

The Horrors of Belgium's Congo

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A latecomer to colonialism, King Leopold II of Belgium searched the world for a satellite to call his very own, finally finding his prey in the Congo region of Africa. Hiding his greed behind the twinned fictions of charity and philanthropy, the king entered the Congo with the help of the explorer Henry Morton Stanley and quickly strong-armed tribal chiefs into signing away their future. Soon after, representatives from Europe and the United States delivered the region - renamed the Congo Free State, later Zaire and now the Democratic Republic of Congo - into Leopold's rapacious care.

The ghastly story of Leopold's reign of terror in Africa during the late 19th- and early-20th centuries forms the subject of the documentary "Congo: White King, Red Rubber, Black Death," from the British filmmaker Peter Bate. Heavily loaded with information - including numbing accounts of countless atrocities - the film weaves together contemporary documentary material, archival photographs, talking-head interviews and, problematically, theatrical re-enactments featuring actors dressed in period costume. Although too compressed by half, the film manages to recreate what, at one point, the hectoring narrator will call an "archaeology of repression."

The scope of that repression is staggering. For Leopold, having a colony was the way to greatness and nothing would stand in the way of that greatness - or profits from the rubber trade: not morality, not decency, not God. Under his command, his soldiers engaged in what would now probably fall under the definition of genocide. In one of the documentary's most chilling moments, an actor coolly reads an excerpt from a diary kept by an officer under Leopold's command: "Village set on fire. Dinner then return." And there is the matter of mutilation: the king's soldiers, in a bid to stave off waste, were ordered to bring back a severed native hand for each cartridge they fired. The hands were later smoked and preserved.

Word of the Congo's misery eventually leaked into Europe and the king's evil was made public. Crowds booed his funeral cortege and another depressing chapter in African history seemed to close, though not for long. The narrator states that the statues of Leopold scattered throughout Belgium are "monuments to a nation's denial." This may be true, but the same could be said of most if not all such statues throughout the world. As the director of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium said matter-of-factly, "King Leopold also was a man of vision; you can strongly disagree with his vision, but he did have a vision." And then he adds, without a suggestion of irony that, of course, the Congo also brought "huge benefits."

Congo: White King, Red Rubber, Black Death

Opens today in Manhattan.

Written and directed by Peter Bate; produced by Paul Pauwels; narrated by Nick Fraser (in English, with subtitled French and Flemish dialogue); released by ArtMattan Productions. At the Quad Cinema, 34 West 13th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 84 minutes. This film is not rated.

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