

Notes from the Underground

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The Historical Underground

The Congo Conflict, Part I

By: Bradley J. Borougerdi, Faculty

Greed, terror and heroism. It's not often that we hear these three words together in the same breath, but they capture the essence and emotion at the heart of a pivotal story of global capitalism that left millions dead. This cautionary and enthralling story should be required learning in any K-12 history class that also plans to study the Holocaust. These key words appear in the subtitle of Adam Hochschild's book, "King Leopold's Ghost," which tells a story so central to 20th-century global history that it is mind-boggling that hardly anyone knows about it. The book centers on the insatiable western appetite for resources that drove Europeans into the heart of Africa, zeroing in on the only region of the continent that came to be "owned" entirely by a single man – a man who would never step foot there in his entire life. This region is the Congo, and the man who seized it, sunk his claws into it, and drained so much life and wealth from it, was Leopold II, King of Belgium.

As King of a small European country that was less than a generation old, Leopold seems to have been driven by a sense of urgency for recognition. "Small country, small people," he reportedly said of Belgium, which was the size of West Virginia.



“There are even people today who call themselves historians that actually claim King Leopold was the best thing to

Not only was Belgium tiny, but it also lacked colonial territories and the stature and wealth that came with an empire. As a child, Leopold showed tremendous fascination with geography, which seems to have morphed into a desire to carve out his own slice of the world when he became King. He made good on this dream when he began realizing enormous profits from Congolese ivory and rubber, which he extracted via forced labor (i.e. – slavery). Ultimately though, no amount of money was enough to satisfy his hunger for wealth. He called this massive death camp the Congo Free State, which he successfully manipulated for years to look like a philanthropic endeavor designed to bring civilization to a people who the world considered primitive heathens. In reality, though, it was a holocaust, where Congolese people were forced into the jungle to extract the white liquid from the rubber vines that twisted deep into the trees and brush of one of the world's most highly concentrated areas of natural resources. In fact, Congolese people today are fond of saying that "we are cursed with too many resources," which transnational corporations still greedily seek to extract by any means necessary.

This deadly thirst for the Congo's commodities all began with the convergence of two powerful personalities: Leopold and his foot soldier, Henry

Morton Stanley. We don't have enough space here to dive into their complementary psychological makeup as deeply as Hochschild does, but suffice it to say that these two were a match made in heaven. Stanley's desire for recognition converged with Leopold's greed to wreak havoc on the Congo. In the King's name, the explorer who became a household name in America for his famous quote, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume," trudged over, around, and through a large region surrounding one of the world's largest potential sources of hydroelectric energy today: the Congo River. With his advanced weaponry, he enjoyably and enthusiastically mowed down the native communities of people he encountered, forcing chiefs to sign treaties they could not read or understand. These treaties ceded all of their land to the King. Although there were many sources of wealth that these men and their colonial henchman sought to extract from the Congo, the most devastating and deadly was what historians call Red Rubber. To be sure, the substance was white, so the adjective here refers to the untold gallons of blood that was spilled in its pursuit.

In the 1890s and early 1900s, this is how a typical scene in King Leopold's Congo would play out: a colonial crew would swarm into a village with soldiers, demanding that the villagers go into the forest to collect rubber by tapping into rubber vines, villagers would smear the substance all over their body until it dried, then return and peel it off their bodies so that it could be sent back to Europe to meet the voracious demand for industrial goods which the substance was used to create. Each village had a quota of wild rubber they were required to collect each day, or else colonial officials and soldiers would start chopping off people's hands. Women were held hostage, raped, and horribly mistreated until their men came back with the goods. Hired criminals were sent in to annihilate anyone who dared try to resist. In the end somewhere between 7 to 15 million were killed, with countless others incapacitated through mutilation. This carnage went on for years under the guise of philanthropy, with only a fraction of the western world speaking out against the atrocity. Those who did were usually silenced, but the persistent personalities of a few heroic figures ultimately prevailed, placing significant international pressure on Belgium to end the horror by the time Leopold died in 1910.

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Our Thought Process

By: Lauren Ewing, Student

Imagine, if you will, a philosophy major sitting in an American History class when the topic turns to The Age of Enlightenment. The proverbial gates open and a ray of light radiates upon the entire classroom. This historical time period was shaped by some of the most innovative philosophers, who truly freed the thought processes of all whom gave their time to listen. My mind is immediately taken back to the essay written by Immanuel Kant in 1784 titled, "What is Enlightenment." Pondering the essay sparked a thought; the generation in which I am categorized seems to have forgotten the messages of this inspirational time period. When you forget history you are more likely to repeat it. What I am referring to is not a repetition in the sense of wheels revolving (although that will also happen), but in the sense of becoming or reverting back to intellectual adolescence and not generating their own individual thought processes and understandings. In the essay Kant wrote, he

pointed out that "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. Dare to know! (Sapere aude.) The motto of Enlightenment is, therefore, "Have the courage to use your own understanding." Kant, in a sense, was calling for freedom, freedom from the restriction of tructuralized thinking. We do not lack intellectual capabilities; we lack the art of thought-individuality.

There are very few things in life which can be proven to be innate; something that is naturally bestowed upon all of mankind without experience – simply an ability one is born with. No rational individual can formulate an argument stating the ability to



think is not indeed innate. What does it mean to think? In the simplest of explanations, it is the voice one hears inside of their head;

some may think it is the very thing that makes them human; not in a biological way, but with emphasis on one's soul. It is, therefore, the process of formulating ideas and coming to conclusions before verbally communicating one's own understanding with others. We all must use the innate ability which has been bestowed upon us and think for ourselves. Following the will of others is the only way to ensure you will never be more than a carbon copy of a leader who spoke their mind and came to their own conclusions. Every leader may require followers; however, no one said you had to be an unthinking disciple.

The Congo Conflict, Continued...

However, as Hochschild points out in his book, Leopold's ghost lingered on in the Congo. The most devastating portion of the terror might have dissipated with his death, but the problems of exploitation and underdevelopment did not. By the 1960s, when Patrice Lumumba threatened to disrupt the financial dominance that European colonialism had been exerting over the Congo by daring to propose that his country become independent of Belgium and work towards using the Congo's resources for the Congolese people, he was assassinated by Belgium (with American support, I might add.) Today, some still fail to recognize these atrocities or categorize the killings of the turn-of-the-century as a holocaust. There are even people today who call themselves historians that actually claim King Leopold was the best thing to have happened to the Congo. With the

overwhelming evidence historians of empire have unearthed regarding imperialism and the worst excesses of capitalist exploitation, it is clear such ignorance is willful. Thus, not only is the story of the Congo a cautionary tale, so is the cognitive dissonance of those who deny physical and moral atrocity. We must be self-conscious of the fact that we are all susceptible to denying history if it offends our sensibilities. However, by recognizing and atoning for our misdeeds, perhaps we can begin to repair many of the internal and external rifts



Western powers have created over the past 500 years. In parting, I challenge all of you to ask yourself what you can do with your voice to advance awareness of the



devastation of the Congo, which is still taking place today. I suggest you start by reading the book.

The Unknown Known

“There are known knowns, there are known unknowns, there are unknown unknowns, but there are also unknown knowns, that is to say ... things you think you know, turns out you did not.” As you swirl that quote through your brain and let it marinate, allow me to inform you that it is from the youngest, oldest and only two-time Secretary of Defense – Donald Rumsfeld. The documentary, “The Unknown Known” (2013), opens with Rumsfeld’s thought-provoking expression and delves into the life, times, and philosophy of one of America’s most controversial political figures of the 21st century.

After graduating from Princeton and serving in the United States Navy, Rumsfeld entered politics at the tender age of 30. Early in his political life, Rumsfeld felt the necessity to dictate memos to himself so that he could stay on top of all that was happening in Congress and so that his staff would know exactly what he was thinking. He continued this practice throughout his career. During his last six years at the Pentagon, Rumsfeld recalled dictating more than 20,000 memos and imagined dictating millions of memos over his career.

The Unknown Known draws on these memos to highlight the Secretary of Defense’s inner thoughts before, during, and after catastrophic events in U.S. history. One particular eerie memo from July 23, 2001, a little more than a month before 9/11, was titled “Pearl Harbor Post-Mortem.” Throughout the memo, Rumsfeld expressed his concern about not wanting to stand before a panel of interrogators, having to answer the question, “Why weren’t we prepared [for an attack of some kind]?” In hindsight, Rumsfeld contended he in no way shape or form had any knowledge of an attack, even though he wrote the memo just before 9/11. Coincidence? Is Rumsfeld a reincarnate of Nostradamus? When questioned about this issue after 9/11, he simply retorted, “I have read enough history that I worried.”

At any rate, as Secretary of Defense, his knowledge of history greatly shaped his thoughts and ideology. At his confirmation

hearing for the position, Rumsfeld remembered being asked, “What do you worry about when you go to bed at night?” His answer was simple and to the point: “Intelligence.” See, Rumsfeld truly believed that an intelligent approach involves using the imagination to consider every possibility, and that the failure to utilize one’s imagination can lead to catastrophic events. In regards to Pearl Harbor, Rumsfeld contended, “We didn’t know we didn’t know; they could do what they did, the way they did it ... Pearl Harbor was a failure of imagination ... That one possibility they had not imagined, was likely.”

Shortly after taking office in 2001, Rumsfeld sent Condoleezza Rice a memo expressing his concern with the possibility of Saddam Hussein acquiring nuclear weapons. Then, in the wake of 9/11, Rumsfeld dictated a memo titled “Strategic Thoughts” (Sept. 30, 2001). In almost Truman Doctrine-fashion, the memo called for the United States to adopt the policy of aiding peoples to be free from terrorism and terrorist regimes. The memo also called for the terrorist-supporting regime in Afghanistan to be dismantled, pointing out that state-supported terrorism must be condemned, and any states with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) capabilities must be dismantled. The memo indicated an imminent conflict with Afghanistan, but also left the gun on the table for another possible conflict with Iraq due to Rumsfeld’s intelligence/imagination that Saddam Hussein might have WMDs.

Rumsfeld’s infatuation with imagination is that it anticipates every possibility and in essence justifies the pre-emptive strike approach of the George W. Bush administration. What is admirable about the use of imagination is its capacity to tackle the possible and considered-impossible wonders of our world. Surely, the imaginations of many great men and women have altered our lives for the better, especially the realm of science and technology. However, on the other side of the imagination-coin is the stark reality that its use in geopolitics implies conjuring situations and threats that don’t exist, which can lead to positive strategic moves, but also massive miscalculations and

mistakes. Amazingly, Rumsfeld echoes this sentiment when he states, “Belief in the inevitability of conflict can become one of its main causes.” Thus, just as surely as imagination can lead to great advances and strategies, it can just as surely lead us into catastrophic calamities with immeasurable human costs.

Ultimately, “The Unknown Known” is an absolutely fascinating documentary that opens the world and mind of Donald Rumsfeld to the viewer and might leave you with more unanswered questions than answers and he might actually prefer it that way. Towards the end of the documentary Rumsfeld is asked, “When you are in a position like Secretary of Defense, do you actually think you are controlling history or that history is controlling you?” Rumsfeld pauses then calmly replied, “Oh ... neither. Obviously you do not control history and you are failing if history controls you.”



“Belief in the inevitability of conflict can become one of its main causes.”



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Notes from the Underground

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“HISTORY IS OUR WEAPON OF CHOICE”



Join Us: Fridays/1 p.m./ESEE 1222

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers:

At long last, your first edition of the 4th volume of *Notes from the Underground* has arrived! OK, so it's a little over a month late, but we can assure you that it is not due to a lack of work on our part, but rather because of far too much work. It takes serious effort trying to spark a revolution, even if it is just a historical one.

We are excited to be back hitting the books and keyboard, and it feels particularly good because we have a new sponsor and editor, Joel Tovanche. As anyone who's been to the Underground on Fridays at 1 p.m. knows, having him on the team adds another dimension to the game. So far, we've come out swinging with topics on Iggy Azalea and white appropriation of blackness, code-switching, the so-called War on Drugs and U.S. America's deeply troubled relationship with them, the Ferguson fiasco, and musings over the economy, society, and culture in general. If you ask me, these meetings are the best place in town for some deep and powerful intellectual stimulation, so stop what you're doing and come get some. You can also find wonderfully insightful discussions during other time slots, such as the “King Leopold's Ghost” Book Workshop, or the variety of powerful presentations from our Historical Lecture Series this semester, which includes talks by Joel, Greg and Eric. TCC Southeast is really shaping up to be a premier Center for Cultural Studies.

This edition introduces the first installment of The Congo Conference Project which we have been planning since Dr. Didier Gondola from IUPUI came down and lit us up with his lecture, which is sure to open some minds. Some of you history students out there writing reviews of “King Leopold's Ghost” might want to get in on the action and draft up an article of whatever aspect of this history you want to be heard over, but you can certainly bet that more will come regardless. Shoot, if we get lucky we might have our first article written by a librarian, but you all are going to have to stay tuned for that. For now, though, we have two other articles about interesting topics. One comes from a new member of the Underground who got some philosophical musings for your mind on how best to utilize your “Enlightened” brain and get to thinking right, while the other explores a powerfully influential figure in American government through detailing a documentary that you absolutely must see. Together, these three articles show that we are hitting the ground running at the Underground this fall, opening another strong year of student/faculty collaboration on a unique and innovative project that seeks to establish a legacy and teach the community at large a powerful message: **Making Education Your Life Is Permanent Revolution!!!**

~ Bradley J. Borougerdi, Greg Kosci, Eric Salas, and Joel Tovanche