

The Congo Free State, In Search of the Historical Truth

Elevator pitch

For the first time the history of Congo Free State is presented on the basis of documents from direct eyewitnesses of the time and following an approach based on the constituent elements as existing in every State (genesis and international recognition, authorities, legislative, executive and judiciary, population, public order, setting the borders, etc.)

Short description

Today's Democratic Republic of the Congo has its origins in the sovereign pre-colonial state known as the Congo Free State (CFS). The CFS itself emerged following the dramatic birth of the kingdom of Belgium in 1830 and reactions to William I of Orange's armed forces invading Belgium in August 1831.

The Dutch assault had revealed the precariousness of Belgian resources, compared to countries which had already acquired the greater part of their colonial empires in Africa and elsewhere by that time. This prompted Leopold I to look for means of replacing the assets lost during the separation from Holland. Using his own funds, he financed several expeditions and attempts at settling in Central America and Africa – albeit without success – and passed this ideal on to his son, Leopold II, who would succeed him on 17 December 1865. The expeditions organized by the new king were equally unfruitful, however. That was until Anglo-American explorer Henry M. Stanley was rather poorly received in London following a memorable east-to-west crossing of the African continent in 1877. This snub led him to respond to an invitation from Leopold II, who agreed to fund the famous explorer's further expeditions.

Arriving at the mouth of the Congo River, one soon came across numerous countries claiming free access to the river which was compared to the Danube. This, in fact, was what in 1885 prompted the famous Berlin Conference, the goal of which was not to partition Africa but to draw up rules that would prevent conflict between those countries and thus avert any repercussions in Europe. In this book, the author describes how the concept and international agreement of spheres of influence – still in use today in international politics.

The Congo Free State, which Leopold II had designed as a free confederation of black peoples, encountered numerous problems. The various chapters of this book relate these problems, helping the reader to discover that the Batetela never actually rebelled, that the creation of a huge Muslim caliphate in the east of the CFS was only narrowly averted, and that traditional barbarism and the practice of cannibalism in certain areas – to which even small children fell victim – were yet to be eradicated. In his search for historical accuracy, the author attempts to discern myth from reality concerning the atrocity of the cut-off hands, a story constantly retold in the media alongside various erroneous accusations and, already in 1904, falsified photographs. Regarding Roger Casement, British Consul and, particularly, Irish hero, the author demonstrates that the content of his report was far less important than the actual purpose of his British attorney through this action.

And, last but not least, the book reveals that on a political level, the authorities had to defend the CFS against the greed of those who, with official endorsement, campaigned for a new partition of the Congo Basin.

English edition

For three main reasons this English version is an update of the French version published by Dynamedia Edition (www.dynamedia.be), specialized in the Belgian period in Congo : to incorporate for the first time some unpublished documents in their original English form; to improve the English version with texts that are not in the French version, and to make the result of this search of the historical truth, worldwide available to English speaking people without having to refer to the French text less complete and not easily available in the Anglo-American world.

Audience and market

Given the current tensions in several countries between communities, associations and action committees based on religion, race or politics, some authorities with responsibilities will need to be better informed regarding the past.

The historical truth is particularly interesting the people of the United States because it is the heritage of its large African American population involved in the civil rights movement. Descendants of former slaves will find this book very helpful, especially people in search of their roots, and the general public in their countries of origin will focus on topics that may be helpful to understand contemporary problems.

Other people will find this book most useful as well: academics, diplomatic services, staff of international and bilateral organisations with responsibilities regarding Africa, students in the field of African history wishing to know how the past has a lasting effect on the present time.

Competition

Two important documents on this topic are on the one hand the well-known "An African Survey" by Lord Hailey (Oxford, 1938) and on the other hand the volume six of the eight volumes history of the Cambridge History of Africa published by Cambridge University Press between 1975 and 1986. Each volume covers a period of 35 years and concerns all countries of Africa. Volume six, covering the period from 1870 to 1905, dedicates on Congo Free State only 40 pages from the 956 of the volume. This way an interesting overview is possible but in dept analysis to search the historical truth requires more. The proposed manuscript may be considered not as a weakness but as complementary to this kind of publications.

Facts & Figures

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