



NEWSMAKER

## Confronting Belgium's bloody legacy in Africa

On the murderous history of Leopold II's Congo Free State

By *Dave Keating*

**A**s 10,000 people took to the streets of Brussels on 7 June to protest as part of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, one landmark drew their ire more than any other: the statue of King Leopold II outside Belgium's royal palace.

"Murderer!" the protesters cried as they climbed the statue and waved the flag of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Had the statue been flimsy enough to pull down they would have done it.

Around ten million Africans were killed during Leopold's brutal reign (1885-1908) in his ill named Congo Free State. The BLM movement has renewed calls for the 14 statues of

Leopold scattered throughout Belgium to be taken down (as one in Antwerp has been) and the places named after him to be renamed. A petition to remove a monument in Ostend, which depicts a group of Congolese people kneeling below Leopold in "gratitude", has attracted 65,000 signatures in a week. In 2004, activists cut off the hand of one of the African figures – the act that Belgian soldiers inflicted on Africans who hadn't met their rubber quota. (Protesters have promised to return it if the current king acknowledges imperial atrocities.)

Leopold's legacy is now in focus as never before, but is complicated by his pivotal role

in creating modern Belgium.

Known as the "builder king", Leopold's projects shape the Brussels skyline: he built the Cinquantenaire Arch next to the EU Commission building, along with the National Basilica in the west, and he put the gaudy finishing touches to the Justice Palace, whose gold dome can be seen across the city.

The dark secret behind these buildings is that they were built with Congo blood money. Leopold II was obsessed with acquiring colonies, and got his opportunity with the 1884 Berlin Conference. Leopold promised to create a free state that improved the lives of the native inhabitants, and was awarded an area 65 times the

size of Belgium as his property.

Leopold's regime was presided over by the murderous gendarmerie and military force, Force Publique. He amassed a personal fortune from the exploitation of ivory and rubber. Much of this money fuelled Belgium's rapid industrialisation, but Leopold also spent plenty on himself and lavish gifts for his mistress, a 16-year-old French prostitute.

Leopold's ruthlessness risked exposing colonialism for what it was. In the early 1900s the great powers turned against him, and their newspapers began running stories about the Congo atrocities. The Belgian parliament soon stripped the colony from the king and assumed control. Leopold died a year later, in 1909. His funeral procession was booed by the crowd, such was the outrage.

But it didn't take long for the atrocities to fade from memory. The Belgian statues to Leopold were erected in the decades that followed at the instigation of his nephew King Albert I. Many were built in the 1930s, a time when the existence of Belgium was being challenged after the country's devastation in the First World War. The Belgian government created a mythology around Leopold II, erasing the memory of the Congo atrocities and replacing it with a narrative of a king who brought glory to Belgium.

Many Belgians are reluctant to confront the truth about the king that shaped their country. As with Edward Colston in Bristol, there were two Leopolds. There was the builder king who gave the public grand buildings and a higher standard of living, and kept Belgium independent. And there was the Congo's "despot king" who worked Africans to death and destroyed a land he never even visited. It is not surprising that many Belgians don't want to contemplate how much of their wealth originated from horrific exploitation over a century ago. The same can be said of many in the UK. ●