>1912-1916</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eugene Henry</td>
<td>1916-1921</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maurice Lippens</td>
<td>1921-1925</td>
<td>Anticlerical Liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Rutten</td>
<td>1925-1927</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auguste Tilkens</td>
<td>1927-1934</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierre Ryckmans</td>
<td>1934-1946</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eugene Jungers</td>
<td>1946-1952</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leon Petillon</td>
<td>1952-1958</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hendrick Cornelis</td>
<td>1958-1960</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Marvin Markowitz\(^\text{15}\)

Protestant missionaries were forbidden from proselytizing on any of the corporate properties owned by big corporations such as Union Miniere du Haut Katanga (UMHK) and Huileries du Congo Belge (Unilever). These

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 27
corporations were known to collude directly with the Catholic Church and had provisions that allowed the Catholic Church to have missions and schools on their properties. This was with the ardent knowledge of the Belgian administration and provides further proof of the fact that the Catholics enjoyed a privileged position in juxtaposition to Protestant missionaries.

Graduates from Catholic mission schools were known to gain preferential access to Belgian jobs in the Congo. They systematically advanced much faster in their positions, compared to their Protestant trained peers. With the exception of a few State schools, Catholic Schools had the mandate to issue certificates sanctioned and recognized by the colonial government. Since the Catholics received government subsidies, they were able to provide educational facilities that were better than those provided by the Protestants. The quality of the education of Catholic and Protestant schools was comparatively similar in quality. The natives soon realized the benefits of attending Catholic school, which precipitated widespread conversion to Catholicism. The Catholics capitalized on this and seriously indoctrinated the new students to their schools whom were not Catholic. This entrenched the conversion of many Congo natives to the faith. They capitalized on the
perception that Catholic schools were State schools, and perhaps creating the illusion that receiving a Catholic education was the only way to go. This was a source of tension between the Catholics and Belgian administrators since it was not an accurate depiction. Nonetheless, this inextricably linked the colonial administration to the Catholic Church as far as the natives were concerned.

Furthermore, Catholics controlled education beyond the primary school level. Technical and vocational training was under total Catholic control. As a result graduates from Protestant mission schools that desired advanced education, had to attend Catholic schools. In practice, Protestant graduates were sometimes prevented from attending their church services. The Protestants viewed this as coerced conversions managed by the Catholic Church. The Catholic monopoly over higher education was cemented with support of the colonial administration. As a result, they continued with the practice of religious conversion and missionary education.

The Protestants generally played a passive role in Belgian politics in the Congo because they did not have the level of influence of the Catholics. They
were particularly sensitive to Belgian public opinion based on the fallout from the campaign against the atrocities in the Congo. Part of their passivity was to show the Colonial government that they were not a disruptive force to their regime in the region. This approach to dealing with the colonial government peaked after Belgium took over the colony from King Leopold. After King Leopold gave up the colony, there was no real enemy to target, since he had been the target of their criticism.

Quite frequently, the Catholic Church made attempts to neutralize the spread of Protestantism in Congo, by trying to limit their geographic spread. 16 The American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society mounted a protest to bring attention to the Catholic Church’s attempt to drive them out Kwilu district in 1912. Kwilu which is in the Kasai region was a strategic location in Belgian colonial administration as was Stanley Pool. The Baptist Missionary Society also lodged a complaint in 1915 stating the Catholic Church masterminded an attack on their steamer ship called the Grenfell. 17 There were also numerous complaints lodged against the Church for kidnapping children in villages

16 Ibid., 38.

17 Ibid.
where the Protestants had set up missions. Since the Catholics were in direct collusion with the colonial administration, it was unlikely that they would be reprimanded for their actions against the Protestants.

The Protestants were viewed by the Catholics as outsiders to the Congo and opposed to the colonial administration. According to Marvin Markowitz, the Catholics believed the Protestants approach to the gospel, which included independent interpretation of the word of God, raised thoughts of nationalism amongst the natives. Nationalism was the result of awakened political consciousness of the Congolese. This consciousness caused dissatisfaction with his condition, being that it was inferior to the Belgians and their agents.\textsuperscript{18} The rise of Kimbanguism, which was a native prophetic movement, strengthened the Catholics perception of Protestant influence on the people of Congo. Certainly, this was inimical to maintaining law and order that was beneficial to continued Belgian authority. The Catholics were convinced the work of the Protestants was aimed at overthrowing Belgian control of the Congo.

\textsuperscript{18} Martelli, \textit{Leopold to Lumumba}, 216.
As a result of these imminent threats to their survival and continuity of their work in the Congo, the Protestants set up a commission through the ballot known as the Congo Protestant Council. They compiled a file that contained information on about twenty-six instances of infractions they suffered at the hands of the Catholics. The committee’s task was to thoroughly investigate and document this information, with full ratification by the members, so they could begin a formal and active petition of inquiry with the colonial government.

Global economic realities in the 1930s forced many Protestant missionaries to consider appealing to the Belgians for financial help. Hitherto, the Catholics were the only beneficiaries of State subsidies. A prominent missionary called Dr. J.H. Oldham started negotiations with the Ministry of Colonies on behalf of the Protestants.\(^{19}\) Their point was reference was to Belgian provisions stating all Christian missionaries would be treated equally, and receipt of subsidies would put the Protestants on par with the Catholics. They attacked the colonial government’s educational policy as being pro-Catholic and partial despite the government’s claims to promote “...secularity

\(^{19}\) Markowitz, Cross and Sword, 75.
and impartiality” (Markowitz 1973, 65). The government’s response to the Protestant protest was that the government had a duty to financially support Catholic missions because of the Concordat of 1906. The Minister of Colonies, made a small concession by granting the Protestants access to the educational curriculum used by the Catholics.

Towards the end of World War II the Belgian government begun to yield to Protestant pressure and started talks to change the educational policy in the Congo. In 1946, the minister of colonies issued a declarative statement which said “...to place all the Christian missions in the colony on the same level, and with equal guarantees, regarding the granting of state subsidies in education, as well as other areas”.

This ended Catholic monopoly of the education system in Congo, although they still controlled about ninety percent of it in the 1950s.

The Catholic Church was in a superior position with the colonial administration in comparison with other missionary organizations. Primarily, they received land grants not available to other missionaries and this was

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20 Ibid., 66.
clearly a ploy used by Leopold and his agents to frustrate and force the missionaries to leave Congo.

The impact of the Congo Reform Associations activities shed light on the human rights violations perpetuated by the Belgians against the Congo people. Since majority of his critics had been Protestants, Leopold begun to think of ways to remove the Protestants from Congo. He was only interested in having missionaries who supported his policies and exploitative tactics in the Congo. He influenced the set up of an organization known as the West African Missionary Association, which was a front organization focused on discrediting the reports against his administrations human rights violations in the Congo.21 A large part of his efforts were targeted towards the Protestant missionaries, until the real intent of his association was exposed, leading to the disbandment of its activities.

King Leopold had proven to be a clever statesman by hiding his true intentions for the Congo from Western powers. When pressure stepped up against Leopold in the America and other Western countries, he targeted

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21 Hochschild, King Leopold’s Ghost, 252.
Senator Nelson Aldrich, an influential representative of Rhode Island to help his course. He knew Senator Aldrich was a part of the Washington political establishment and was the chairman of the Senate Finance committee. He began to bait Senator Aldrich and other influential stakeholders with the promise of financial gain from his activities in Congo. He offered commercial concessions to major American businessmen such as John D. Rockefeller and Bernard Baruch. Incidentally, when the US government wanted to appoint a consul to verify what Roger Casement’s report had exposed, Senator Aldridge told the Secretary of State he would not support the nominee. As a result, Mr. Root, Secretary of State at that time, withdrew the nomination.

Leopold played the role of a “victimized Catholic”, when public criticism for this policies in Congo ascended. He managed to convince the Vatican that he was being unfairly targeted by the Protestant Missionaries. He began to lobby the Vatican and American public opinion consecutively.

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23 Hochschild, Leopold’s Ghost, 244.
Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore who was an eminent Catholic clergyman in the United States was a friend of Senator Aldrich. Through this acquaintance he became familiar with King Leopold’s direct problems in the Congo.

Cardinal Gibbons became a staunch supporter of King Leopold. He realized there were inimical economic interests to certain American businessmen to engage with King Leopold’s Congo. Cardinal Gibbons became better informed about the potential in Congo after receiving a detailed letter from Thomas Ryan who was a wealthy Catholic and supporter of the Church. He conveyed Cardinal Gibbons’ support of the Congo to King Leopold when he met him in Brussels in according to Cardinal Gibbons’ records from 1906.

Significantly, Baltimore represented the roots of the Catholic Church in America since it was the location of the first American Archdiocese. Gibbons who became Cardinal in 1886 was “…highly regarded by the leaders of other faiths, wielded his political clout, diplomatic skill and personal charm on

24 Ibid.
25 Weisbord, The King, the Cardinal and the Pope.
behalf of Leopold and his cause in the Congo years.” 26 This level of support enabled Leopold to engage the services of lobbyists to win American support for his project, The Congo Free State.

Cardinal Gibbons’ support of King Leopold’s Congo gave him additional credibility and neutralized some of the efforts of the Congo Reform Association and Protestant critics of his tactics. The Cardinal’s record has a stark omission of his support of Congo. As an eminent clergyman his favorable public reputation was cemented when he was honored in 1911, for recognition of his twenty fifth year as Cardinal. He was feted and admired by American President’s Taft and Teddy Roosevelt. Notably, the Cardinal had a letter read on his behalf at the International Peace Congress of Boston in 1904. His letter supported the civilizing mission and humane efforts of the King, which was in sharp opposition to E.D. Morel’s stance on the brutality in Congo. Mr. Morel was a prominent British journalist who was instrumental in the formation of the Congo Reform Association. Morel’s exposure to Congo came from his tenure as a shipping clerk in Liverpool. He observed ships from Congo arrived with ivory and rubber, and returned to Congo filled with guns.

26 Ibid., 39.
and ammunition. Cardinal Gibbons received a message sent by Cardinal Merry del Val on behalf of Pope Pius X, stating his approval and support of Gibbons at the Boston conference. Gibbons was quoted in a New York Times article from October of 1904 defending his support of King Leopold by saying he “… performed with lively satisfaction, as it was done in behalf of a sovereign who has done much in the cause of Christianity and civilization, and who is the ruler of a nation conspicuous not only for Catholic faith but also for the noble qualities which exalt a nation”.  

Gibbons had spent significant time in Rome and Pope Pius X and other important clergymen knew him and admired his many qualities. The Vatican supported King Leopold completely, and this is evidenced by messages sent to Cardinal Gibbon from Cardinal Gotti written in Latin. The message from Gotti confirmed that the Holy Father was pleased with Gibbons’ efforts and hoped he would convince other clergymen to join him in discrediting Protestant accusations of the King’s efforts in the Congo. Gibbons responded saying he was working assiduously to build a political base in Congress in

27 Ibid

28 Ibid.
support of the King. He agreed to make available his personal political connections to support this effort. Despite information from E.D. Morel sent to Cardinal Gibbons about the true state of Congo, he chose to continue to publicly support the King and accept the testimony of Catholic missionaries that suggested the King was indeed on a civilizing mission. Leopold honored the Cardinal by awarding him with the Grand Croix de l’Irdre De la Couronne honored the Cardinal. This cemented unwavering support from Cardinal Gibbons to the King.

To provide additional fodder to his supporters, Leopold claimed to have rid the Africans of rampant alcoholism, barbarism and cannibalism. He also highlighted his efforts aimed at neutralizing the Arab slave trade that had existed in Congo and neighboring areas. This endeared him to Cardinal Lavegerie of Algeria, until the Cardinal gained firsthand knowledge of the atrocities perpetrated by Leopold’s forces in Belgium.

The Vatican continued to support King Leopold despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary of their support. By 1905, the Congo Reform Association and other critics had been able to clearly demonstrate that the
Belgians were indeed committing brutal acts of terror against the natives of Congo. Certainly this was not helped by a report produced by a commission set up by Leopold to investigate and authenticate or dispute claim of brutality against the peoples of Congo. The commission which was made up of three respected lawyers from Italy, Switzerland and a Belgian, produced a report critical of the Belgian administration of Congo. Their report seemed to vindicate earlier reports submitted by E.D Morel and Roger Casement. The King believed the commission was merely going to be a rubber stamp favorable to his policies. The commission’s report was inevitably damaging to Leopold’s quest in Congo. According to Weisbord, Protestants unsuccessfully reached out to Pope Pius X to in an effort to get him to change his stance on the issue of Congo. The official message sent on behalf of Pope Pius X by Cardinal Merry Del Val, acknowledged the negative aspects of the Belgian administration of the Congo, however they maintained “…the Holy See had not modified its benevolent intentions toward the Congo government one whit…..there would be no change in papal policy”. 29

29 Ibid., 44.
Despite the fact that Congo Free State was the personal property of King Leopold, the reports of human rights abuses weakened his claim to the territory. The activities of the Congo Reform Association galvanized political and popular support against the King’s ownership of the Congo because of the atrocities committed by his agents. Furthermore, the proposal put forward by the commission he set up backfired and precipitated to seal his wavering control of Congo. This exposed the hypocrisy of King Leopold’s earlier stated public mission, which was to civilize the Congo for the benefit of the natives.

In the 1890s, George Washington Williams proposed self-rule with international oversight as the viable option for the Congo people. Since Leopold had entrenched the Belgian position in Congo by ruthlessly decimating social structures and reducing the population by more than fifty percent in 1920 to a mere eight to ten million people, E.D. Morel’s solution was to give the Belgian State control of the Congo. This, he believed would bring international scrutiny to the Congo and possibly prevent another wide scale atrocity. King Leopold owned Congo and the Belgian state had no jurisdiction over the territory. Political pressure from Britain and other
European countries, forced King Leopold to negotiate with the Belgian State in 1906.

To hide his web of personal riches from the Congo, the King stalled by refusing to answer questions related to financial data from the Congo, and used his well-timed temper tantrums to buy time. By 1908, he had succeeded in convincing all the relevant stakeholders that he received no substantial personal gain from his Congo enterprise. He also managed to get the Belgian State to absorb over one hundred and ten million francs in loans they had made out to the King. He also negotiated government allocation of funds to several pet projects he had all over Belgium. To sum it all up, he was to receive another fifty million francs “as a mark of gratitude for his great sacrifices made for the Congo”.30 These funds were to be financed from revenue obtained from Congo. By November of 1908, Congo Free State became the official colony of Belgium.

There are no extensive records about the depth of the atrocities that King Leopold’s agents used against the native Congolese. In fact, Adam Hochschild reports that just before King Leopold handed over Congo to the

Belgian State, extensive records were burnt. As a result, there is no significant documentation about what actually happened in King Leopold’s Congo. This is in stark contrast to the extensive documentation kept by the Nazis during the holocaust. Survivors of the holocaust also kept significant records, which is why there is more global knowledge about what happened to the Jews during World War II. This contrast is made because over ten million Congolese perished during King Leopold’s ownership of the territory, and although there is a museum in Belgium that covers this period, there is a stark contrast to the publicity received when compared with the holocaust, where over six million Jews were killed.

In Chapter Five, we would explore the role violence played in controlling and exploiting the Congolese, and how the rest of the world reacted to these events when they became public. After Leopold successfully made Congo his private property, his administration set up an armed force known as the Force Publique. This army ensured that the local labor force met rubber extraction quotas and kept them in control by exerting brutal violence. Some of the tactics used by the Force Publique included chopping off limbs,
executions, rape and public flogging using the *chiccotte*. This whip was symbolic of the atrocities committed against the native people.
CHAPTER FIVE

ATROCITIES COMMITTED AGAINST THE NATIVES

By 1889, The Belgians issued a law that set up a labor tax system which compelled the Congo natives to work for them, since the Congo River was not navigable; the indigenous people were used as porters for transporting goods in this terrain. Horses and other labor animals could not survive the terrain, so the indigenes were the primary source of labor. Initially, the locals were reluctant to work as potters and the Belgians had to bring in people from Zanzibar and Liberia to works as porters. Eventually transported labor proved unsustainable and the Belgians turned to coercing the Congolese into forced labor.

The exploitation of rubber in the Congo by the Belgians was a good source of revenue for Leopold and Belgium. The Congo, during this period was viewed as a “company government, interlocked with commercial interests which pursued profit maximization by any means possible.”¹ Once the Belgians controlled the rubber industry, it came to represent a principal source of revenue for them. Global market forces precipitated by Charles

¹ Nelson, Colonialism, 81.
Goodyear’s innovation of vulcanizing created a rubber boom; since industries relied on rubber for producing industrial and consumer goods. By 1888, another innovator called John Dunlop created the rubber tire for automobiles and completely solidified further market demand for rubber.

King Leopold financed Congo primarily from his own resources and by 1890, the cost of running the Congo exceeded any profit he was making from the Congo. In fact, in that year revenue from the Congo was recorded at about one million Belgian francs while expenditure exceeded four million Belgian francs. Over a fourteen-year period beginning in 1876, King Leopold is reported to have spent over thirty million francs on the Congo with little return. His personal coffers were rapidly depleted and it even affected his health and well being. At this stage, the King decided to let go of his philanthropic façade and begin to find ways to profit from his property. Rubber, land and African labor would prove very critical to enriching King Leopold and Belgium. Leopold cemented his control of land in the Congo by a decree in 1885 and subsequently neutralized encroachment by private

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2 Ibid.
corporations such as SAB on Congo land by 1892. This in effect, gave him sole control of the land and resources of the Congo.³

Global demand doubled from 1860-1880, and again in 1900-06, presented a unique opportunity for the Belgians to cash in on the rubber in Congo. The rubber production in the Congo rose significantly and raised African contribution to the rubber trade from a measly five per cent in 1880 to about thirty per cent in 1900. Rubber extraction became the lifeblood of the political economy of the Belgians in Congo, until independence was granted in 1960.

The Belgian administration was able to co-opt African land by dividing it into economic zones which in effect neutralized any land rights the Congo people. In respect to rubber, the Europeans usurped control over the resource because they proposed that “…prior to European occupation, rubber vines were not commercially exploited; therefore, the African rights over these products, which were found on the State’s vacant land, were non-existent” (Nelson, 1994, 89). To seal control, the indigenous people were restricted from selling rubber to anyone, but agents of the state.

³ Ibid., 86.
The final stroke of control was to gain access to the African labor pool. The Belgians effectively did this by starting to impose what was known as rubber tax on the Africans, collectable on a monthly basis.\textsuperscript{4} Furthermore, the Belgians instituted a decree in 1903, which required all locals in the various jurisdictions to partake in labor for the state at least for forty hours a week. In effect, this was a clever way of instituting forced labor or a form of productive slavery. Even though the laborers were paid a nominal wage, they were subject to the rubber tax. In addition, State employees were rewarded with incentives and bonuses to maximize production efforts. Their bonuses were correlated to their ability to decrease how much they paid the locals for rubber. Ultimately, increases in pay and promotion were not based on administrative merit but rather the ability to maximized labor production of rubber at minimal cost to the State. This led to the rise of the use of coercive violence and terror tactics.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 89.
The Force Publique was an army created by King Leopold to help him maintain control in the Congo. The Army was set up in 1885 and previously employed soldiers from Zanzibar, Ghana and Liberia until 1894, when it included indigenous Congo soldiers led by European officers. The bulk of the army was drawn from orphans, outcasts in the society and people from the bottom rungs of the indigenous social structure. Some of these orphans had been cared for and trained by missionaries and were later moved to military barracks so they could be of service to their benefactors, the Belgians. Other sources of men for the Force Publique came from quotas imposed on local chiefs who gave their socially undesirable citizens, troublemakers and former slaves to the Belgians.

These African soldiers of the Force Publique were completely loyal to the state since they were divorced from traditional society. Their primary means of attaining any kind of social status was directly linked to loyal service to the Belgians. Conscription was usually limited to seven years of service although many of them re-enlisted in the Army. In addition, their increases in promotion and pay were directly in sync with their ability to enforce adherence to the rubber production quotas instituted by the Belgians on the
African labor force. In colonial African history, the Army class in many countries such as Ghana and Nigeria took over power for many years and the Force Publique was an example “...of the first manifestation of non-traditional class-consciousness in the Congo basin”.\textsuperscript{5} Joseph Mobutu, who later became known as Mobutu Sese Seko, was a product of the Force Publique before he overthrew Patrice Lumumba and became President of Zaire (Congo). His vile rule was marked by despotism and human rights abuses akin to tactics used by the Force Publique, a relic of European colonialism in Africa.

The first type of violence instituted by the Belgians against the local Congo people was one of cultural violence. Disaffected members of local villages turned to the Belgians for respite. Other Congolese defected to the Belgians because they were viewed as social rebels in their society so they found “social acceptance” by working for the Belgians. Consequently, there was a system of Africans being violent towards other Africans for the benefit of the Belgians. Historically, Congo tribes had engaged in warfare over territorial rights and for other reasons, but it had never been entirely at the command, and for the benefit of a foreign power.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 107.
According to Hochschild et al., the soldiers engaged in wholesale rape of women in the various villages they served on behalf of the Belgians. Coercive rape was widespread and if there was no acquiescence by the woman, her family or husband- she was effectively murdered. The Belgians knew exactly what was happening and they condoned it indirectly since the use of terror correlated with a direct increase in the production of rubber.\(^6\) Shockingly, Belgian agents “...encouraged horrific violence. In order to prevent the use of guns for hunting, for example, agents often demanded an ear, nose, or hand for each spent cartridge”.\(^7\)

Villagers were kept in line with the threat of violence if they did not meet their quotas.\(^8\) Anyone who did not meet assigned quotas was whipped and beaten. The *chicotte* (whip made from the hide of a hippopotamus), was used to brutally beat up the villagers. It was a normal sight to find villagers subject to at least fifty lashes with the *chicotte*. The *chicotte* left visible and painful scars on the backs of the natives, clear evidence of the brutality of the

\(^6\) Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 164.

\(^7\) Nelson, *Colonialism*, 107.

Belgians and their agents. This was an effective practice at inducing compliance, since no villager wanted to suffer the pain of being whipped.⁹

Other tactics used by the Belgians and their agents included widespread looting of villages, kidnapping of spouses until rubber quotas were met and widespread extortion aimed at ensuring villagers met rubber quotas. High-level Belgian administrators, such as Governor-General Wahis sanctioned the use of hostage taking as a tactic to incentivize rubber productions in areas where natives did not readily comply with Belgian directives. The kidnapped women and children were kept in very squalid conditions and many of them died from diseases. In some instances the women and children were sold back to their families after the quotas were met. The economic benefit was enormous since profits exceeded capital investments made by the Belgians. For example in 1897, the Belgians recorded over two million francs in profit, far exceeding any capital investments they had made in the Congo.

It was impossible for the international community to ignore the events happening in the Congo. Protestant missionaries were of course, one of the first to broadcast what was happening to the people of Congo to the whole world. Agitations for reform also started with organizations like the Congo Reform Association. Leopold set up independent commissions to investigate the tactics used in the Congo, and the commission corroborated the fact that wanton violence was used against the people, and forced labor was the main apparatus in the extraction of rubber and other raw materials which benefited the Belgians.

In the next Chapter, we discover that there is global criticism against the tactics used by the Belgians in Congo. These reports came from people like Roger Casement, a British civil servant and others. These criticisms led to the formation of the Congo Reform Association which agitated for the end to violence against the natives of Congo. In addition, several Protestant missionaries also criticized the Belgian policy of brutal control in Congo. King Leopold eventually gave up control of Congo in 1908 after receiving a hefty payoff financed by revenue from the colony. The Catholic missionaries in Congo, who were mainly from Belgium and thus subjects of the King,
supported the operations of the colonial administration in Congo. We will investigate if there was any moral objection by the Catholic Church to Leopold’s violent rule of Congo.
CHAPTER 6
PUBLIC CRITICISM AGAINST BELGIAN ATROCITIES IN THE CONGO

King Leopold benefited immensely from the rubber trade during its peak from 1890-1904. For that period, Congo’s production of rubber increased tremendously and he accumulated over one billion dollars based on real dollar value for 2002.¹ These estimates are grossly understated because the trade was not sanctioned or monitored by a neutral body, and it was largely successful, because of the efficient labor tactics used by the Belgians against the people of Congo. King Leopold spent his new found wealth on personal real estate, parks and promenades, and also indulged his wife, who was a sixteen year old prostitute when he met her in Paris. He also put some of his money into the Suez Canal and other global projects.

George Washington Williams, a well known African-American Pastor and Civil War veteran, travelled through Congo and was one of the early whistleblowers about the atrocities the Belgians were committing against the

¹ Gondola, Congo, 71.
natives of Congo.² It is important to state that Mr. Williams was not affiliated with a mission at the time he started his critique in 1890. He wrote a letter titled “An Open Letter to his Serene Majesty Leopold II” to share his first hand observations of the violence used by the Belgians and their agents to exploit and control the people of the Congo.³ He described his first hand eyewitness accounts of Belgian ruthlessness in the Congo as “crimes against humanity.” His proposal, when he petitioned the US government, was to grant Congo self-rule, with some oversight from the international community.

Another early critic of the Belgian tactics in Congo was another African-American missionary called William Sheppard. He had travelled to the Congo with real ambitions to spread the word of God, and also to escape racism and prejudice in America. Mr. Sheppard represented the Southern Presbyterian Church and arrived in Congo to establish a mission on the Kasai River in 1890. He encountered several Congo tribes such as the Kuba, whom he described as “dignified, courageous, honest, with an open smiling

² Korieh and Njoku, Missions, 77.

³ Renton, Seddon and Zeilig, The Congo, 36.
countenance and really hospitable”⁴ (Gondola 2002, 72). This is in sharp contrast to the depictions of the African tribes by Henry Morton Stanley as backward and uncivilized, certainly, the tone that paved the way for King Leopold’s “civilizing mission”. Leopold later tried to discredit Mr. Sheppard by taking him to court for an article he had written denouncing the destruction of the Kuba society by Leopold’s forces.

In 1897, a Swedish missionary called E.V. Sjobolm kept account of his own witness of the Belgian atrocities where natives got their hands chopped off because they did not meet quotas for rubber production. He was witness to a basket of chopped off hands, which a soldier had kept as evidence of his efficiency to his superiors. Other missionaries during this time period gave accounts of uncovering graves filled with natives who usually had their right hands chopped off. Eyewitness accounts state that the hands were chopped off at the wrist and even higher on some of the bodies and even on survivors.⁵

⁴ Gondola, Congo, 72.

⁵ Ibid., 70.
Although, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie of the White Fathers approached Leopold for help in establishing missions in the Congo, he soon become disillusioned after he became exposed to the King’s real plans for the Congo.

He wrote a letter to the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation (Propaganda) that stated:

I feel obliged to confidentially make your Eminence aware that the King of the Belgians appears to have designs on the center of Africa that are not merely humanitarian but political. He has begun to form a small army destined, no doubt, for conquest, under the leadership of Stanley, the American Protestant explorer. It is unfortunate that this (Catholic) Prince puts himself into the hands of Protestants for such an undertaking.⁶ (Markowitz, 1973, 3).

From the above statement it is possible that Cardinal Lavigerie’s main gripe was with the fact that Leopold had consorted with a Protestant explorer rather that a Catholic on this expedition designed to dominate and exploit Congo.

The returns from the rubber trade only benefited King Leopold and Belgium. Even though, Leopold argued that forced labor was necessary because the natives of the Congo people were not motivated to work; the Belgians provided no incentive to the natives but a very paltry salary set by

⁶ Markowitz, Cross and Sword, 3.
the State, akin to slave conditions. The mandatory labor limit of a forty hour work week took away from the time the natives spent of farming, hunting and other pursuits. In reality, most people worked more than forty-hours a week since travelling long distances to rubber harvesting sites was not accounted for in the work week.

Reports of the atrocities in Congo reached Britain and a journalist called E.D. Morel begun leading the anti-Congo cause. He had already established a reputation for being a professional activist. He worked as a part-time clerk in the shipping docks and noticed ships arriving from Congo came with tons of rubber and departed with guns and ammunition. He started spreading news about the Congo through his column in a weekly newspaper called *West Africa*. He later started his own paper, the *West African Mail*, and continued writing about Congo. Primary interest in the Congo at that time was based on the commercial interests of the British. When the Berlin Act was put in place, Congo was supposed to be a free trade zone, but Leopold annexed the whole territory and closed it off to other Western countries.

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In 1903, the British Parliament adopted a motion which was aimed at ensuring the Congo natives were treated humanely and also to ensure that Leopold did not have sole control over the resources in the Congo, based on what was agreed upon in the General Act of Berlin. The British decided to set up an independent inquiry to verify what was actually happening in Congo. Roger Casement was selected for this job and was posted to Stanley Pool as the British Consul. He was raised as an Irish Protestant in Ulster and came from a military family. He had previously visited the Congo as part of the Sanford expedition in 1884 and returned to England five years later. He was later appointed to two posts after becoming a civil servant, first in Nigeria and then in Mozambique. He distinguished himself during the Boer War and established a firm reputation in the ranks of the Colonial Office. Based on his vast experience in Africa, he seemed to be the right choice for the British in Congo.

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Mr. Casement interviewed missionaries, victims and Belgian agents while gathering information for his report. Once in London, he confirmed that some aspects of his report which contained testimony from the natives may have some exaggerated detail; however the weight of his discovery of the atrocities could not be discounted. The report detailed massive depopulation in certain area that were fledgling communities prior to Belgian intervention. This was primarily due to killings, but also “…the spread of disease partly to a decline in health of the natives as a result of excessive demands on their labor and food supplies.”\(^9\) The entire report confirmed that the Belgians had systematically set up a framework to exploit the Congo.

As a result of the Casement report of 1903, the Congo Reform Association was formed in February of 1904 with E.D. Morel as secretary and Lord Beauchamp as the president. The Association started a steady campaign aimed to inform and shock public opinion against Belgian atrocities in the Congo. The movement gained momentum and many prominent people such as Arthur Conan Doyle, the writer of Sherlock Holmes, joined the Association. Mr. Doyle’s exposure to the issues in the Congo influenced him to write *The

\(^9\) Ibid., 169.
Crime of the Congo in 1909. Similarly, another novelist, Joseph Conrad, a personal friend of Roger Casement wrote Heart of Darkness which was a novel about the atrocities committed by the Belgians in Congo. Mark Twain added his voice to the campaign and also wrote a political satire titled “King Leopold’s Soliloquy”, an aptly harsh critique of the Belgian ruler’s oversight of the Congo.

Leopold relinquished control and responsibility of the Congo in 1908 and turned over his control to Belgium. This decision was due to the efforts of the Congo Reform Association. The Belgians embarked on a series of reforms to reverse abuses and created the Charte Coloniale\(^\text{10}\), which subjected Belgian policies in Congo to parliamentary oversight. This provision also made room for a division focused on African affairs, which was to act as a safeguard against a reoccurrence of atrocities in the Congo. As a result, the Congo Reform Association was dissolved by E.D. Morel in 1913. History proves that the Belgians continued with Leopold’s policies, and any provisions made by the Charte Coloniale were generally ineffective and not implemented.

\(^{10}\) Belgian Congo, http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Belgian_Congo
In 1905, the Belgian Parliament instigated by Emile Vandervelde insisted that King Leopold set up an independent commission to look into the atrocities. This was in sharp response to international pressure regarding the use of forced labor by the Belgians in the Congo. Leopold’s commission responded by stating that forced labor was actually beneficial to the locals because:

Considering the dislike of the native for work and his few wants, the exploitation of the domain under the law of supply and demand could not have lasted very long...As the work of gathering became more difficult, the use of coercion was necessary to arouse the blacks from their apathy.\(^\text{11}\)

Even further, the commission argued that the imposition of forced labor enabled the indigenous people to have an incentive to work, which in effect was humanitarian in nature. Forced labor was in effect justified in the eyes of the Belgians, since they had made significant capital investments in Congo, and it was only just that the locals engage in mutual contribution through their labor. It is however important to note that certain tribes such as the Mongo were willing trade partners in rubber and ivory with private corporations such as SAB in the 1890s. Forced labor became a pragmatic tactic

\(^{11}\) Nelson, Colonialism, 90.
used by the Belgians because of their increased need to maximize profit by exploiting the Congo Basin.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Pope John Paul II notably apologized for the historical misdeeds of the Church in the waning years of his tenure as pope. He specifically mentioned the Jews, the crusaders, the inquisition, the removal of Constantinople, forced conversions. There was absolutely no mention of the involvement of the Church’s role in King Leopold’s rule over the Congo. His apology was general in nature as it did not target any leading clergymen. This is significant because King Leopold enjoyed unequivocal support from Pope Pius X and the efforts of the Belgian Catholics in Congo. He was aware of the tragic deaths and brutal mistreatment suffered by the Congo people, but it appears policy has been total silence on the issue since “...claiming souls for the mother Church, not humanitarianism, was the greatest good and the guiding diplomatic principle.”¹

The Belgians systematically killed a lot of Congo natives in the process of furthering their economic agenda in the region. “Although, the killing in the Congo was of genocidal proportions, it was not strictly speaking, a

¹ Weisbord, The King, the Cardinal and the Pope, 45.
genocide.” Nonetheless, more Congolese were killed for the sake of Belgian imperialism, than Jews during Hitler’s fascist holocaust. The difference is that the Belgians did not keep sufficient records on the deaths of the Congolese like the Germans did when they perpetuated the holocaust. Consequently, there is not sufficient available data to give an exact number on the number of people killed, although estimates state it exceeds ten million. Since there was no real census data, until 1924 when population estimates were for about ten million people.

Many Congolese also died to diseases such as smallpox and yellow fever. Since their living conditions were decimated because they had to abandon their lives to work for the Belgians, it affected the order of life they had created for themselves. Birthrates were also seriously affected, since the men were induced into forced labor away from their families, for long periods of time.

Belgian cruelty to the Congolese was so brutal it has been systematically removed from any records that exist in Belgium. King Leopold

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ensured that his official records were burnt to ashes in 1908.3 According to Adam Hochschild, when one visits the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium, built by King Leopold II, there is little evidence of these atrocities. This is to be expected because the King’s stance on Congo was that he was on a “civilizing” mission. This museum is notable because of its collection of African artifacts and exhibitions. There are exhibitions in the museum that aimed to glorify Belgian efforts to end Arab slavery in Congo. Other displays pay memoriam to Belgian soldiers who were buried in Congo, information some African ceremonies, some sculptures or statues of some of the tribes people in Congo, “But of any larger injustice in the Congo, there is no sign whatever. For in none of the museum’s galleries is there the slightest hint that millions of Congolese met unnatural deaths.”4

This practice of sanitizing colonial savagery in Africa is not the sole preserve of the Belgians. For example there is no evidence of the German massacring almost the entire Herero tribe of Namibia in 1904. It was only in 2004, that the German government publicly apologized for what it had done

3 Hochschild,. King Leopold’s Ghost, 294.

4 Ibid., 293.
to the Herero people. Of course Herero tribesmen filing a petition against the German government in an American court, demanding over two billion dollars in reparations, precipitated this. The same lack of remembrance is evidenced in the French, Portuguese and even the British to an extent.\(^5\) Perhaps this is an example the people of Congo must follow.

Various sects of the Belgian Catholic Church such as the Jesuits, Franciscan Sisters, and Missionaries of Scheut also known as Scheutists came to support the Belgian administration of the Congo. Clearly, their role was to work in a civilizing and humanitarian capacity, with the Africans being the recipients of these efforts. Also, the Catholic Church’s mission was to create a class of pupils who received sufficient education, so they could be of service to the Belgian administration either in the Force Publique or clerical administration. Even though, institutions of higher education were founded, Walter Rodney, a prominent Guyanese scholar, reports that at the time of independence, only sixteen natives of Congo were graduates of tertiary

institutions.\textsuperscript{6} This shows the colonial educational system was not designed to empower the Congolese.

Exploitation of the Congo was so profitable to the Belgians so much so that in 1955-60, Societe-Generale made annual profits exceeding twenty seven million pounds per annum from the extraction of copper from Congo.\textsuperscript{7} Belgian corporations invested in infrastructure in Congo to benefit the expatriates and funded their salaries from their profits. More than a third of the profits made in Congo went back to Belgium. Even the United States was a beneficiary of trade with Belgian Congo, as it received uranium for the production of armament post-second world war.

In conclusion, the wealth of the Congo was too appealing to King Leopold and subsequently the Belgian administration. Raw materials such as rubber, was important in fueling the industrial growth of Europe. The Congo was easily subjugated to Belgium because of European advances in technology. Thomas Sowell states, “...the use of quinine and other medical advances” enabled the Belgians and other Europeans to resist malaria and

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\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{6}] Walter Rodney, \textit{How Europe Underdeveloped Africa}. (Howard University Press: Washington DC 1982), 244-255.
\item[\textsuperscript{7}] Ibid., 153.
\end{itemize}
other tropical diseases. This enabled them to survive the tropics and penetrate the inlands of Congo for their exploits. The use of rudimentary arms such as bows and arrows were absolutely no match for the guns that the Belgians brought with them. In this case, sheer bravery was not going to help the Africans to resist encroachment of their land.

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