King Leopold's Ghost, Adam Hochschild

When Henry Morton Stanley--more or less as a stunt to sell newspapers--went looking for David Livingstone in central Africa, he got a taste for the adventure of the explorer's march in the tropics. He returned to hike across equatorial Africa from 1874-1877, and came back with information on interior economies and river systems. The King of Belgium, Leopold II, saw his reports as an opportunity to profit, and financed a third African mission for Stanley, where the explorer obtained treaties from many African leaders that purported to transfer their property to Leopold. As long as European merchants were ostensibly free to come and go from this territory, these agreements were regarded as legitimate by other European powers, and by 1885 Leopold claimed sovereignty over a vast landscape in the middle of the continent. The colony, called the Congo, became King Leopold's personal property (while ironically his power as King at home was being reduced). Also formally proclaimed in 1885, was a law that all "vacant land" there was the King's. (Land determined as empty by European observers did not actually mean it was not being used by some Congolese.)

The goal of the colony was to harvest wealth as quickly as possible. Initially this mainly meant obtaining the ivory from elephant tusks, but this also included looting food from Congolese peasants to feed the colonial state's soldiers. District officers--white, nearly always single (most of whom took Africans as concubines)--became the men in charge in many parts of the territory. They received a bottle of red wine per diem as well as various prestigious canned foods, and each had several African house-servants. In exchange, they were expected to keep wealth flowing from their district to Belgium.

Because the King did not have enough people to exploit all the territory claimed, he offered up concessions to outside buyers. This meant a company would buy up rights to land exploitation, and then have access to about half of the profits of a particular good (such as ivory or copper) that they were able to extract in that zone. The remaining profits went into the Free State's--and Leopold's--treasuries. The Free State government also made it illegal for Africans to use money; they had to exchange goods via bartering.

Sometimes African goods were confiscated. Others were purchased for low prices at gunpoint. To collect most of the resources, however, Africans were forced to labor in the Congo for European masters. This practice was justified by claiming that Africans would otherwise be lazy; Europeans argued that hard work was good for the Congolese as a people. Most Africans initially worked as porters, people who carried goods long distances, prior to the building (by African labor) of rails and importation of inland steamboats, and in any places where steam-powered vehicles could not reach. Other Congolese worked for the state as rail-builders, dockworkers, soldiers, collectors, and farmers. A Belgian described the porters he saw in 1896:

Unceasingly we meet these porters . . . black, miserable, with only a horribly filthy loin-cloth for clothing, frizzy and bare head supporting the load - box, bale, ivory tusk . . . barrel; most of them sickly, drooping under a burden increased by tiredness and insufficient food - a handful of rice and some stinking dried fish; pitiful walking caryatids, beasts of burden with thin monkey legs, with drawn features, eyes fixed and round from preoccupation with keeping their balance and from the daze of exhaustion. They come and go like this by the thousands . . . requisitioned by the State armed with its powerful militia, handed over by chiefs whose slaves they are and who make off with their salaries, trotting with bent knees, belly forward, an arm raised to steady the

[The PDF that follows scanned poorly: in a few places letters are rendered as weird symbols, like ~ for the "m" in more.]
load, the other leaning on a long walking-stick, dusty and sweaty, insects spreading out across the mountains and valleys their many flies and their task of Sisyphus, dying along the road or, the journey over, heading off to die from overwork in their villages.

The death toll was particularly high among porters forced to carry loads long distances. Of the three hundred porters conscripted in 1891 by District Commissioner Paul Lemarinel for a forced march of more than six hundred miles to set up a new post, not one returned.

Stanislas Lefranc, a devout Catholic and monarchist, was a Belgian prosecutor who had come to the Congo to work as a magistrate. Early one Sunday morning in Leopoldville, he heard the sound of many children screaming desperately.

On tracing the howls to their source, Lefranc found "some thirty urchins, of whom several, were seven or eight years old, lined up and waiting their turn, watching, terrified, their companions being flogged. Most of the urchins, in a paroxysm of grief... kicked so frightfully that the soldiers ordered to hold them by the hands and feet had to lift them off the ground... 25 times the whip slashed down on each of the children." The evening before, Lefranc learned, several children had laughed in the presence of a white man, who then ordered that all the servant boys in town be given fifty lashes. The second installment of twenty-five lashes was due at six o'clock the next morning. Lefranc managed to get these stopped, but was told not to make any more protests that interfered with discipline.

Lefranc was seeing in use a central tool of Leopold's Congo, which in the minds of the territory's people, soon became as closely identified with white rule as the steamboat or the rifle. It was the chicotte - a whip of raw; sun-dried hippopotamus hide, cut into a long sharp-edged cork-screw strip. Usually the chicotte was applied to the victim's bare buttocks. Its blows would leave permanent scars; more than twenty-five strokes could mean unconsciousness; and a hundred or more - not an uncommon punishment... were often fatal.

Lefranc was to see many more chicotte beatings, although his descriptions of them, in pamphlets... and newspaper articles he published in Belgium, provoked little reaction.
EXPERT OPINION.

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ABSOLUTELY TRUE MY DEAD BOY THEY MINT 20 AMAND. THEY NEVER TOUCHED ME.

Punch, 1905: One of a number of cartoons where Leopold compares notes with the sultan of Turkey, also condemned for his massacres of Armenians.

The station chief selects the victims. Trembling, haggard, they lie face down on the ground... two of their companions, sometimes four, seize them by the feet and hands, and remove their cotton drawers... Each time that the torturer lifts up the chicotte, a reddish stripe appears on the skin of the pitiful victims, who, however firmly held, gasp in frightful contortions. At the first blow... the unhappy victims let out horrible cries which soon become faint groans. In a refinement of evil, some officers, and I've witnessed this, demand that when the sufferer gets up, panting, he must graciously give the military salute.

The open horror Lefranc expressed succeeded only in earning him a reputation as an oddball or troublemaker. He "shows an astonishing ignorance of things which he ought to know because of his work. A mediocre agent," the acting governor general wrote in a personnel evaluation. In an attempt to quiet his complaints, Lefranc wrote, officials ordered that executions at his post be carried out in a new location instead of next to his house.

Except for Lefranc, few Europeans working for the regime left records of their shock at the sight of officially sanctioned terror. The white men who passed through the territory as military officers, steamboat captains, or state or concession company officials generally accepted the use of the chicotte as unthinkingly as hundreds of thousands of other men in uniform would accept their assignments, a half-century later, to staff the Nazi and Soviet concentration camps. "Monsters exist," wrote Primo Levi of his experience at Auschwitz. "But they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are... the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions."

What made it possible for the functionaries in the Congo to so blithely watch the chicotte in action and, as we shall see, to deal out pain and death in other ways as well? To begin with, of course, was race. To Europeans, Africans were inferior beings: lazy, uncivilized, little better than animals. In fact, the most common way they were put to work was, like animals, as beasts of burden. In any system of terror, the functionaries must first of all see the victims as less than human, and Victorian ideas about race provided such a foundation.

Then, of course, the terror in the Congo was sanctioned by the authorities. For a white man to rebel meant challenging the system that
provided your livelihood. Everyone around you was participating. By going along with the system, you were paid, promoted, awarded medals. So men who would have been appalled to see someone using a chicotte on the streets of Brussels or Paris or Stockholm accepted the act, in this different setting, as normal. We can hear the echo of this thinking, in another context, half a century later: “To tell the truth,” said Franz Stangl of the mass killings that took place when he was commandant of the Nazi death camps of Sobibor and Treblinka, “one did become used to it.”

In such a regime, one thing that often helps functionaries “become used to it” is a slight, symbolic distance - irrelevant to the victim - between an official in charge and the physical act of terror itself. That symbolic distance was frequently cited in self-defense by Nazis put on trial after World War II. Dr. Johann Paul Kremer, for example, an SS physician who liked to do his pathology research on human tissue that was still fresh, explained:

The patient was put on the dissecting table while he was still alive. I then approached the table and put several questions to the man as to such details which pertained to my researches. . . . When I had collected my information the orderly approached the patient and killed him with an injection in the vicinity of the heart. . . . I myself never made any lethal injections.

I myself never made any lethal injections. Although some whites in the Congo enjoyed wielding the chicotte, most put a similar symbolic distance between themselves and the dreaded instrument. “At first I . . . took upon myself the responsibility of meting out punishment to those whose conduct during the previous day seemed to warrant such treatment,” recalled Raoul de Premorel, who worked for a company operating in the Kasai River basin. “Soon . . . I found it desirable to assign the execution of sentences to others under my direction. The best plan seemed to be to have each capita [African foreman] administer the punishment for his own gang.”

And so the bulk of chicotte blows were inflicted by Africans on the bodies of other Africans. This, for the conquerors, served a further purpose. It created a class of foremen from among the conquered, like the kapos in the Nazi concentration camps and the predurki, or trusties, in the Soviet gulag. Just as terrorizing people is part of conquest, so is forcing someone else to administer the terror.

Finally, when terror is the unquestioned order of the day, wielding it efficiently is regarded as a manly virtue, the way soldiers value calmness in battle. This is the ultimate in “becoming used to it.” Here, for instance, a station chief named Georges Bricusse describes in his diary a hanging he ordered in 1895 of a man who had stolen a rifle:

The gallows is set up. The rope is attached, too high. They lift up the nigger and put the noose around him. The rope twists for a few moments, then crack, the man is wriggling on the ground. A shot in the back of the neck and the game is up. It didn’t make the least impression on me this time!! And to think that the first time I saw the chicotte administered, I was pale with fright. Africa has some use after all. I could now walk into fire as if to a wedding.

The framework of control that Leopold extended across his enormous realm was military. After all, without armed force, you cannot make men leave their homes and families and carry sixty-five-pound loads for weeks or months. The king was particularly happy to run his own army in Africa, since in Belgium he was forever at loggerheads with legislators who did not share his passion for building great forts, spending more money on the army, and instituting the draft.

Leopold had made use of African mercenaries ever since sending Stanley to stake out his claim from 1879 to 1884. In 1888 he formally organized them into the Force Publique, an army for his new state. Over the next dozen years, it grew to more than nineteen thousand officers and men, the most powerful army in central Africa. By the late 1890s, it consumed more than half the state’s budget. At once counterguerrilla troops, an army of occupation, and a corporate labor police force, it was

* If the underlings’ allegiance is unreliable, sometimes the conquerors take precautions. When eighteen mutinous black soldiers were executed in Boma in 1900, a photographer recorded the scene: the condemned rebels are tied to stakes and a firing squad of loyal black troops has just fired a salvo. But in case the loyalists waver, the entire white male population of Boma is standing in a long row at right angles to both groups, each sun-helmeted white man with a rifle at the ready.
divided mainly into small garrisons - typically, several dozen black soldiers under one or two white officers, on a riverbank. The initial handful of military posts quickly grew to 183 by 1900, and to 313 by 1908.

The Force Publique had its hands full. Many of the king's new subjects belonged to warrior peoples who fought back. More than a dozen different ethnic groups staged major rebellions against Leopold's rule. The Yaka people fought the whites for more than ten years before they were subdued, in 1906. The Chokwe fought for twenty years, inflicting heavy casualties on Leopold's soldiers. The Boa and the Budja mobilized more than five thousand men to fight a guerrilla war from deep within the rain forest. Just as Americans used the word pacification in Vietnam seventy years later, so the Force Publique's military expeditions were officially called reconnaissances pacifiques.

The history of central Africa before the European arrival was as filled with wars and conquests as Europe's own, and even during Leopold's rule not all the Congo's violence was between colonizer and colonized. Because so many Congo peoples had earlier fought among themselves, the Force Publique was often able to ally itself with one ethnic group to defeat another. But sooner or later the first group found itself subdued as well. With their forces stretched thin over a huge territory, Leopold's commanders made clever use of this shifting pattern of alliances. In the end, though, their superior firepower guaranteed victory - and a history written by the victors.

Yet sometimes, even through those records, we can glimpse the determination of those who resisted the king. In Katanga in the far south, warriors from the Sanga people were led by a chief named Mulume Niama. Though the state troops were armed with artillery, his forces put up a stiff fight, killing one officer and wounding three soldiers. They then took refuge in a large chalk cave called Tshamakele. The Force Publique commander ordered his men to light fires at the three entrances to the cave to smoke the rebels out, and after a week he sent an emissary to negotiate Mulume Niama's surrender. The chief and his men refused. Soldiers lit the fires again and blocked the cave for three months. When the troops finally entered it, they found 178 bodies. Fearful of leaving any sign of a martyrs' grave, the Force Publique soldiers triggered landslides to obliterate all traces of the existence of the Tshamakele cave and of the bodies of Mulume Niama and his men.

Another rebellion took place along the caravan route around the lower Congo rapids. A notorious state agent, a Belgian named Eugene Rommel, built a station there to procure porters for the three-week trek from Matadi to Stanley Pool, a job for which the state needed fifty thousand men a year by the mid-1890s. Unlike the Protestant missionaries and some private traders, who hired the porters they used on this route and negotiated wages with them, the Congo state - at Leopold's specific order - used forced labor. Rommel named his station Baka Baka, which means "capture, capture."

A local chief named Nzansu led an uprising, ambushing and killing Rommel on December 5, 1893, and burning his station to the ground. The rebels also burned and pillaged two other nearby state posts, where they killed two white officials and wounded several more. However, Nzansu spared Mukimbungu, a Swedish mission on the caravan route. He even gave the missionaries some supplies he had found abandoned on the trail and returned some goods his men had taken from the mission station. One of the missionaries, Karl Teodor Andersson, wrote to his church members back in Sweden:

If our friends of the Mission at home are worried for our safety here as a result of letters and newspaper reports about the unrest in these parts, I wish to reassure them. . . . The leader of the rebels, Chief Nzansu of Kasi, has let us know that he does not wish harm to anyone of us as we have always shown that we are friends of the black people. But to the men of the State he has sworn death. And anyone who knows of the conditions out here cannot feel surprised.

This rebellion particularly alarmed the state because it completely stopped traffic on the crucial caravan route to Stanley Pool. To crush the rebels, the authorities sent out a force of fifteen white officers and two hundred black soldiers. Another Swedish missionary, C. N. Borrisson, wrote home a few weeks later, "The rebels have not fled . . . but have assembled in the leader's village, which they are defending unto death although their other villages have been burned."

Borrisson goes on to speak powerfully for the rebels whose own voices we cannot hear:

A man sows what he reaps. In reality, the state is the true source of these uprisings. It is strange that people who claim to be civilized think they can treat their fellow man - even though he is of a
different color - any which way. . . . Without a doubt one of the most disreputable [of the officials] is the late Mr. Rommel. One should not speak ill of the dead but I must simply mention some smaller matters to prove that the unrest has been justified . . . He imprisoned women when the people refused to transport [supplies] and to sell him goods below market prices. . . . He was not ashamed to come by our station and abduct our school girls . . . and treat them in despicable ways. One Sunday morning brother Andersson and I went to a neighboring village and helped release three poor women whom his soldiers had imprisoned because one of them had asked for the return of a stone jug which had been taken from her. . . .

But what happens to all of the women who are taken prisoner? Some are set free . . . when their husbands have done all they can to regain the one who is dearest to them. Others are forced to work in the fields and also to work as prostitutes. . . .

Our most respected men here . . . have told us with tears in their eyes and much vexation in their hearts that they had recently seen a group of seven hundred women chained together and transported [to the coast on steamboats]. “And,” they said, “whether they cut off our heads or that of a chicken it is all the same to them . . .”

So can anyone feel truly surprised that the discontent has finally come to the surface? Nzansu, the leader of the uprising, and [Rommel’s] assassin, only wanted to become the Engelbrekt of the Congo and the GustafWasa of his people. His followers are as loyal to him as Swedes were to their leaders in those times.

The missionary’s comparison was to two Swedish patriots of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, noblemen who led rebellions of Swedish peasants against harsh foreign kings. Wasa was successful and was himself elected King of Sweden. Nzansu was less fortunate. He and his warriors fought on against Leopold’s Force Publique for eight months, and, despite several scorched-earth expeditions sent against them, continued to fight sporadically for five more years. There seems to be no record of Nzansu’s fate.

All, the commissioned officers and some sergeants, of the Force Publique were white, mostly Belgian, but from other countries as well. Their own armies were usually happy to give them leave to gain a few years’ combat experience. All the ordinary soldiers were black. Mercenaries from Zanzibar and the British West African colonies in the army’s first few years were soon outnumbered by soldiers from the Congo itself, most of whom were conscripts. Even those who volunteered often did so because, as one soldier explained to a European visitor, he preferred “to be with the hunters rather than with the hunted.” Ill paid, ill fed, and flogged with the chicotte for the slightest offense, many tried to desert, and in the early days officers had to spend much of their time capturing them. Then, to guard against desertions, the state began sending new conscripts far from their home districts. As a soldier finishing your seven-year term, you might then face a journey of several hundred to a thousand miles to get home. Sometimes even then you would not be allowed to go.

The soldiers’ frustrations frequently boiled over into mutinies, large and small. The first big one erupted at the military base at Luluabourg in the south-central savanna country in 1895. The base commander, Mathieu Pelzer, was a notorious bully who used his fists on those under him and routinely ordered soldiers given 125 lashes with the chicotte. When his African concubine slept with another man, he ordered her killed. At one point Pelzer ordered a soldier punished, but before the man wielding the chicotte could begin, a sergeant named Kandolo went up to him and snatched the whip out of his hands. When rebellion against Pelzer broke out shortly afterward, it was led by angry black commissioned officers with Kandoio at their head.

Soldiers attacked and wounded Pelzer, who fled into the bush and hid. But the rebels tracked him down and killed him. Under Kandolo, dressed in white and riding on a bull, they set off for other Force Publique posts, gathering supporters among the black soldiers and killing several European officers. For more than half a year, the rebels controlled most of the Kasai region. In the bush, they split into small groups, spreading out over a broad area and successfully evading or fighting off a long series of heavily armed expeditions sent against them. A year later, worried Force Publique officers estimated that there were still four hundred to five hundred rebels at large, recruiting new members and allying themselves with local chiefs against the state. Altogether, suppressing the revolt cost the Force Publique the lives of several hundred black soldiers and porters.
and fifteen white officers or NCOs. One was an American, Lieutenant Lindsay Burke, a twenty-six-year-old native of New Orleans, who had been in Africa less than a year. He marched into an ambush and died, along with twenty-seven of his men, in early 1897. The rebel leader Kandolo was fatally wounded in battle, but two corporals who played a major role in the revolt, Yamba-Yamba and Kimpuki, fought on as guerrilla leaders; they were killed, still fighting, in 1908, thirteen years after the uprising began.

At the other end of the country, in the far northeast, a great mutiny broke out in 1897 among three thousand soldiers and an equal number of porters and auxiliaries. The men, who had been forced to march for months through forests and swamps in a renewed reach by Leopold toward the headwaters of the Nile, finally had enough. The fighting went on for three years, as column after column of loyalist Force Publique troops fought the rebels over some six hundred miles of forest and savanna along the chain of lakes on the Congo’s eastern border. Beneath their own red-and-white flag, rebels from different ethnic groups fought together, maintained military discipline, and staged ambushes to replenish their supplies of weapons and ammunition. Sympathetic chiefs gave them support, including warnings by talking drum of approaching troops. Even the Force Publique’s official history acknowledges that in battle “the rebels displayed a courage worthy of a better cause.”

More than two years after the revolt began, the rebels were able to muster twenty-five hundred soldiers to attack a heavily fortified position. One contingent of loyalist Force Publique mercenaries was reduced from three hundred men to three during the campaign. The rebels were still fighting in 1900, when two thousand of them finally withdrew across the frontier into German territory, today’s Rwanda and Burundi, where they gave up their arms in return for the right to settle.

This prolonged mutiny is the sole case in the history of Leopold’s Congo where we have an eyewitness account of what it was like behind rebel lines. In April 1897, these insurgents captured a French priest, Father Auguste Achte, who unintentionally walked into their hands, assuming that the “immense camp” he had come upon must be that of a Force Publique expedition. Finding himself instead among some two thousand rebels, whose leaders were wearing captured gold-braided officers’ uniforms and pistols, Achte was terrified, certain that he was going to die. Some of the mutineers did rough him up and tell him they had sworn to kill all white people. But the leaders of the group argued them down, making a distinction between those whites who worked for the hated Congo state and those who did not. Mulamba, the chief of this group of rebels, reported Achte, told the priest that they were sparing his life because “I had no rifle, I taught God’s word, I took care of sick natives, and (the decisive argument) I had never hit a black.” The rebels had reached this conclusion after interrogating a dozen young Africans to whom the priest was giving religious instruction.

To Father Achte’s surprise, the rebels eventually slaughtered a goat, fed him, brewed him a cup of coffee, and presented him with a gift of ivory to compensate for those of his goods they had confiscated, “so you won’t write in Europe that we stole from you.” After several days, he was released. The rebels told him they had killed their Belgian officers because the officers treated them like animals, they hadn’t been paid for months, and soldiers and chiefs alike were flogged or hung for the slightest offense. They spoke of one white officer who shot sixty soldiers in a single day because they refused to work on a Sunday, and of another who “with his own hands poured salt and pepper on the bloody wounds made by the chicotte and ordered the sick from his post thrown alive into the Lualaba River.”

“For three years I built up a hatred against the Belgians in my heart, and choked it back;” Mulamba said to Achte. “When I saw Dhanis [Baron Francis Dhanis, the Force Publique commander in the area] face to face with my rebelling countrymen, I trembled with happiness: it was the moment of deliverance and vengeance.” Other rebels told Achte that they had chosen Mulamba as their king and two others as his deputies, and that they wanted to set up an independent state free of white rule. This uprising and the other Force Publique rebellions were more than mutinies of disgruntled soldiers; they were precursors of the anticolonial guerrilla wars that shook central and southern Africa starting in the 1960s.

While Leopold grandly issued edicts banning the slave trade, virtually no visitors except George Washington Williams stated the obvious: not only the porters but even the soldiers of the Force Publique were, in effect, slaves. Moreover, under a system personally approved by the king, white state agents were paid a bonus according to the number of men they turned over to the Force Publique. Sometimes agents bought men from collaborating chiefs, who delivered their human goods in chains. (In one
Tippu Tip was a shrewd, resourceful man who made a fortune in ivory as well as slaves, businesses he was able to expand dramatically, thanks to Stanley's discovery of the route of the upper Congo River. Leopold knew that Tippu Tip's power and administrative acumen had made him almost the de facto ruler of the eastern Congo. In 1887, the king asked him to serve as governor of the colony's eastern province, with its capital at Stanley Falls, and Tippu Tip accepted; several relatives occupied posts under him. At this early stage, with Leopold's military forces spread thin, the bargain offered something to both men. (The king also contracted to buy the freedom of several thousand of Tippu Tip's slaves, but one condition of their freedom, these "liberated" slaves and many others quickly discovered, was a seven-year enlistment term in the Force Publique.) Although Leopold managed for most of his life to be all things to all people, the spectacle of this antislavery crusader doing so much business with Africa's most prominent slave-dealer helped spur the first murmurings against the king in Europe.

Eventually the two men parted ways. Ambitious white state officials in the eastern Congo, without the approval of their superiors in Brussels, then fought several victorious battles against some of the Afro-Arab warlords in the region, fighting that after the fact was converted into a noble campaign against the dastardly "Arab" slave-dealers. Colonial-heroic literature elevated it to a central place in the period's official mythology, echoes of which can be heard in Belgium to this day. However, over the years Congo military forces spilled far more blood in fighting innumerable uprisings by Africans, including the rebels from their own ranks. Furthermore, as soon as the rogue campaign against the slavers was over, Leopold put many of them back in place as state officials.

What was it like to be captured and enslaved by the Congo's white conquerors? In one rare instance we can hear an African voice describe the experience. It was recorded by an American Swahili-speaking state agent, Edgar Canisius, who found himself unexpectedly moved by the story told to him by "a woman of great intelligence, named nanga." Later, when he met the officer and soldiers who had captured her, he concluded that she had indeed spoken the truth. The events she describes took place in the eastern part of the territory, near Nyangwe, the town where Stanley had first seen the giant river that turned out to be the Congo. Here, as recorded by Canisius, is nanga's story:

Our village is called Waniendo, after our chief Niendo .... It is a large village near a small stream, and surrounded by large fields of mohago (cassava) and muhindu (maize) and other foods, for we all
worked hard at our plantations, and always had plenty to eat.... We never had war in our country; and the men had not many arms except knives. 

We were all busy in the fields hoeing our plantations, for it was the rainy season, and the weeds sprang quickly up, when a runner came to the village saying that a large band of men was coming, that they all wore red caps and blue cloth, and carried guns and long knives, and that many white men were with them, the chief of whom was Kibalanga [the African name for a Force Publique officer named Oscar Michaux, who once received a Sword of Honor from Leopold's own hands]. Niendo at once called all the chief men to his house, while the drums were beaten to summon the people to the village. A long consultation was held, and finally we were all told to go quietly to the fields and bring in ground-nuts, plantains, and cassava for the warriors who were coming, and goats and fowls for the white men. The women all went with baskets and filled them, and then put them in the road.... Niendo thought that, by giving presents of much food, he would induce the strangers to pass on without harming us. And so it proved ....

When the white men and their warriors had gone, we went again to our work, and were hoping that they would not return; but this they did in a very short time. As before, we brought in great heaps of food; but this time Kibalanga did not move away directly, but camped near our village, and his soldiers came and stole all our fowls and goats and tore up our cassava; but we did not mind that as long as they did not harm us. The next morning ... soon after the sun rose over the hill, a large band of soldiers came into the village, and we all went into the houses and sat down. We were not long seated when the soldiers came rushing in shouting, and threatening Niendo with their guns. They rushed into the houses and dragged the people out. Three or four came to our house and caught hold of me, also my husband Oleka and my sister Katinga. We were dragged into the road, and were tied together with cords about our necks, so that we could not escape. We were all crying, for now we knew that we were to be taken away to be slaves. The soldiers beat us with the iron sticks from their guns, and compelled us to march to the camp of Kibalanga, who ordered the women to be tied up separately, ten to each cord, and the men in the same way. When we were all collected - and there were many from other villages whom we now saw, and many from Waniendo - the soldiers brought baskets of food for us to carry; in some of which was smoked human flesh....

We then set off marching very quickly. My sister Katinga had her baby in her arms, and was not compelled to carry a basket; but my husband Oleka was made to carry a goat. We marched until the afternoon, when we camped near a stream, where we were glad to drink, for we were much athirst. We had nothing to eat, for the soldiers would give us nothing .... The next day we continued the march, and when we camped at noon were given some maize and plantains, which were gathered near a village from which the people had run away. So it continued each day until the fifth day, when the soldiers took my sister's baby and threw it in the grass, leaving it to die, and made her carry some cooking pots which they found in the deserted village. On the sixth day we became very weak from lack of food and from constant marching and sleeping in the damp grass, and my husband, who marched behind us with the goat, could not stand up longer, and so he sat down beside the path and refused to walk more. The soldiers beat him, but still he refused to move. Then one of them struck him on the head with the end of his gun, and he fell upon the ground. One of the soldiers caught the goat, while two or three others stuck the long knives they put on the ends of their guns into my husband. I saw the blood spurt out, and then saw him no more, for we passed over the brow of a hill and he was out of sight. Many of the young men were killed the same way, and many babies thrown into the grass to die.... After marching ten days we came to the great water ... and were taken in canoes across to the white men's town at Nyangwe.

Even children were not spared the rigors of Leopold's regime. "I believe we must set up three children's colonies;' the king wrote on April 27, 1890. "One in the Upper Congo near the equator, specifically military, with clergy for religious instruction and for vocational education. One at Leopoldville under clergy with a soldier for military training. One at
(Hochschild explains further the role of missionaries in the more-or-less kidnapping of Congolese children to raise them as soldiers for the *Force Publique*.)

He then discusses William Sheppard, a black American missionary, who arrived in the Congo in 1890. Sheppard became an evangelical explorer and ended up being the first non-African to enter the court of the Kuba Kingdom.

Next comes the story of Leopold's new commodity.

Not surprisingly, the Kuba were happy with their existing way of life, and, despite their friendliness toward Sheppard, showed little interest in Christianity. The mission station Sheppard ran among them made few converts. But Sheppard had become so well known back home for his discoveries that the Presbyterians were afraid of an adverse public reaction if they closed his mission to the Kuba and stationed him elsewhere.

The entire Kasai region, like the rest of the Congo, in time succumbed to the tightening grip of the Congo state. Some eight years after Sheppard's historic visit, Leopold's forces finally reached and looted the Kuba capital.

The raid on the capital, like many other events in the Congo, was triggered by a discovery far away. One day a few years before William Sheppard first embarked for Africa, a veterinary surgeon in Ireland named John Dunlop was trying to solve a problem that had bedeviled bicyclists for many years: how do you get a gentle ride without springs? Dunlop finally devised a practical way of making a long-sought solution, an inflatable rubber tire. In 1895 the Dunlop Company began making tires—setting off a bicycle craze and starting a new industry just in time, it turned out, for the coming of the automobile.

Europeans had known about rubber ever since Christopher Columbus noticed it in the West Indies. In the late 1700s, a British scientist gave the substance its English name when he noticed it could rub out pencil marks. The Scot Charles Macintosh contributed his name to the language in 1823 when he figured out a mass-production method for doing something long practiced by the Indians of the Americas: applying rubber to cloth to make it waterproof. Sixteen years later, the American inventor Charles Goodyear accidentally spilled sulfur into some hot rubber on his stove. He discovered that the resulting mixture did not turn stiff when cold or smellly and gooey when hot—major problems for those trying to make rubber boots or raincoats before then. But it was not until the early 1890s, half a decade after Dunlop fitted the pneumatic tire onto his son's tricycle wheel, that the worldwide rubber boom began. The industrial world rapidly developed an appetite not just for rubber tires, but for hoses, tubing, gaskets, and the like, and for rubber insulation for the telegraph, telephone, and electrical wiring now rapidly encompassing the globe. Suddenly factories could not get enough of the magical commodity, and its price rose throughout the 1890s. Nowhere did the boom have a more drastic impact on people's lives than in the equatorial rain forest, where wild rubber vines snaked high into the trees, that covered nearly half of King Leopold's Congo.

For Leopold, the rubber boom was a godsend. He had gone dangerously into debt with his Congo investments, but he now saw that the return would be more lucrative than he had ever imagined. The world did not lose its desire for ivory, but by the late 1890s wild rubber had far surpassed it as the main source of revenue from the Congo. His fortune assured, the king eagerly grilled functionaries returning from the Congo about rubber harvests; he devoured a constant stream of telegrams and reports from the territory, marking them up in the margins and passing them on to aides for action. His letters from this period are filled with numbers: commodity prices from world markets, interest rates on loans, quantities of rifles to be shipped to the Congo, tons of rubber to be shipped to Europe, and the exact dimensions of the triumphal arch in Brussels he was planning to build with his newfound profits. Reading the king's correspondence is like reading the letters of the CEO of a corporation that has just developed a profitable new product and is racing to take advantage of it before competitors can get their assembly lines going.

The competition Leopold worried about was from cultivated rubber, which comes not from a vine but a tree. Rubber trees, however, require much care and some years before they grow large enough to be tapped. The king voraciously demanded ever greater quantities of wild rubber from the Congo, because he knew that the price would drop once plantations of rubber trees in Latin America and Asia reached maturity.
rubber, you had to slash the vine with a knife and hang a bucket or earthenware pot to collect the slow drip of thick, milky sap. You could make a small incision to tap the vine, or — officially forbidden but widely practiced — cut through it entirely, which produced more rubber but killed the vine. Once the vines near a village were drained dry, workers had to go ever deeper into the forest until, before long, most harvesters were traveling at least one or two days to find fresh vines. As the lengths of vine within reach of the ground were tapped dry, workers climbed high into the trees to reach sap. "We . . . passed a man on the road who had broken his back by falling from a tree while . . . tapping some vines," wrote one missionary. Furthermore, heavy tropical downpours during much of the year turned large areas of the rain forest, where the rubber vines grew, into swampland.

No payments of trinkets or brass wire were enough to make people stay in the flooded forest for days at a time to do work that was so arduous — and physically painful. A gatherer had to dry the syrup-like rubber so that it would coagulate, and often the only way to do so was to spread the substance on his arms, thighs, and chest. "The first few times it is not without pain that the man pulls it off the hairy parts of his body," Louis Chaltin, a Force Publique officer, confided to his journal in 1892. "The native doesn’t like making rubber. He must be compelled to do it."

How was he to be compelled? A trickle of news and rumor gradually made its way to Europe. "An example of what is done was told me up the Ubangi [River]," the British vice consul reported in 1899. "This officer[s] . . . method . . . was to arrive in canoes at a village, the inhabitants of which invariably bolted on their arrival; the soldiers were then landed, and commenced looting, taking all the chickens, grain, etc., out of the houses; after this they attacked the natives until able to seize their women; these women were kept as hostages until the Chief of the district brought in the required number of kilogrammes of rubber. The rubber having been brought, the women were sold back to their owners for a couple of goats apiece, and so he continued from village to village until the requisite amount of rubber had been collected."

Sometimes the hostages were women, sometimes children, sometimes elders or chiefs. Every state or company post in the rubber areas had a stockade for hostages. If you were a male villager, resisting the order to gather rubber could mean death for your wife. She might die anyway, for in the stockades food was scarce and conditions were harsh. "The women taken during the last raid at Engweutta are causing me no end of trouble,"

This did indeed happen, but by then the Congo had had a wild-rubber boom nearly two decades long. During that time the search knew no bounds.

As with the men bringing in ivory, those supplying rubber to the Congo state and private companies were rewarded according to the amount they turned in. In 1903, one particularly "productive" agent received a commission eight times his annual salary. But the big money flowed directly back to Antwerp and Brussels, in the capital mostly to either side of the rue Bréderode, the small street that separated the back of the Royal Palace from several buildings holding offices of the Congo state and Congo business operations.

Even though Leopold’s centrally controlled state got half of concession-company profits, the king made vastly more money from the land the state exploited directly. But because the concession companies were not managed so secretly, we have better statistics from them. In 1897, for example, one of the companies, the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber and Exploration Company, or A.B.I.R., spent 1.33 francs per kilo to harvest rubber in the Congo and ship it to the company’s headquarters at Antwerp — where it was sold for prices that sometimes reached 10 francs per kilo, a profit of more than 700 percent. By 1898, the price of A.B.I.R.’s stock was nearly thirty times what it had been six years earlier. Between 1890 and 1904, total Congo rubber earnings increased ninety-six times over. By the turn of the century, the État Indépendant du Congo had become, far and away, the most profitable colony in Africa. The profits came swiftly because, transportation costs aside, harvesting wild rubber required no cultivation, no fertilizers, no capital investment in expensive equipment. It required only labor.

How was this labor to be found? For the Congo’s rulers, this posed a problem. They could not simply round up men, chain them together, and put them to work under the eye of an overseer with a chirote, as they did with porters. To gather wild rubber, people must disperse widely through the rain forest and often climb trees.

Rubber is coagulated sap; the French word for it, caoutchouc, comes from a South American Indian word meaning "the wood that weeps." The wood that wept in the Congo was a long spongy vine of the Llandophila genus. Up to a foot thick at the base, a vine would twine upward around a tree to a hundred feet or more off the ground, where it could reach sunlight. There, branching, it might wind its way hundreds of feet through the upper limbs of another half-dozen trees. To gather the
wrote Force Publique officer Georges Bricusse in his diary on November 22, 1895. "All the soldiers want one. The sentries who are supposed to watch them unchain the prettiest ones and rape them."

Leopold, of course, never proclaimed hostage-taking as official policy; if anyone made such charges, authorities in Brussels indignantly denied them. But out in the field, far from prying eyes, the pretense was dropped. Instructions on taking hostages were even given in the semi-official instruction book, the revealing Manuel du Voyageur et du Résident au Congo, a copy of which the administration gave to each agent and each state post. The manual's five volumes cover everything from keeping servants obedient to the proper firing of artillery salutes. Taking hostages was one more routine piece of work:

In Africa taking prisoners is... an easy thing to do, for if the natives hide, they will not go far from their village and must come to look for food in the gardens which surround it. In watching these carefully, you will be certain of capturing people after a brief delay... When you feel you have enough captives, you should choose among them an old person, preferably an old woman. Make her a present and send her to her chief to begin negotiations. The chief, wanting to see his people set free, will usually decide to send representatives.

Seldom does history offer us a chance to see such detailed instructions for those carrying out a regime of terror. The tips on hostage-taking are in the volume of the manual called Practical Questions, which was compiled by an editorial committee of about thirty people. One member—he worked on the book during a two-year period following his stint as the head-collecting station chief at Stanley Falls—was Léon Rom.

Hostage-taking set the Congo apart from most other forced-labor regimes. But in other ways it resembled them. As would be true decades later of the Soviet gulag, another slave labor system for harvesting raw materials, the Congo operated by quotas. In Siberia the quotas concerned cubic meters of timber cut or tons of gold ore mined by prisoners each day; in the Congo the quota was for kilos of rubber. In the A.B.I.R. concession company's rich territory just below the Congo River's great half-circle bend, for example, the normal quota assigned to each village was three to four kilos of dried rubber per adult male per fortnight—which essentially meant full-time labor for those men. Elsewhere, quotas were higher and might be raised as time went on. An official in the Mongala River basin in the far north, controlled by another concession company, the Société Anversoise du Commerce au Congo, estimated that to fill their quota, rubber gatherers had to spend twenty-four days a month in the forest, where they built crude cages to sleep in for protection—not always successful—against leopards.

To get at parts of the vine high off the ground, men frantic to get every possible drop of rubber would sometimes tear down the whole vine, slice it into sections, and squeeze the rubber out. Although the Congo state issued strict orders against killing the vines this way, it also applied the chiatte to men who didn't bring in enough rubber. The chiatte prevailed. One witness saw Africans who had to dig up roots in order to find enough rubber to meet their quotas.

The entire system was militarized. Force Publique garrisons were scattered everywhere, often supplying their firepower to the companies under contract. In addition, each company had its own militia force, euphemistically called "sentries." In military matters as in almost everything else, the companies operated as an extension of the Congo state, and when hostages had to be taken or a rebellious village subdued, company sentries and Force Publique soldiers often took to the field together.

Wherever rubber vines grew, the population was tightly controlled. Usually you had to get a permit from the state or company agent in order to visit a friend or relative in another village. In some areas, you were required to wear a numbered metal disk, attached to a cord around your neck, so that company agents could keep track of whether you had met your quota. Huge numbers of Africans were conscripted into this labor army: in 1906, the books of A.B.I.R. alone, responsible for only a small fraction of the Congo state's rubber production, listed forty-seven thousand rubber gatherers.

All along the rivers, columns of exhausted men, carrying baskets of lumpy gray rubber on their heads, sometimes walked twenty miles or more to assemble near the houses of European agents, who sat on their verandas and weighed the loads of rubber. At one collection point, a missionary counted four hundred men with baskets. After the sap was
turned in, it was formed into rough slabs, each the size of a small suitcase, and left to dry in the sun. Then it was shipped downriver, on a barge or scow towed by a steamboat, the first stage of the long journey to Europe.

The state and the companies generally paid villagers for their rubber with a piece of cloth, beads, a few spoonfuls of salt, or a knife. These cost next to nothing, and the knives were essential tools for gathering more rubber. On at least one occasion, a chief who forced his people to gather rubber was paid in human beings. A legal dispute between two white officials near Stanley Falls put the following exchange on record in 1901. The witness being questioned was Lianiba, chief of a village named Malinda:

**Question:** Did M. Hottaux [a company official] ever give you living women or children?

**Answer:** Yes, he gave me six women and two men.

**Question:** What for?

**Answer:** In payment for rubber which I brought into the station, telling me I could eat them, or kill them, or use them as slaves — as I liked.

The rain forest bordering the Kasai River was rich in rubber, and William Sheppard and the other American Presbyterians there found themselves in the midst of a cataclysm. The Kasai was also the scene of some of the strongest resistance to Leopold’s rule. Armed men of a chief allied with the regime rampaged through the region where Sheppard worked, plundering and burning more than a dozen villages. Floods of desperate refugees sought help at Sheppard’s mission station.

In 1899 the reluctant Sheppard was ordered by his superiors to travel into the bush, at some risk to himself, to investigate the source of the fighting. There he found bloodstained ground, destroyed villages, and many bodies; the air was thick with the stench of rotting flesh. On the day he reached the marauders’ camp, his eye was caught by a large number of objects being smoked. The chief “conducted us to a framework of sticks, under which was burning a slow fire, and there they were, the right hands, I counted them, 81 in all.” The chief told Sheppard, “See! Here is our evidence. I always have to cut off the right hands of those we kill in order to show the State how many we have killed.” He proudly showed Sheppard some of the bodies the hands had come from. The smoking preserved the hands in the hot, moist climate, for it might be days or weeks before the chief could display them to the proper official and receive credit for his kills.

Sheppard had stumbled on one of the most grisly aspects of Leopold’s rubber system. Like the hostage-taking, the severing of hands was deliberate policy, as even high officials would later admit. “During my time in the Congo I was the first commissioner of the Equator district,” recalled Charles Lemaire after his retirement. “As soon as it was a question of rubber, I wrote to the government. ‘To gather rubber in the district . . . one must cut off hands, noses and ears.’”

If a village refused to submit to the rubber regime, state or company troops or their allies sometimes shot everyone in sight, so that nearby villages would get the message. But on such occasions some European officers were mistrustful. For each cartridge issued to their soldiers they demanded proof that the bullet had been used to kill someone, not “wasted” in hunting or, worse yet, saved for possible use in a mutiny. The standard proof was the right hand from a corpse. Or occasionally not from a corpse. “Sometimes,” said one officer to a missionary, soldiers “shot a cartridge at an animal in hunting; they then cut off a hand from a living man.” In some military units there was even a “keeper of the hands”; his job was the smoking.

Sheppard was not the first foreign witness to see severed hands in the Congo, nor would he be the last. But the articles he wrote for missionary magazines about his grisly find were reprinted and quoted widely, both in Europe and the United States, and it is partly due to him that people overseas began to associate the Congo with severed hands. A half-dozen years after Sheppard’s stark discovery, while attacking the expensive public works Leopold was building with his Congo profits, the socialist leader Émile Vandervelde would speak in the Belgian Parliament of “monumental arches which one will someday call the Arches of the Severed Hands.” William Sheppard’s outspokenness would eventually bring down the wrath of the authorities and one day Vandervelde, an attorney, would find himself defending Sheppard in a Congo courtroom. But that is getting ahead of our story.

As the rubber terror spread throughout the rain forest, it branded people with memories that remained raw for the rest of their lives. A Catholic priest who recorded oral histories half a century later quotes a man, Tswambe, speaking of a particularly hated state official named Léon
Fiévez, who terrorized a district along the river three hundred miles north of Stanley Pool:

All the blacks saw this man as the Devil of the Equator... From all the bodies killed in the field, you had to cut off the hands. He wanted to see the number of hands cut off by each soldier, who had to bring them in baskets... A village which refused to provide rubber would be completely swept clean. As a young man, I saw [Fiévez’s] soldier Molili, then guarding the village of Boyeka, take a big net, put ten arrested natives in it, attach big stones to the net, and make it tumble into the river... Rubber caused these torments; that's why we no longer want to hear its name spoken. Soldiers made young men kill or rape their own mothers and sisters.

A Force Publique officer who passed through Fiévez’s post in 1894 quotes Fiévez himself describing what he did when the surrounding villages failed to supply his troops with the fish and manioc he had demanded: “I made war against them. One example was enough: a hundred heads cut off, and there have been plenty of supplies at the station ever since. My goal is ultimately humanitarian. I killed a hundred people... but that allowed five hundred others to live.”

With “humanitarian” ground rules that included cutting off hands and heads, sadists like Fiévez had a field day. The station chief at M‘Bima used his revolver to shoot holes in Africans’ ear lobes. Raoul de Premorel, an agent working along the Kasai River, enjoyed giving large doses of castor oil to people he considered malingerers. When villagers, in a desperate attempt to meet the weight quota, turned in rubber mixed with dirt or pebbles to the agent Albéric Detiège, he made them eat it. When two porters failed to use a designated latrine, a district commissioner, Jean Verdussen, ordered them paraded in front of troops, their faces rubbed with excrement.

As news of the white man’s soldiers and their baskets of severed hands spread through the Congo, a myth gained credence with Africans that was a curious reversal of the white obsession with black cannibalism. The cans of corned beef seen in white men’s houses, it was said, did not contain meat from the animals shown on the label; they contained chopped-up hands.

ONCE WHEN Leopold and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany were watching a parade in Berlin, Leopold, grumbling about the erosion of royal authority, remarked to the kaiser, “There is really nothing left for us kings except money!” Rubber would soon bring Leopold money beyond imagining, but the Congo alone was never enough to satisfy him. Fantasizing an empire that would encompass the two legendary rivers of Africa, the Congo and the Nile, he imagined linking the rivers by a great railway, and in the early 1890s dispatched expeditions northeast from the Congo toward the Nile valley. One of these claimed the ancient copper mines of Bahre el-Ghazal, taking care to claim the mines for Leopold personally while committing the Congo state to provide military protection.

The French finally blocked the king from further moves toward the Nile, but he was already dreaming of new colonies elsewhere. “I would like to make out of our little Belgium, with its six million people, the capital of an immense empire,” he said. “The Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, are in a state of decadence and their colonies will one day or another come on to the market.” He asked Prime Minister William Gladstone of England about the possibility of leasing Uganda.

Leopold was quick to embellish his imperial schemes with any humanitarian sentiment in the air. In 1896, he proposed to another surprised British prime minister, Lord Salisbury, that a Sudanese army under Congo state officers be used “for the purpose of invading and occupying