

Time for a Long Overdue Change in Brussels, Antwerp and Elsewhere! Facing Squarely the Full Horrors of the Belgian African Past.

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: ...

A time to be silent and a time to speak,

A time to tear and a time to mend ..."

Book of Ecclesiastes

Sometimes one can apologize for something, and it serves as a veil on what truly transpired, especially now when political correctness is the vogue and that the offending event happened 130 years ago. It is correct to finally take issue with the **1894 Word Fair** where Congolese villagers were displayed in a human zoo in a square in front of the Antwerp's Museum of Fine Arts. The exhibit's main purpose was to provide proof to King Leopold II's subjects that the primitive Congolese were a "people that needed civilizing." More than one million people came to see this celebration of the Congo and 267 Congolese natives lived on display in a staged habitat that featured a river village, forest village and a 'civilized village' where the Black natives wore European clothes. At least seven of the African 'natives' died during the Antwerp fair, and they are buried in a common grave at the nearby Schoonselhof cemetery. In September 2022, over sixty academics, writers, and activists signed a petition to contextualize the colonial inappropriateness of the world fair. The Royal Museum of Fine Arts had undergone significant renovations and was set to reopen the following week. The group is seriously calling on the city officials to give the long-forgotten drama a memorial plaque in the *square* in front of the museum property to commemorate the peoples of the African Congo. The sixty or so signatories of the petition hope to bring attention to the inhumanity of the past event and not to hide from passerby's and patrons the past 'colonial shadow' that had befallen the popular museum's frontal real estate. It is a cordial thing to propose, and I do not question their sincerity but it 'wallpapers over' the historical truth by implying that there is an equivalency in criticizing the racial past insensitivity with the magnitude of the recognition and atonement that is required by today's Belgians. It's like apologizing for 'Buffalo' Bill Cody's use of native Indians as part of his grand Wild West show that opened in Nebraska in 1883 but not mentioning the continent-wide subjugation of Native Americans during the 18th and 19th century where they were forced on to American reservations after their native lands were taken, they were murdered, and their life-sustaining buffalo herds that numbered into the scores of millions were decimated. The African holocaust in King Leopold's Belgian Congo attrited the native population by an estimated ten million natives after cruelly forcing them to be slaves for the king's greed. Belgium is not alone in their contrived unspoken silence about what we try to forget. In Paris and Lisbon there are also no monuments to their own pernicious African rubber industries, modeled after Leopold's profitable enterprise in the Congo; in Berlin there are no museum exhibits of remembrances for the slaughtered Hereros killed in the tens of thousands by German soldiers. There would be no memorials there for victims of the Jewish holocaust if Nazi Germany had won or negotiated a peace to somehow remain intact.

Leopold's Congo and its brutal exploitation in pursuit of ivory and wild rubber is whitewashed not only by those Belgians who do not want to be painted by the dark sins of their forebears but is aided by the Africans themselves who have little collective memory of the ivory and rubber terror. The history of slavery and colonization is all too often ignored. The tribal oral traditions are more in line with mythologizing tribal kings, dynasties and celebrating warrior bravery and victories. But the legacy of such a past, today in Africa, is more of the cause of division and conflict than we admit. A paradigm of greed and thievery that is bolstered by those whose goal is not only to eschew 'collective guilt' but to make others forget or never learn of such misdeeds so that those that unjustly profited never have their memories or legacies tarnished. Defensive Belgians point out the post-Columbian deaths of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and the depopulation due to wild rubber harvesting in the adjoining central African countries run by France, Germany, and Portugal. In today's Namibia, the Germans killed many without the pretense of bringing civilization to the Herero tribes who had rebelled in 1904 after much of their territory had been absconded by the colonists. The Germans sent in heavily armed troops that implemented an extermination order openly declared by Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha: "Within the German boundaries every Herero, whether found with or without a rifle, with or without cattle, shall be shot...no male prisoners will be taken." Soldiers bayoneted, clubbed, stabbed, shot to death victims while poisoning dug wells and waterholes, and then driving the dispossessed survivors into the dry desert to perish from thirst and hunger. Of the 80, 000 tribal men, women, and children in 1903, less than 20,000 landless survivors lived on by 1906. Internationally the genocide brought only silence although there were scattered protests in Germany, but the Germans were never sensitive to protests about killing their enemies in mass as the future would prove all too readily. In France's equatorial African holdings, almost all areas of the rubber-bearing rain forest were divided among the French concession companies. The rape and brutality incurred rose to the level practiced by the Belgians, although the impact was less because the rubber-bearing territory in the hands of France was of far lesser size. The population loss in these French holdings is estimated at one-half of all natives, rivalling the depopulation rates in Belgian-controlled central Africa. As in Leopold's holdings, the French and German African territories were wracked by long, violent uprisings against the worse practices of the imposed rubber industry. King Leopold II also by the way of strawmen and shell-corporations owned big blocks of stocks in European concession corporations operating in the French Congo and Germany's Cameroon which was discovered when Belgian authorities tried to untangle his finances after his death. Fearing that the French and Germans would be upset with such news of the foreign king's control the bureaucrats in Brussels kept the matter quiet, they did not sell his substantial stock holdings until the 1920s. There were forced labor and slavery in the rubber industry in Portuguese Angola. All colonial concession companies or government enterprises in central Africa followed the 'Belgian model' that had started a decade earlier and was considered an inspiration in reaping dividends for risk-taking investors that had ponied up venture capital. In addition, Britain avoided international criticism for the broadscale extermination of Aboriginal people in Australia, and the world also remained uncritical when American troops fought a counterinsurgency war in the Philippines that killed 20, 000 rebels and left ten times that number of Filipinos dead from sickness or starvation.

From the colonial era, Africa was left not with the tradition of democracy as institutionalized in France, Italy, Netherlands, Britain, Belgium, and the likes, but by authoritarian rule and the plunder of natural resources; often the riches of Africa are funneled to a small oligarchy loyal to the dictatorial ruler like they were in King Leopold's time and place. And those Africans that did prosper did so by becoming agents of the ruling class by collaborating with the European colonists. It is an oversimplification to

blame Africa's troubles on European imperialism but distorting the written record by press censorship, book-banning and having the former colonizers writing school textbooks is counterproductive even if it suppresses or twists the foul taste of the historical record into swallowable pabulum. The only thing that can set the perpetrators and their victims finally 'free' is the process of healing which begins with the truth. In the Congo as well as in Belgium, textbooks custom written to indoctrinate schoolchildren about King Leopold II's good works persisted for over a half-century after his death. Today, in Antwerp and Brussels some conscientious people who hear of the far-reaching atrocities in Africa are embarrassingly apologetic about their ignorance because they were duped by the 'sin of omission' in their private or public-school curriculum. Others are intent to continue the legacy of denial that they feel their patriotism demands. Exclaimed a former Belgian prime minister: "The colonial past is completely past. There is no emotional link anymore ...it is history." It is analogous to the 'Jim Crow' South in America where statutes commemorate the valor of Confederate racists, traitors, rebel insurrectionists, and small-town historical societies sponsor bake-sales to preserve the architecture of Southern plantation manors. The false portrayal minimizes the brutality and inhumanity of the slave economy of the antebellum American South. Its goal is to mask what really happened and reframe it so that those who profited, even the long dead, never get their just comeuppance, at least in the minds of the apologists, less scholarly, blissfully ignorant or the willingly gullible. More importantly it allows those of privilege to defiantly disown any thoughts that they or their families are not deserving by recasting their family's legacy from outrageous exploitation of others into a cultural asset of genteel nobility. Nobility and elitism trump fair play and decency. It is part of our Darwinian evolutionary inheritance. We see hunting African lions as noble beasts, as rightful rulers of their jungle or savannah domains. It is our evolutionary history that attracts us to this anthropomorphic perspective of the big-cats natural behavior as proof of their right to dominate other species. "The lion and tiger do not apologize to the sheep." It bolsters our view that the strong among us can take from the weak with impunity or without guilt. The cats simply follow what they through biological evolution have successfully become to survive and reproduce. Their hunting prowess in Darwinian terms is no more meant to be a claim to leadership or entitlement than that of a lowly fish who lives by eating algae or pond-scum. The selfish among us use Darwinian falsehoods to eschew human altruism in keeping societies cohesive and functioning.

In 2005, the Royal Museum of Central Africa mounted an exhibit that was highly promoted although temporary: "*Memory of the Congo: The Colonial Era.*" It was prompted by calls for significant changes to how the colonial past has never been addressed in Belgium due to a campaign of denial and by emphasizing the contributions made by Belgians to ensuring peace today in Africa. American author Adam Hochschild of *King Leopold's Ghost* vividly points out the shortcomings for both the exhibit and the illustrated book that accompanies it, as a ruse that illustrates "how to pretend to acknowledge something without really doing so." Only four small black-and-white grainy photos among the hundreds exhibited showed any abusive practices, the term 'hostage' appears nowhere at all and there is absolutely no reference to the forced labor system or King Leopold's duplicity in hiding the extraordinary scope of the abuse needed to reap astounding levels of profit. His whitewashing 'Commission of Inquiry' conducted in 1904-1905 is hailed by the museum embarrassingly as "a pioneering initiative in the history of human rights in Central Africa."

What was not realized by King Leopold and his Belgian agents who exploited the biological and botanical resources of the Congo was that the true treasure lay below their feet. Revenues from wild rubber dropped precipitously from 1910 onward and by 1928 represented just one percent [1 %] of Congolese

exports, down almost 90% from that exported at the turn of the century. Mining, which despite needing massive investment for the extraction and processing of ore received financing from the Belgian state and private capital, timely displaced the atrophied wild rubber industry. Manual labor was supplied by the natives for almost no Belgian did any physical work other than supervisory management. Diamonds, gold, uranium, manganese, copper, anthracite coal, zinc, tin, tantalum, wolfram, timber, cobalt and especially coltan that rivals the price of precious metals for its value in today's computer-chips, were and many still are the natural resources craved by worldwide growing industries. The fighting and rape of the Congo's natural resources has continued unabated with little of the riches trickling down to the common people; the Mobutu regime used King Leopold's framework to manipulate the economy to enrich themselves, and the quality of life experienced by much of the Congolese population was far worse when his dictatorial reign ended than when the Belgian regency ended in 1960. Multinational corporations have also profited handsomely by bribing officials and cooperating with different factional armies who profit from extracting wealth from the country by monopolizing the control of the country's resources. Westerners pouring guns and armaments into Africa is reckless. During the 1990s the United States shamelessly poured over \$200 million of training and equipment into six of the seven military contingencies fighting in the civil war that wracked the Congo. Most of the dead from the battling between competing forces are ordinary men, women and children, victims of the crossfire of internecine warfare fought over the riches and not over religion nor ideology. Combat shifts from one prized mining region to the next as the commodity prices rise and fall. For the Congo, its great storehouse of mineral treasure and its parade of dysfunctional governments has been catastrophic. With few schools or jobs, public workers including the police who receive little or no regular pay, millions of handguns circulating and militias that are self-financed by the underground sales of what is mined or smuggled, the people's plight remains dire. Without honest regulation and efficacious tax collection, the riches gleaned from the natural resources circumvent raising the prosperity of the Congolese citizenship.

Denial of the past condemns humanity to repeat the same mistakes and despite the awfulness of King Leopold II's reign, its obfuscation by Belgians just extends the folly. We despite our stupendous technological advances, at our worse are ignoble beasts. Our evolutionary inheritance where individual greed and tribal parochial interest undermine even a low common denominator of decency directed toward the universal good has led to competition among European and Asian industrial and trading powers for natural resources that has often been apocalyptic as evidenced by World Wars I and II. We must demand a new accounting where competition for profit must coincide with avoiding the cataclysmic consequences to a just social order, a sustainable environment, and a prosperous but realistic achievable global economy. International efforts must be made to develop a framework where the strong and weak can co-exist and the fate of all can be uplifted. Equality for all is infeasible but unfettered private gain without regard to preserving the best of our modern world is destructive. We must adamantly squelch all predators that prey on the dispossessed with force if required for to do nothing is an existential threat to our species and the natural world. Migrants and refugees from warfare, hardship and detrimental climate change must be accommodated seamlessly. For we have but one viable planet and one common destiny despite our future 'sci-fi' hopes, dreams, and fantasies about discovering other inhabitable worlds that we can feasibly reach. We have achieved the nearly impossible, we now have the expertise and the means to destroy everything if we cannot come closer to the ideal of one for all, and all for one, and everyone must put the integrity of a functioning Earth, first. Perhaps wishful thinking steeped in naivete but nevertheless such sentiment rings true in that the torrent of dysfunctional ways of doing things and conducting business *must* change, quite soon! For we

are no longer the passengers on the *HMS Titanic* shouting warnings to the helmsman to Turn! Turn!
Turn! We are now the very iceberg posing a threat to every living thing on board our mothership.

Whatever is has already been,
And what will be, has been before;
And God will call the past to account.

-----Book of Ecclesiastes 3:15.

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October 10, 2022---Indigenous Peoples' Day

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