

How did the Force Publique exercise an intense regime of terror to control the Congolese Natives during the Congo Free State?

During King Leopold II reign of the Congo Free State, the Congolese natives were controlled to a significant extent through an intense regime of terror. As a way of controlling the Congo natives, and using their labour as a mechanism of economic gain, the 'Force Publique' tortured and killed millions of individuals. By examining evidence of the Congo atrocities that took place, it is visible that an unnecessary amount of torture, abuse and damage was inflicted upon the Congolese natives for the sole purpose of collecting and selling rubber for an insurmountable profit. Despite the large amount of evidence provided to showcase the terror Congolese people face, many Belgium citizens still believe that the Congo Free State was beneficial for the Congo natives, showcasing the continuation of colonial perspectives throughout modern Europe.

The Force Publique was a Congolese army and police force that operated during the duration of the Congo Free State (1885-1908). The Force Publique was a private army employed by King Leopold II, to control the labour and behaviours of native Congolese people. Soldiers were taught to use unorthodox methods of punishment to control the Congolese natives through maim, torture and murder. ***'These black soldiers, many of whom are slaves, exercise the power of life and death. They are ignorant and cruel, because they do not comprehend the natives; they are imposed upon them by the State [...] They are the greatest curse the country suffers now'*** (Mertens 2016, p. 13). In a text written by Charlotte Merten in 2016, called 'Sexual Violence in the Congo Free State: Archival Traces and Present Reconfigurations', a reference is made to Roger Casement and his statement that it was both the white and black soldier's who ***"never made any concealment that in committing these acts they were but***

obeying the positive orders of their superiors". This statement showed that the motivation behind the Force Publique's methods of punishments, were to control the natives, and their labour, as a way of making economic profit.

The regime of terror used within the Congo Free State was intensified using methods of torture, including the mutilation of Congolese hands. During the time of the Congo Free State the hands of Natives were severed off to show officials that a bullet was used for its intended purpose, murder. ***'To be certain about the use of bullets, the guards were instructed to cut off the right hand of each person they killed and return it to the European officials, who would tally the hands against the number of bullets used.'*** (Thompson 2002, p. 147). Photographs taken by Alice Seeley Harris, a human rights photographer, who visited the Congo Free State, revealed evidence that ***'clever forest guards would simply cut off the hands from living people'*** (Thompson 2002, p. 147), as a result of missing a target or keeping the ammunition for other uses. One of Harris' photos, Source 1, shows a Congolese man and child during the time of the Free State, who had both had their right hand removed whilst still being alive. The severing of Congolese hands, what once began as a symbol of murder, slowly became a form of currency throughout the Congo, and as a result hundreds of natives had their hands forcibly removed by the Force Publique.

During a time when the Congo was being oppressed for its cheap labour and bountiful resources, thousands of natives were killed. As a punishment for refusal to collect rubber and Ivory for the European officials, the Force Publique would kill natives and use these killings as examples for the other Congolese people. ***"If a village refused to submit to the rubber regime state or company troops or their allies sometimes shot everyone in sight, so that***

nearby villages would get the message....”(Jalata, A., 2013, p. 24). ‘Heart of Darkness’ a famous novel by Joseph Conrad, based on Joseph’s true venture to the Congo Free State reveals the ways in which Stations and European officials would display the heads of dead Congolese people in front of their houses to scare other natives into following European rule. **‘Those heads on the stakes...black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids... dream of that eternal slumber’** (Conrad, J., 1899 p. 71-72). Murder was a form of punishment commonly used by the Force Publique to control the labour of Natives. It was an extremely reliable way to control and terrorize natives into fearing, and following European rule.

Throughout the Congo Free State, all members of the Congolese native population were affected by the regime of terror, to a significant extent. Women and children, as well as men, were stolen, held captive, killed, raped and mutilated, when rubber quotas were not met, or sometimes due to the cruel nature of the officers who were hired into the Force Publique. **‘...I have seen women, and children summarily arrested, taken away from their homes and families, to be kept in wholly illegal and painful detention...’** (Morel, E., 1905). **‘While the white man killed people, he made others prisoner, and cut off hands and feet.’** (Mertens 2016, p. 10). Another image taken by Alice Seely Harris, and the text which accompanied it in *‘Don’t Call Me Lady: The Journey of Lady Alice Seely Harris’*, showed how women and children were used to punish Native Congolese men when quotas weren’t met. Source 2, shows the image of Nsala taken in 1904 staring at the severed hand and foot of his daughter. In Harris’ account she shared Nsala’s story, **‘She was five years old....But they weren’t finished. Then they killed his wife too. And because that didn’t seem quite cruel enough, quite strong enough to make their case, they cannibalized both Boali and her mother. And they presented Nsala with the tokens, the leftovers from the once living body of his darling**

child whom he so loved.' (Rare Historical Photos 2016). By stealing children and woman from villages, murdering them, raping them, mutilating them and holding them captive, European officials and the Force Publique were able to terrorize men into following orders.

It is estimated that through the Force Publique's intense regime of terror roughly half the native population were killed, despite Belgium's continuous denial, and King Leopold II promise of maintaining slave bans. For King Leopold II to gain ownership of the Congo, he had to promise the rest of Europe that he would never embark in slavery. The King had over 500 Congolese chiefs sign treaties, despite not knowing what the documents were, and as a result was able to gain ownership of the Congo, it's land, it's people and it's resources (Turner, D. and Kane, C., 2019.). Even though there are countless sources of evidence that showcase the mutilation, murder, oppression and destruction of Congolese Natives through the Force Publiques regime of terror, for years Belgium officials have claimed King Leopold II, his colonial administrators and European officials only used humanitarian motives to colonise the Congo. In an article written by the Guardian in 1999, 'Professor Jean Stengers, a leading historian of the period' was quoted saying, ***'Terrible things happened, but...It is absurd to say so many millions died...Leopold did not start genocide...we reformed the Congo and had a decent administration there.'*** (Bates, S., 1999). Evidence from a variety of sources showcase the ways in which King Leopold II used the Force Publique, and a regime of terror to control the Congolese Natives, but despite this there are still many people who contest the atrocities of the Congo Free State.

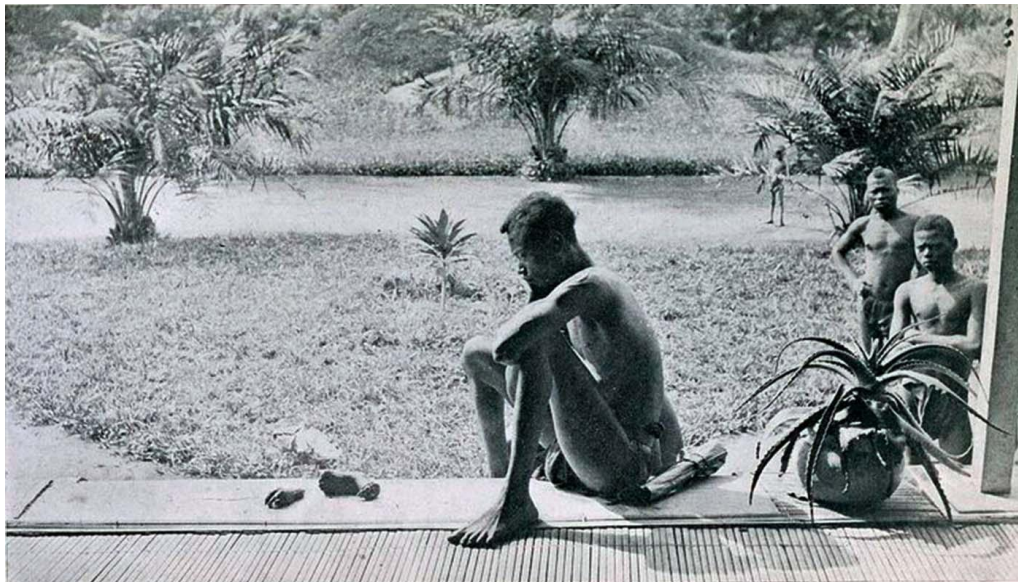
The Regime of Terror enforced by the European Officials and Force Publique onto the native Congolese people, controlled society to a significant extent. The Force Publique was the army/police force employed by the Congo Free State to control the behaviours and labour of

Congolese natives. Through mutilating the hands of Natives, European Officials were able to control the ways in which their ammunition was used by Force Publique officers. By taking countless native lives and using the bodies of the dead as examples for other natives, the European Officials were able to terrorize the Congolese. Although many Belgians contest to the genocide that took place within the Congo, there are insurmountable sources of evidence to showcase the atrocities that took place, and how it affected all aspects of the native population. By using their regime of terror, King Leopold II's Force Publique was able to maintain control, and gain extensive profits, through the forced labour, and oppression, of Native Congolese People.

Sources:



Source 1 - Photograph taken by Alice Seeley Harris, of two Congolese Natives whose hands have been removed. (Monovisions 2019)



Source 2 - Photograph taken by Alice Seeley Harris in 1904 of Nsala, a Congolese man staring at the severed hand and foot of his daughter. (Rare Historical Photos. 2016.)

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