

## \* King Leopold's Ghost excerpt

The raid on the capital, like many other events in the Congo, was triggered by a discovery far away. One day a few years before William Sheppard first embarked for Africa, a veterinary surgeon with a majestic white beard was tinkering with his son's tricycle at his home in Belfast, Ireland. John Dunlop was trying to solve a problem that had bedeviled bicyclists for many years: how do you get a gentle ride without springs? Dunlop finally devised a practical way of making a long-sought solution, an inflatable rubber tire. In 1890 the Dunlop Company began making tires — setting off a bicycle craze and starting a new industry just in time, it turned out, for the coming of the automobile.

Europeans had known about rubber ever since Christopher Columbus noticed it in the West Indies. In the late 1700s, a British scientist gave the substance its English name when he noticed it could rub out pencil marks. The Scot Charles Macintosh contributed his name to the language

in 1823 when he figured out a mass-production method for doing something long practiced by the Indians of the Americas: applying rubber to cloth to make it waterproof. Sixteen years later, the American inventor Charles Goodyear accidentally spilled sulfur into some hot rubber on his stove. He discovered that the resulting mixture did not turn stiff when cold or smelly and gooey when hot — major problems for those trying to make rubber boots or raincoats before then. But it was not until the early 1890s, half a decade after Dunlop fitted the pneumatic tire onto his son's tricycle wheel, that the worldwide rubber boom began. The industrial world rapidly developed an appetite not just for rubber tires, but for hoses, tubing, gaskets, and the like, and for rubber insulation for the telegraph, telephone, and electrical wiring now rapidly encompassing the globe. Suddenly factories could not get enough of the magical commodity, and its price rose throughout the 1890s. Nowhere did the boom have a more drastic impact on people's lives than in the equatorial rain forest, where wild rubber vines snaked high into the trees, that covered nearly half of King Leopold's Congo.

For Leopold, the rubber boom was a godsend. He had gone dangerously into debt with his Congo investments, but he now saw that the return would be more lucrative than he had ever imagined. The world did not lose its desire for ivory, but by the late 1890s wild rubber had far surpassed it as the main source of revenue from the Congo. His fortune assured, the king eagerly grilled functionaries returning from the Congo about rubber harvests; he devoured a constant stream of telegrams and reports from the territory, marking them up in the margins and passing them on to aides for action. His letters from this period are filled with numbers: commodity prices from world markets, interest rates on loans, quantities of rifles to be shipped to the Congo, tons of rubber to be shipped to Europe, and the exact dimensions of the triumphal arch in Brussels he was planning to build with his newfound profits. Reading the king's correspondence is like reading the letters of the CEO of a corporation that has just developed a profitable new product and is racing to take advantage of it before competitors can get their assembly lines going.

The competition Leopold worried about was from cultivated rubber, which comes not from a vine but a tree. Rubber trees, however, require much care and some years before they grow large enough to be tapped. The king voraciously demanded ever greater quantities of wild rubber from the Congo, because he knew that the price would drop once plantations of rubber trees in Latin America and Asia reached maturity.

This did indeed happen, but by then the Congo had had a wild-rubber boom nearly two decades long. During that time the search knew no bounds.

As with the men bringing in ivory, those supplying rubber to the Congo state and private companies were rewarded according to the amount they turned in. In 1903, one particularly "productive" agent received a commission eight times his annual salary. But the big money flowed directly back to Antwerp and Brussels, in the capital mostly to either side of the rue Brédérède, the small street that separated the back of the Royal Palace from several buildings holding offices of the Congo state and Congo business operations.

Even though Leopold's privately controlled state got half of concession-company profits, the king made vastly more money from the land the state exploited directly. But because the concession companies were not managed so secretly, we have better statistics from them. In 1897, for example, one of the companies, the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber and Exploration Company, or A.B.I.R., spent 1.35 francs per kilo to harvest rubber in the Congo and ship it to the company's headquarters at Antwerp — where it was sold for prices that sometimes reached 10 francs per kilo, a profit of more than 700 percent. By 1898, the price of A.B.I.R.'s stock was nearly thirty times what it had been six years earlier. Between 1890 and 1904, total Congo rubber earnings increased ninety-six times over. By the turn of the century, the *État Indépendant du Congo* had become, far and away, the most profitable colony in Africa. The profits came swiftly because, transportation costs aside, harvesting wild rubber required no cultivation, no fertilizers, no capital investment in expensive equipment. It required only labor.

How was this labor to be found? For the Congo's rulers, this posed a problem. They could not simply round up men, chain them together, and put them to work under the eye of an overseer with a *chicotte*, as they did with porters. To gather wild rubber, people must disperse widely through the rain forest and often climb trees.

Rubber is coagulated sap; the French word for it, *caoutchouc*, comes from a South American Indian word meaning "the wood that weeps." The wood that wept in the Congo was a long spongy vine of the *Landolphia* genus. Up to a foot thick at the base, a vine would twine upward around a tree to a hundred feet or more off the ground, where it could reach sunlight. There, branching, it might wind its way hundreds of feet through the upper limbs of another half-dozen trees. To gather the

rubber, you had to slash the vine with a knife and hang a bucket or earthenware pot to collect the slow drip of thick, milky sap. You could make a small incision to tap the vine, or — officially forbidden but widely practiced — cut through it entirely, which produced more rubber but killed the vine. Once the vines near a village were drained dry, workers had to go ever deeper into the forest until, before long, most harvesters were traveling at least one or two days to find fresh vines. As the lengths of vine within reach of the ground were tapped dry, workers climbed high into the trees to reach sap. "We . . . passed a man on the road who had broken his back by falling from a tree while . . . tapping some vines," wrote one missionary. Furthermore, heavy tropical downpours during much of the year turned large areas of the rain forest, where the rubber vines grew, into swampland.

No payments of trinkets or brass wire were enough to make people stay in the flooded forest for days at a time to do work that was so arduous — and physically painful. A gatherer had to dry the syrup-like rubber so that it would coagulate, and often the only way to do so was to spread the substance on his arms, thighs, and chest. "The first few times it is not without pain that the man pulls it off the hairy parts of his body," Louis Chaltin, a Force Publique officer, confided to his journal in 1892. "The native doesn't like making rubber. He must be compelled to do it."

How was he to be compelled? A trickle of news and rumor gradually made its way to Europe. "An example of what is done was told me up the Ubangi [River]," the British vice consul reported in 1899. "This officer[s] . . . method . . . was to arrive in canoes at a village, the inhabitants of which invariably bolted on their arrival; the soldiers were then landed, and commenced looting, taking all the chickens, grain, etc., out of the houses; after this they attacked the natives until able to seize their women; these women were kept as hostages until the Chief of the district brought in the required number of kilogrammes of rubber. The rubber having been brought, the women were sold back to their owners for a couple of goats apiece, and so he continued from village to village until the requisite amount of rubber had been collected."

Sometimes the hostages were women, sometimes children, sometimes elders or chiefs. Every state or company post in the rubber areas had a stockade for hostages. If you were a male villager, resisting the order to gather rubber could mean death for your wife. She might die anyway, for in the stockades food was scarce and conditions were harsh. "The women taken during the last raid at Engwettra are causing me no end of trouble,"

wrote Force Publique officer Georges Bricusse in his diary on November 22, 1895. "All the soldiers want one. The sentries who are supposed to watch them unchain the prettiest ones and rape them."

Leopold, of course, never proclaimed hostage-taking as official policy; if anyone made such charges, authorities in Brussels indignantly denied them. But out in the field, far from prying eyes, the pretense was dropped. Instructions on taking hostages were even given in the semiofficial instruction book, the revealing *Manuel du Voyageur et du Résident au Congo*, a copy of which the administration gave to each agent and each state post. The manual's five volumes cover everything from keeping servants obedient to the proper firing of artillery salutes. Taking hostages was one more routine piece of work:

In Africa taking prisoners is . . . an easy thing to do, for if the natives hide, they will not go far from their village and must come to look for food in the gardens which surround it. In watching these carefully, you will be certain of capturing people after a brief delay. . . . When you feel you have enough captives, you should choose among them an old person, preferably an old woman. Make her a present and send her to her chief to begin negotiations. The chief, wanting to see his people set free, will usually decide to send representatives.

Seldom does history offer us a chance to see such detailed instructions for those carrying out a regime of terror. The tips on hostage-taking are in the volume of the manual called *Practical Questions*, which was compiled by an editorial committee of about thirty people. One member — he worked on the book during a two-year period following his stint as the head-collecting station chief at Stanley Falls — was Léon Rom.



Hostage-taking set the Congo apart from most other forced-labor regimes. But in other ways it resembled them. As would be true decades later of the Soviet gulag, another slave labor system for harvesting raw materials, the Congo operated by quotas. In Siberia the quotas concerned cubic meters of timber cut or tons of gold ore mined by prisoners each day; in the Congo the quota was for kilos of rubber. In the A.B.I.R. concession company's rich territory just below the Congo River's great

half-circle bend, for example, the normal quota assigned to each village was three to four kilos of dried rubber per adult male per fortnight — which essentially meant full-time labor for those men. Elsewhere, quotas were higher and might be raised as time went on. An official in the Mongala River basin in the far north, controlled by another concession company, the Société Anversoise du Commerce au Congo, estimated that to fill their quota, rubber gatherers had to spend twenty-four days a month in the forest, where they built crude cages to sleep in for protection — not always successful — against leopards.

To get at parts of the vine high off the ground, men frantic to get every possible drop of rubber would sometimes tear down the whole vine, slice it into sections, and squeeze the rubber out. Although the Congo state issued strict orders against killing the vines this way, it also applied the *chicotte* to men who didn't bring in enough rubber. The *chicotte* prevailed. One witness saw Africans who had to dig up roots in order to find enough rubber to meet their quotas.

The entire system was militarized. Force Publique garrisons were scattered everywhere, often supplying their firepower to the companies under contract. In addition, each company had its own militia force, euphemistically called "sentries." In military matters as in almost everything else, the companies operated as an extension of the Congo state, and when hostages had to be taken or a rebellious village subdued, company sentries and Force Publique soldiers often took to the field together.

Wherever rubber vines grew, the population was tightly controlled. Usually you had to get a permit from the state or company agent in order to visit a friend or relative in another village. In some areas, you were required to wear a numbered metal disk, attached to a cord around your neck, so that company agents could keep track of whether you had met your quota. Huge numbers of Africans were conscripted into this labor army: in 1906, the books of A.B.I.R. alone, responsible for only a small fraction of the Congo state's rubber production, listed forty-seven thousand rubber gatherers.

All along the rivers, columns of exhausted men, carrying baskets of lumpy gray rubber on their heads, sometimes walked twenty miles or more to assemble near the houses of European agents, who sat on their verandas and weighed the loads of rubber. At one collection point, a missionary counted four hundred men with baskets. After the sap was

turned in, it was formed into rough slabs, each the size of a small suitcase, and left to dry in the sun. Then it was shipped downriver, on a barge or scow towed by a steamboat, the first stage of the long journey to Europe.

The state and the companies generally paid villagers for their rubber with a piece of cloth, beads, a few spoonfuls of salt, or a knife. These cost next to nothing, and the knives were essential tools for gathering more rubber. On at least one occasion, a chief who forced his people to gather rubber was paid in human beings. A legal dispute between two white officials near Stanley Falls put the following exchange on record in 1901. The witness being questioned was Liamba, chief of a village named Malinda:

*Question:* Did M. Hottiaux [a company official] ever give you living women or children?

*Answer:* Yes, he gave me six women and two men.

*Question:* What for?

*Answer:* In payment for rubber which I brought into the station, telling me I could eat them, or kill them, or use them as slaves — as I liked.



The rain forest bordering the Kasai River was rich in rubber, and William Sheppard and the other American Presbyterians there found themselves in the midst of a cataclysm. The Kasai was also the scene of some of the strongest resistance to Leopold's rule. Armed men of a chief allied with the regime rampaged through the region where Sheppard worked, plundering and burning more than a dozen villages. Floods of desperate refugees sought help at Sheppard's mission station.

In 1899 the reluctant Sheppard was ordered by his superiors to travel into the bush, at some risk to himself, to investigate the source of the fighting. There he found bloodstained ground, destroyed villages, and many bodies; the air was thick with the stench of rotting flesh. On the day he reached the marauders' camp, his eye was caught by a large number of objects being smoked. The chief "conducted us to a framework of sticks, under which was burning a slow fire, and there they were, the right hands, I counted them, 81 in all." The chief told Sheppard, "See! Here is our evidence. I always have to cut off the right hands of those we kill in order to show the State how many we have killed." He proudly showed

Sheppard some of the bodies the hands had come from. The smoking preserved the hands in the hot, moist climate, for it might be days or weeks before the chief could display them to the proper official and receive credit for his kills.

Sheppard had stumbled on one of the most grisly aspects of Leopold's rubber system. Like the hostage-taking, the severing of hands was deliberate policy, as even high officials would later admit. "During my time in the Congo I was the first commissioner of the Equator district," recalled Charles Lemaire after his retirement. "As soon as it was a question of rubber, I wrote to the government, 'To gather rubber in the district . . . one must cut off hands, noses and ears.'"

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. But on such occasions some European officers were mistrustful. For each cartridge issued to their soldiers they demanded proof that the bullet had been used to kill someone, not "wasted" in hunting or, worse yet, saved for possible use in a mutiny. The standard proof was the right hand from a corpse. Or occasionally not from a corpse. "Sometimes," said one officer to a missionary, soldiers "shot a cartridge at an animal in hunting; they then cut off a hand from a living man." In some military units there was even a "keeper of the hands"; his job was the smoking.

Sheppard was not the first foreign witness to see severed hands in the Congo, nor would he be the last. But the articles he wrote for missionary magazines about his grisly find were reprinted and quoted widely, both in Europe and the United States, and it is partly due to him that people overseas began to associate the Congo with severed hands. A half-dozen years after Sheppard's stark discovery, while attacking the expensive public works Leopold was building with his Congo profits, the socialist leader Émile Vandervelde would speak in the Belgian Parliament of "monumental arches which one will someday call the Arches of the Severed Hands." William Sheppard's outspokenness would eventually bring down the wrath of the authorities and one day Vandervelde, an attorney, would find himself defending Sheppard in a Congo courtroom. But that is getting ahead of our story.

As the rubber terror spread throughout the rain forest, it branded people with memories that remained raw for the rest of their lives. A Catholic priest who recorded oral histories half a century later quotes a man, Tswambe, speaking of a particularly hated state official named Léon

Fiévez, who terrorized a district along the river three hundred miles north of Stanley Pool:

All the blacks saw this man as the Devil of the Equator. . . . From all the bodies killed in the field, you had to cut off the hands. He wanted to see the number of hands cut off by each soldier, who had to bring them in baskets. . . . A village which refused to provide rubber would be completely swept clean. As a young man, I saw [Fiévez's] soldier Molili, then guarding the village of Boyeka, take a big net, put ten arrested natives in it, attach big stones to the net, and make it tumble into the river. . . . Rubber caused these torments; that's why we no longer want to hear its name spoken. Soldiers made young men kill or rape their own mothers and sisters.

A Force Publique officer who passed through Fiévez's post in 1894 quotes Fiévez himself describing what he did when the surrounding villages failed to supply his troops with the fish and manioc he had demanded: "I made war against them. One example was enough: a hundred heads cut off, and there have been plenty of supplies at the station ever since. My goal is ultimately humanitarian. I killed a hundred people . . . but that allowed five hundred others to live."

With "humanitarian" ground rules that included cutting off hands and heads, sadists like Fiévez had a field day. The station chief at M'Bima used his revolver to shoot holes in Africans' ear lobes. Raoul de Premorel, an agent working along the Kasai River, enjoyed giving large doses of castor oil to people he considered malingerers. When villagers, in a desperate attempt to meet the weight quota, turned in rubber mixed with dirt or pebbles to the agent Albéric Detiège, he made them eat it. When two porters failed to use a designated latrine, a district commissioner, Jean Verdussen, ordered them paraded in front of troops, their faces rubbed with excrement.

As news of the white man's soldiers and their baskets of severed hands spread through the Congo, a myth gained credence with Africans that was a curious reversal of the white obsession with black cannibalism. The cans of corned beef seen in white men's houses, it was said, did not contain meat from the animals shown on the label; they contained chopped-up hands.