



# King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa

By Adam Hochschild

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## King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa By Adam Hochschild

In the 1880s, as the European powers were carving up Africa, King Leopold II of Belgium seized for himself the vast and mostly unexplored territory surrounding the Congo River. Carrying out a genocidal plundering of the Congo, he looted its rubber, brutalized its people, and ultimately slashed its population by ten million—all the while shrewdly cultivating his reputation as a great humanitarian. Heroic efforts to expose these crimes eventually led to the first great human rights movement of the twentieth century, in which everyone from Mark Twain to the Archbishop of Canterbury participated. King Leopold's Ghost is the haunting account of a megalomaniac of monstrous proportions, a man as cunning, charming, and cruel as any of the great Shakespearean villains. It is also the deeply moving portrait of those who fought Leopold: a brave handful of missionaries, travelers, and young idealists who went to Africa for work or adventure and unexpectedly found themselves witnesses to a holocaust. Adam Hochschild brings this largely untold story alive with the wit and skill of a Barbara Tuchman. Like her, he knows that history often provides a far richer cast of characters than any novelist could invent. Chief among them is Edmund Morel, a young British shipping agent who went on to lead the international crusade against Leopold. Another hero of this tale, the Irish patriot Roger Casement, ended his life on a London gallows. Two courageous black Americans, George Washington Williams and William Sheppard, risked much to bring evidence of the Congo atrocities to the outside world. Sailing into the middle of the story was a young Congo River steamboat officer named Joseph Conrad. And looming above them all, the duplicitous billionaire King Leopold II. With great power and compassion, King Leopold's Ghost will brand the tragedy of the Congo--too long forgotten--onto the conscience of the West.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Amazon.com Review**

King Leopold of Belgium, writes historian Adam Hochschild in this grim history, did not much care for his native land or his subjects, all of which he dismissed as "small country, small people." Even so, he searched the globe to find a colony for Belgium, frantic that the scramble of other European powers for overseas dominions in Africa and Asia would leave nothing for himself or his people. When he eventually found a suitable location in what would become the Belgian Congo, later known as Zaire and now simply as Congo, Leopold set about establishing a rule of terror that would culminate in the deaths of 4 to 8 million indigenous people, "a death toll," Hochschild writes, "of Holocaust dimensions." Those who survived went to work mining ore or harvesting rubber, yielding a fortune for the Belgian king, who salted away billions of dollars in hidden bank accounts throughout the world. Hochschild's fine book of historical inquiry, which draws heavily on eyewitness accounts of the colonialists' savagery, brings this little-studied episode in European and African history into new light. --*Gregory McNamee*

### **From Publishers Weekly**

Hochschild's superb, engrossing chronicle focuses on one of the great, horrifying and nearly forgotten crimes of the century: greedy Belgian King Leopold II's rape of the Congo, the vast colony he seized as his private fiefdom in 1885. Until 1909, he used his mercenary army to force slaves into mines and rubber plantations, burn villages, mete out sadistic punishments, including dismemberment, and commit mass murder. The hero of Hochschild's highly personal, even gossipy narrative is Liverpool shipping agent Edmund Morel, who, having stumbled on evidence of Leopold's atrocities, became an investigative journalist and launched an international Congo reform movement with support from Mark Twain, Booker T. Washington and Arthur Conan Doyle. Other pivotal figures include Joseph Conrad, whose disgust with Leopold's "civilizing mission" led to *Heart of Darkness*; and black American journalist George Washington Williams, who wrote the first systematic indictment of Leopold's colonial regime in 1890. Hochschild (*The Unquiet Ghost*) documents the machinations of Leopold, who won over President Chester A. Arthur and bribed a U.S. senator to derail Congo protest resolutions. He also draws provocative parallels between Leopold's predatory one-man rule and the strongarm tactics of Mobuto Sese Seko, who ruled the successor state of Zaire. But most of all it is a story of the bestiality of one challenged by the heroism of many in an increasingly democratic world. 30 illustrations. Agent: Georges Borchardt. First serial rights to American Scholar. Author tour.

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### **From Library Journal**

Having had two books named to LJ's Best Books list in the past?Half the Way Home in 1986 and *The Unquiet Ghost* in 1994?Hochschild wins the Triple Crown with this powerfully moving account of enslavement, mutilation, and murder in 19th-century Africa. Though it is not well known today, five to eight million African lives were lost when the Belgians colonized the Congo under King Leopold?a slaughter that, as Hochschild points out, proves Conrad's Mr. Kurtz to be no exaggeration. Hochschild is quietly devastating: he's got the facts, gleaned from prodigious research, and they speak?damningly?for themselves. (LJ)

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