**Leopold II and the Belgian Congo: A Brief History**

Leopold II was the King of Belgium. Many of his relatives were kings and queens in Europe, like his cousin Victoria the Queen of England. He was jealous of their money and realized that his cousins and their countries were rich because they had colonies. Leopold wanted a colony too, but the Belgian people did not want one because they thought that their country was too small to control a colony. It would cost a lot of money to start a colony and many people would have to leave Belgium to control the colony. Leopold still wanted one though, so he sent explorers to Africa to see about finding and getting a colony. He learned that the Congo region in Africa was rich in resources and so he formed an organization called the International Association of the Congo. This group was the mask for Leopold’s true goal of getting his own personal colony.

In 1884, Leopold’s delegates at the Berlin Conference manipulated the other countries of Europe to let the IAC administer the Congo, promising free trade to all the countries. However, Leopold had already prevented this free trade from happening by making deals with the tribes in the Congo that they would only trade with his people. So, Leopold acquired the Congo, a region 32 times the size of Belgium, as his own personal property.

Leopold got very rich off of ivory from the elephants in the Congo because Europeans wanted to buy it – a middle class home needed a piano (ivory keys!), and ivory was very popular for jewelry, combs, etc.

Over in America in the 1890s, a man by the name of Dunlop was experimenting with rubber and learned that if you heat it up, you can do a lot of things with it, including making tires. The rubber boom began. Rubber trees were planted in South America, but they would take 15 years to grow. If someone else had rubber, they could make a lot of money in this 15-year window – they would have a monopoly.

It just so happened that Leopold’s Congo had a lot of rubber. So, realizing that he had a 15-year monopoly on rubber before he faced competition from the South American trees (competition drives down prices), he tried to get as much rubber as possible and would do anything to get the rubber. To get his rubber, he forced the native Congo people into slavery. To get them to do the work, he threatened them with death, dismemberment (especially hands), and holding their families hostage. In total, 5-10 million Congo people were killed and many more were impacted by the burning of villages and farms, exposure to the elements, starvation, and mutilation. This was the biggest genocide in history before the Holocaust. Leopold was able to keep all of this hidden from the world, but the world didn’t really ask any questions because they wanted the rubber.

When missionaries and others started to document the “horror” and the “red rubber terror,” Leopold was able to use his control over the media to silence their stories. In the late 1900s, however, George Eastman perfected a film developing process (starting the Kodak Company) and people began to go to the Congo with cameras. Leopold could not deny this evidence. The world was forced to recognize that things were bad in Leopold’s Congo. The world sent in an international committee to investigate and they decided that this was genocide. Leopold was forced in 1908 to give up his colony. He sold it to the nation of Belgium (which he controlled – so he effectively still controlled the Congo AND had a lot of money transferred from the Belgian treasury to his own personal accounts) and then died in 1909. Belgian control of the colony didn’t change, so some of the abuses continued even after the world thought that they had put an end to them. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914 the attention of the European nations transferred from their overseas colonies to their own backyards.