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COMMENTARY

A Monument to Denial

By Adam Hochschild

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No country likes to come to terms with embarrassing parts of its past. Japanese schoolbooks still whitewash the atrocities of World War II, and the Turkish government continues to deny the Armenian genocide. Until about 1970, the millions of visitors to Colonial Williamsburg saw no indication that roughly half the inhabitants of the original town were slaves.

Until recently, one of the world's more blatant denials of history had been taking place at the Royal Museum of Central Africa, an immense, chateau-like building on the outskirts of Brussels. It was founded a century ago by Belgium's King Leopold II, who, from 1885 to 1908, literally owned the Congo as the world's only privately controlled colony. Right through the 1990s, the museum's magnificent collection of African art, tools, masks and weapons — among the largest and best anywhere, much of it gathered during the 23 years of Leopold's rule — reflected nothing of what had happened in the territory during that period. It was as if a great museum of Jewish art and culture in Berlin revealed nothing about the Holocaust.

The holocaust visited upon the Congo under Leopold was not an attempt at deliberate extermination, like the one the Nazis carried out on Europe's Jews, but its overall toll was probably higher. Soon after the king got his hands on the colony, there was a worldwide rubber boom, and Leopold turned much of the Congo's adult male population into forced labor for gathering wild rubber. His private army marched into village after village and held the women hostage to force the men to go into the rain forest, often for weeks out of each month, to tap rubber vines. This went on for nearly two decades.

Though Leopold made a fortune estimated at well over \$1 billion in today's dollars, the results were catastrophic for Congolese. Laborers were often worked to death, and many female hostages starved. With few people to hunt, fish or cultivate crops, food grew scarce. Hundreds of thousands of people fled the forced-labor regime, but deep in the forest they found little to eat and no shelter, and travelers came upon their bones for years afterward. Tens of thousands more rose up in

rebellion and were shot down. The birthrate plummeted. Disease — principally sleeping sickness — took a toll in the millions among half-starved and traumatized people who otherwise might have survived.

Leopold's murderous regime was exposed in its own day by a brave band of activists: American, British and Swedish missionaries, and a hard-working British journalist, E.D. Morel. Any historian of Africa knows the basic story, and many have written about parts of it.

In 1998, I finished a book on the subject, "King Leopold's Ghost," which was published in Belgium and drew furious denunciations from royalists and conservatives. The foreign minister sent a special message to Belgian diplomats abroad, counseling them on how to answer awkward questions from readers. Asked if the museum planned changes, a senior official of the Royal Museum of Central Africa replied that some were under study, "but absolutely not because of the recent disreputable book by an American."

The museum's current director, Guido Gryseels, caught between pressure from human rights activists on the one hand and rumored strong pressure from the government and the royal family on the other, several years ago appointed a commission of historians to study the Leopold period and determine just what did happen. The move won favorable press coverage, but was in essence an odd one: Usually commissions take evidence and hear witnesses; they don't study the distant past.

Under Gryseels, the museum has also gradually begun rewording signs on its exhibits, and several weeks ago opened a new exhibit, "Memory of Congo: the Colonial Era," accompanied by a catalog, a thick, lavishly illustrated coffee-table book of several dozen scholarly articles.

Judging from the latter, the museum has pulled its head out of the sand — but only part way. There are a few atrocity photos, but they are far outnumbered by pictures of dancers, musicians and happy black and white families. The catalog is rife with evasions and denials. The commission of historians, for instance, sets the loss of population during the most brutal colonial period at 20%. This ignores the fact that in 1919 an official body of the Belgian colonial government estimated the toll at 50%. And that the Belgian-born Jan Vansina, professor emeritus of history and anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and widely regarded as the greatest living student of Central African peoples, makes the same estimate today.

One wall panel at the new museum exhibit raises — and debunks — the charge, "Genocide in the Congo?" But this is a red herring: No reputable scholar of the Congo uses the word. Forced labor is different from genocide, though both can be fatal. Most of all, it is strange to see the catalog's articles on the bus system of Leopoldville, Congo national parks and the Congo visit of a Belgian crown prince, but not a single piece on the deadly forced labor system.

Belgium is not alone in failing to face up to its own history. All countries mythologize their pasts and confront the worst of it only slowly. But once they do, there are positive discoveries as well as painful ones. When I went to school in the 1950s, I never heard the name Frederick Douglass, but

my children, who went in the 1980s, did.

The Royal Museum of Central Africa has similar figures it could celebrate. Stanlislas Lefranc was a devout Catholic and monarchist who went to the Congo 100 years ago to work as a magistrate. In pamphlets and newspaper articles he later published in Belgium, he spoke out bravely against the cruelties he witnessed. Jules Marchal, who died recently, was a Belgian diplomat in Africa who, in his spare time, wrote the definitive history of forced labor in the Congo, much of it based on years of searching files for duplicate copies of documents that King Leopold had ordered destroyed. Both men were shunned and ostracized in their time. Confronting the past is not just about acknowledging guilt, but rediscovering heroes.

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