

from
**PRIVATE COMPANY RULE
IN THE CONGO**
1903

A. E. Scrivener

By the late 1800s, European countries were competing to get at the great riches of Africa's natural resources. In 1882, Belgian King Leopold II founded a company called the International Association of the Congo. Its goal was to exploit the rubber and mineral lands along the Congo River. The company controllers forced the native population to do the work. European missionaries who went to the Congo to teach Christianity were appalled by the company's activities. The following journal entry by the missionary A. E. Scrivener describes the brutality that the Africans faced at the hands of the company owners.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Recognizing Effects

What effects did the practices of the company owners have on the people of the Congo?

Everything was on a military basis, but so far as I could see, the one and only reason for it all was rubber. It was the theme of every conversation, and it was evident that the only way to please one's superiors was to increase the output somehow. I saw a few men come in, and the frightened look even now on their faces tells only too eloquently of the awful time they have passed through. As I saw it brought in, each man had a little basket, containing say, four or five pounds of rubber. This was emptied into a larger basket and weighed, and being found sufficient, each man was given a cupful of coarse salt, and to some of the headmen a fathom of calico. . . . I heard from the white men and some of the soldiers some most gruesome stories. The former white man (I feel ashamed of my colour every time I think of him) would stand at the door of the store to receive the rubber from the poor trembling wretches, who after, in some cases, weeks of privation in the forests, had ventured in with what they had been able to collect. A man bringing rather under the proper amount, the white man flies into a rage, and seizing a rifle from one of the guards, shoots him dead on the spot. Very rarely did rubber come in, but one or more were shot in that way at the door of the store "to make the survivors bring more next time." Men who had tried to run from the country and had been caught, were brought to the station and made to stand one behind the other, and an Albin bullet sent through them. "A pity to waste cartridges on such wretches." On ——— removing from the station, his successor almost fainted on

attempting to enter the station prison, in which were numbers of poor wretches so reduced by starvation and the awful stench from weeks of accumulation of filth, that they were not able to stand. Some of the stories are unprintable. . . . Under the present *régime* a list is kept of all the people. Every town is known and visited at stated intervals. Those stationed near the posts are required to do the various tasks, such as the bringing in of timber and other material. A little payment is made, but that it is in any respect an equivalent it would be absurd to suppose. The people are regarded as the property of the State for any purpose for which they may be needed. That they have any desires of their own, or any plans worth carrying out in connection with their own lives, would create a smile among the officials. It is one continual grind, and the native intercourse between one district and another in the old style is practically non-existent. Only the roads to and fro from the various posts are kept open, and large tracts of country are abandoned to the wild beasts. The white man himself told me that you could walk on for five days in one direction, and not see a single village or a single human being. And this where formerly there was a big tribe! . . . From thence on to the Lake we found the road more and more swampy. Leaving Mbongo on Saturday (29th) we passed through miles of deserted villages, and saw at varying distances many signs of the former inhabitants. . . . Leaving the plain, we . . . followed for three-quarters of an hour the course of a fast-flowing, swollen stream. Then for half an hour through some deserted gardens and amongst the ruins of a number of villages, then a sharp turn to the left through another low-lying bit of grassland. . . .

[In due course Mr. Scrivener arrived at Ngongo, where the surviving relatives of the refugees whom Mr. Scrivener had brought with him, as already mentioned, met after their long parting:]

As one by one the surviving relatives of my men arrived, some affecting scenes were enacted. There was no falling on necks and weeping, but very genuine joy was shown and tears were shed as the losses death had made were told. How they shook hands and snapped their fingers! What expressions of surprise—the wide-opened mouth covered with the open hand to make its evidence of wonder the more apparent. . . . So far as the State post was concerned, it was in a very dilapidated condition. . . . On three sides of the usual huge quadrangle there were abundant signs of a former population, but we only found three villages—bigger indeed than any we had seen before, but sadly diminished from what had been but recently the condition of the place. . . . Soon we began talking, and, without any encouragement on my part, they began the tales I had become so accustomed to. They were living in peace and quietness when the white men came in from the Lake with all sorts of requests to do this and to do that, and they thought it meant slavery. So they attempted to keep the white men out of their country, but without avail. The rifles were too much for them. So they submitted, and made up their minds to do the best they could under the altered circumstances. First came the command to build houses for the soldiers, and this was done without a murmur.

Then they had to feed the soldiers, and all the men and women—hangers-on who accompanied them. Then they were told to bring in rubber. This was quite a new thing for them to do. There was rubber in the forest several days away from their home, but that it was worth anything was news to them. A small reward was offered, and a rush was made for the rubber; “What strange white men to give us cloth and beads for the sap of a wild vine.” They rejoiced in what they thought was their good fortune. But soon the reward was reduced until they were told to bring in the rubber for nothing. To this they tried to demur, but to their great surprise several were shot by the soldiers, and the rest were told, with many curses and blows, to go at once or more would be killed. Terrified, they began to prepare their food for the fortnight’s absence from the village, which the collection of the rubber entailed. The soldiers discovered them sitting about. “What, not gone yet!” Bang! bang! bang! And down fell one and another dead, in the midst of wives and companions. There is a terrible wail, and an attempt made to prepare the dead for burial, but this is not allowed. All must go at once to the forest. And off the poor wretches had to go without even their tinder-boxes to make fires. Many died in the forests from exposure and hunger, and still more from the rifles of the ferocious soldiers in charge of the post. In spite of all their efforts, the amount fell off, and more and more were killed. . . . I was shown round the place, and the sites of former big chiefs’ settlements were pointed out. A careful estimate made the population of, say, seven years ago, to be 2,000 people in and about the post, within the radius of, say, a quarter of a mile. All told they would not muster 200 now, and there is so much sadness and gloom that they are fast decreasing. . . . Lying about in the grass, within a few yards of the house I was occupying, were numbers of human bones, in some cases complete skeletons. I counted thirty-six skulls, and saw many sets of bones from which the skulls were missing. I called one of the men, and asked the meaning of it. “When the rubber palaver began,” said he, “the soldiers shot so many we grew tired of burying, and very often we were not allowed to bury, and so just dragged the bodies out into the grass and left them. There are hundreds all round if you would like to see them.” But I had seen more than enough, and was sickened by the stories that came from men and women alike of the awful time they had passed through. The Bulgarian atrocities might be considered as mildness itself when compared with what has been done here. . . . In due course we reached Ibali. There was hardly a sound building in the place. . . . Why such dilapidation? The Commandant away for a trip likely to extend into three months, the sub-lieutenant away in another direction on a punitive expedition. In other words, station must be neglected and rubber-hunting carried out with all vigour. I stayed here two days, and the one thing that impressed itself upon me was the collection of rubber. I saw long files of men come as at Mbongo with their little baskets under their arms, saw them paid their milk-tin-full of salt, and the two yards of calico flung to the head men; saw their trembling timidity, and in fact a great deal more, to prove the state of terrorism that exists, and the virtual slavery

in which the people are held. . . . So much for the journey to the Lake. It has enlarged my knowledge of the country, and also, alas! my knowledge of the awful deeds enacted in the mad haste of men to get rich. So far as I know I am the first white man to go into the *Domaine privé* of the King, other than the *employés* of the State. I expect there will be wrath in some quarters, but that cannot be helped.

Source: Excerpt from *King Leopold's Rule in Africa* (London: William Heinemann, 1904), pp. 181–186.