

The wealth of Africa Congo Free State

Teachers' notes



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THE WEALTH OF AFRICA: USING THESE RESOURCES

This educational resource consists of 16 sets of resources on African civilisations, countries and themes.

Each set of resources includes:

- Teachers' notes
- Students' worksheets
- A presentation

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Teachers' notes

These are intended to provide background material for teachers, but can also be referred to by students who want more contextual information.

Students' worksheets

These are stand-alone worksheets which can be downloaded as classroom resources or viewed on the interactive whiteboard. They are self-contained, with tasks and questions and a limited number of sources in which the language has been slightly amended to make them more accessible to the likely reading ages of the students. They are also designed to be used independently of the teacher, e.g. for homework.

If teachers do not wish to spend more than one or two lessons on Congo Free State, then the sheets will prove ideal for small project work, with groups of students taking one sheet, finding interesting and relevant information, and reporting back to the rest of the class. A specimen lesson plan along these lines is given below.

Presentation

This provides a simpler and more visual introduction to the topic. It contains some of the images and sources found in the other sections, and can be shown on the whiteboard or used at home to give an overview of the main topics covered.

Your feedback

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LESSON SCHEME: CONGO FREE STATE IN AN HOUR

Aim

To decide whether Leopold mismanaged the Congo Free State or not.

Starter: Impressions of the Congo Free State

Scroll quickly through the images in the presentation, and get feedback from students on their first impressions, especially on what they consider Leopold's rule to have been like. (10 minutes)

Research

Divide the class into groups with one group per resource sheet. Each group has to look at the question at the top of the sheet, and decide on the answer by studying the sources. The group should note 5–10 relevant facts that it can feed back to the rest of the class as evidence of its answer. (20 minutes)

Feedback

Each group feeds back its findings, opinion and evidence to the rest of the class, who could take notes. (15 minutes)

Discussion

The central question of the effects of Leopold's rule can be debated, whether there were any benefits to being colonised, who did well out of it etc. (15 minutes)

Homework

e.g. Argue the case for or against Leopold.

CONGO FREE STATE 1885–1908: TEACHERS' NOTES

Introduction

The life of the Congo Free State was mercifully brief. Even in its short existence it managed to take onto itself the mantle of almost everything that was bad about European colonialism. It became even then, when colonial enthusiasm was at its height, a byword for greed, cruelty, hypocrisy and exploitation.

Joseph Conrad, one of the most esteemed novelists of his generation, had travelled to the Congo Free State, and wrote vividly of what he saw. His searing novel *Heart of Darkness* has become a metaphor for the mystery, horror and sheer impenetrability of Africa to European eyes. The title contains many levels of meaning, from the darkness of the jungle, the unknown heart of the continent, to the depths of human behaviour. It was intended by its creator as a comment on the Europeans and, more particularly, King Leopold II of the Belgians.

Why study the Congo Free State?

The history of the Congo Free State is an interesting case study in colonialism in its own right, and perhaps a pointer to the subsequent troubled history of the nation. It is also an object lesson in the dark side of European behaviour in Africa and it serves as a point of comparison with other colonial experiences.

For students of History in the Key Stage 3 English National Curriculum, it provides a stark and dramatic tale to illustrate the negative side of colonialism, and as such could be used as a contrast to other examples. It could be used to show that the abolition of the slave trade did not necessarily lead to a better experience for Africans at the hands of Europeans. It could also be used to illustrate the historical background to the modern problems of the country.

In terms of the wealth of Africa, the Congo Free State is an example of exploitation. The wealth of the Congo could be measured in terms of its raw materials – in this case rubber and ivory, as well as mineral resources and metals. The extraction of these products, with virtually no attempt to see them as sustainable resources (as per the human assets), nor as opportunities for reinvestment, is an example of how Africa has been robbed of its wealth for short-term gain.

Geography

The Congo Free State was (and the modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo is) one of the largest territorial units on the continent. It occupied much of the centre of Africa, with only a small outlet to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. The central and northern parts consist principally of dense bush, with small pockets of fertile land. The south is mainly savannah. The bush is largely impenetrable, and the only sure means of communication throughout the country is by river, notably the Congo, one of the mightiest watercourses of the continent.

The main problem with the Congo is that it is not navigable throughout its whole length, and the most vital part – the length between Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) and the coast – is broken up by a series of cataracts. Building a railway from the sea to the navigable reaches was, therefore, an essential undertaking.

The country was, and is, extraordinarily rich in raw materials. The Katanga region in the south contains an array of minerals, among which copper and diamonds are notable.

History

The history of the Congo Free State is very much bound up with one man, King Leopold II of the Belgians. An intelligent and ambitious man, he had been interested in the possibilities of colonies throughout much of his life. Belgium was then the second-most industrialised country in Europe, with a large population, much of which was well educated. Leopold saw a national need to provide an outlet for the talents of these people, as well as a source for investment and raw materials. Judging by his subsequent behaviour, he combined these aims with the less laudable ones of personal enrichment and prestige in terms of the glorification of his name through public works and the acquisition of territory that would put him on a level with the other crowned heads of the Great Powers.

The systematic and determined way he went about achieving this ambition was remarkable, given the lower status of Belgium and its King when compared to the other European powers. In 1876 he organised a geographical conference in Brussels, to which he invited luminaries from all the major countries. Emphasising his philanthropic ambitions for the Congo, as yet relatively unknown to Europeans given its distance from the coast, and his stated desire to end the slave trade in the region, he managed to found the International African Association and had himself elected president.

Leopold now turned to more practical measures. He financed the American explorer Stanley to travel up the Congo from its mouth, building roads and trading posts and concluding agreements with local rulers. Opposite him, on the north bank of the river, the French explorer de Brazza was doing the same and a race developed to reach Stanley Pool above the cataracts. Stanley was second, but nevertheless set up the post of Leopoldville on the south bank in 1882.

By 1884, Leopold managed to persuade the USA to recognise the claims of the International African Association (which he had reformulated to become the International Association of the Congo) to the rest of the Congo, but he still needed European approval. He did this in a typically cunning way, offering France an option to all the IAC territory if it should become available. By agreeing, France not only implicitly recognised Leopold's rights, but also committed itself to defending him against Britain. At the Berlin Conference of 1884–5, called to discuss the issue, Germany chose to support France (and Leopold) against Britain. In 1885 the Congo Free State was born.

The result of the Berlin Conference was that the Congo was granted not to a country, Belgium, but to a company, the IAC, which effectively meant Leopold. Paying lip service to the free trade clauses of the Berlin Act, he divided the Congo Free State into two areas – the smaller one would allow free trade, the larger (the *domaine privé*) would be private.

In 1901, Leopold removed 100,000 square miles from the free trade area and declared it the *Fondation de la Couronne*, in which all profits would go directly to him. Much of this money he spent on beautifying Brussels, but a large amount was later discovered in one of his private accounts.

Economy

The first decade of the Congo Free State was disastrous for Leopold. He had taken out large loans to finance his ambitions, and was receiving very little in return. He was saved by the worldwide demand for rubber, principally for pneumatic tyres for bicycles and motor cars which were selling in huge numbers. The Congo Free State was rich in wild rubber, and Leopold granted huge concessions to a few companies to exploit this resource. The most notorious was Abir – the Anglo-Belgian India-Rubber Company.

Leopold used Abir and the Belgian state to ensure that rubber was collected speedily and efficiently. Belgian officials found that their main administrative functions consisted of ensuring that the strict quotas of rubber collection were adhered to, whether this was for Leopold directly or for concessions like Abir in which he had a 50% share. Very quickly the rubber vines which, unlike trees, were not tapped but pulled up, were exhausted around the villages, and local people had to trek further and further into the bush to find fresh supplies.

Villagers were taxed in collected rubber, and those that were unwilling or unable were given sharp lessons by the militia – the Force Publique – some of whom were rumoured to be cannibals. Huts might be burnt, women kidnapped, men shot and their hands cut off. These abuses were hushed up by a mixture of blackmail – officials earned bonuses to top up a meagre salary according to the amount of rubber they collected, and thus quickly became complicit – and the sheer inaccessibility of the country. Stories that did get out were either hushed up, even by officials in Britain, or successfully prosecuted in the libel courts.

The end of the Congo Free State

One who did believe the stories coming out of the Congo was a Liverpool shipping clerk, E D Morel, who worked for a company which did business with the territory. He noticed that while huge amounts of raw materials were coming out of the Congo into Europe, the only things going in the other direction seemed to be guns and other ordnance unconnected with the business of supplying a colony. He was so disturbed by his findings that he resigned, and devoted his time to publicising the issue. By 1903 he had managed to persuade the British government to instruct their consul in the Congo Free State, Roger Casement, to tour the territory and report on what he saw. The following year, Casement and Morel were among those who founded the Congo Reform Association, and the result of the report and their campaigns forced even Leopold to instigate a Belgian commission of enquiry, which confirmed the abuses. In 1908, in a typically cunning deal, Leopold effectively sold the Congo Free State to Belgium, which renamed it the Belgian Congo.

The costs

Given the lack of effective censuses, it is difficult to estimate how many died under Leopold's rule. Figures run as high as 20 million, well over half the population, but these numbers, even if correct, cannot all be attributed to his brutality. The epidemic of sleeping sickness, which affected almost all the sub-Saharan countries during these years, caused enormous mortality. Yet the precise figures are possibly immaterial – the photographs of mutilated victims, the burnt villages, and the findings of the commissions of enquiry are evidence enough of one of the bleakest episodes in African, and European, civilisation.

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