Why, and through what means did revelations of atrocities in the Congo produce a 'crisis of empire' in the early twentieth century?

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21 March 2017

The period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a one of reconfiguration of European imperialism in which both the methods of political organization and control and the public attitudes towards imperialism were changing. Issues of political economy and of social attitudes influenced each other bidirectionally; economic motives drove new colonial ventures which, in turn, ran up against both positive and negative attitudes which themselves affected both relationships with colonized regions and relationships between imperial powers. The situation of the Belgian Congo is an example of this, in which humanitarian outcry made the current form of political–economic control untenable, while nevertheless serving mainly to normalize rather than to fundamentally alter the relationship between colonizer and colonized.

Over the course of the nineteenth century public debate had taken place over the nature of the imperial mission, in terms of its purpose and its responsibilities. These had two major strands, often interweaving. The first was liberal political philosophy and its conception by Bentham and the Mills that good government should be minimal and maximize well-being, two goals which were understood as being aligned but which, nevertheless, often came into contradiction;[1] the second was the growing non-conformist and evangelical Christian movement, which found particular expression in the missionary societies which felt an obligation to work to-

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[1]Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

wards improving the lives of others both at home and overseas.[2]

The outcry over the conditions in the Belgian Congo was one of a series of such humanitarian campaigns in the British Empire, the first having been the anti-slavery movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This case differed from the earlier in that the object of concern was not the British Empire itself but the empire of a foreign power; thus, real humanitarian concerns could also be mobilized to serve foreign policy aims. Similarly, the way in which the Congo was governed (as the personal property of the Belgian king, rather than as a possession of the Belgian state) allowed criticisms to be made on the basis not only of cruelty but simply of good governance, a question of political technique rather than of morality.

The administration of the Congo had been agreed in 1885, at the same Berlin Conference that provided justification for British dominance over other parts of Africa; this at once presented several barriers to government support for a humanitarian campaign against Leopold. Firstly, that a critique of Belgian imperialism might be expanded to take in British imperialism too, posing a risk to ongoing British expansion in Africa, as well as undermining its claims on existing colonies. Secondly, that undermining Belgian control over the Congo might alter the European balance of power in a way that Germany could benefit from, Germany being at this time the primary threat perceived by both Britain and France.[3]

Nevertheless, the British eventually were motivated, in 1903, to commission a report into the Congolese situation, published the following year. As predicted, Belgian public opinion was suspicious of British motives, pointing to the recent annexation of the Boer republics in South Africa and accusing Britain, and in particular 'Liverpool merchants', of making 'preparations and excuses for a new annexation'.[4] Despite these concerns the Belgian government commissioned its own report into the colony, and public opinion was additionally turned further against Leopold by the publication of private letters by a former employee of the king. Eventually, in 1908, the Congo Free State was annexed by Belgium, its absolutist institutions replaced by Belgian constitutional monarchy.

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[2] Andrew Porter, 'Trusteeship, Anti-Slavery and Humanitarianism', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. by Andrew Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), III, pp. 198–221.

[3] Porter, III.

[4] Jean Stengers, 'King Leopold's Congo, 1886–1908', in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, ed. by Roland Oliver and G. N. Sanderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), VI, pp. 315–58 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521228039.009>.

However, the effects of the humanitarian concern beyond this peaceful transfer of power were limited. Within five years the Congo Reform Association had been dissolved, its founder Edmund Morel having been convinced that sufficient progress was being made under direct Belgian rule. The Association's objection had not been to imperial exploitation in general, but to the inhumane conditions that were used to enforce that exploitation. Roger Casement, who had written the report for the British government, went on to write a similar report on conditions in the rubber industry; as in Congo, he found brutal treatment of the natives, the exposure of which led to the bankruptcy of the Peruvian Amazon Company, whose employees had been responsible for the conditions; however, few criminal charges were enforced and no significant political changes were made.[5] The trajectory of other major figures in the Association was similarly limited to a criticism of inhumane policies and not opposition to empire in general. Major financial support had come from the Cadbury family, for example, who as Quakers felt a humanitarian responsibility, but as business owners depended on the continuation of colonial trade. As such they were far from opposed to the expansion of British business interests in West Africa; when public outcry began to be directed at the labour conditions in Portuguese West African cocoa farms, they were able to deflect criticism (with the assistance of Morel) until new sources of cocoa, depending on allegedly-free labour, could be established in British West Africa.[6]

The religious movements involved in the Congo campaign were not new ones, or even new to humanitarian campaigning; Quakers in particular had been involved in the first anti-slavery campaign a century earlier and Quaker-owned businesses (like Cadbury) had a long tradition of philanthropy both towards their own employees and towards the wider world. However, once again this rarely developed into a generalized critique of empire; at most, as in the World Wars, it was expressed as a policy of pacifism, yet even here this pacifism was based in a general principle of non-violence rather than anti-imperialism. Indeed, as noted earlier, various religious groups were active supporters of empire, envisaged as a means of spreading Christian civilization, through organizations such as the London Missionary Society. These movements fundamentally assumed, even at their most progressive, that non-Europeans were inferior to Europeans, giving Europeans not only a right but a duty to intervene. In East Africa, for example, the Church Missionary Society had lobbied for intervention

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[5]Jordan Goodman, *The Devil and Mr Casement* (London: Verso, 2009).

[6]Kevin Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and the New Slaveries in Africa, 1884-1926* (London: Routledge, 2005).

against the Zanzibar-centred slave trade; following this success they and other missionary organizations had expanded further inland during the 1870s and 1880s. This significant missionary presence, intentionally or otherwise, had formed (along with commercial interests in the area) the basis of the British claim over the area at the Berlin Conference.[7]

British missionary involvement in the Congo differed from other missionary activity in that, rather than being concentrated either in British-controlled territory or in regions outside of the influence of any European empire, the Congo was under Belgian control and thus any agitation could lead to conflict with foreign powers without the possibility of British annexation to establish formal control. Furthermore, the Belgian support for Catholic missionary groups and discrimination against Protestant ones made British missionary groups initially loathe to jeopardize their position, pursuing instead an 'apolitical' policy that amounted to tacit acceptance of the status quo.[8] Despite this initial reticence, however, the missionary societies' contribution was significant, not least in their mobilization of new forms of mass communication (photography and 'magic lantern' shows, for example) which could reach a far wider audience than Morel's more mainstream journalism was able. Much of the indecisiveness comes not from a lack of dedication on the part of individuals, but rather the disagreement over priorities between and within organizations, and, indeed, even humanitarian concerns were not universally agreed to be of greater priority than conversion; while it was generally considered that Christian mission took priority over the needs of imperialism, in practice missionaries tended to be only cautiously liberal if not conservative.[9] The limits of this can be seen in Uganda, for example, when missionary organizations gave approval to the use of forced or 'conscripted' labour 'for work of national importance'[10] Nor were missionaries universally loathe to use force in pursuit of their aims; not only were corporal punishments applied to wrongdoers, but numerous examples can be found of the Royal

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[7]John H. Darch, *Missionary Imperialists? Missionaries, Government and the Growth of the British Empire in the Tropics, 1860–1885* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), p. 241.

[8]Andrew Porter, *Religion Versus Empire?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), chap. 11.

[9]John C. B. Webster, 'British Missions in India', in *Missionary Ideologies in the Imperialist Era*, ed. by Torben Christensen and William R. Hutchison (Århus: Aros, 1982) <http://www.worldcat.org/title/missionary-ideologies-in-the-imperialist-era-1880-1920-papers-from-the-durham-consultation-1981/oclc/954226168>.

[10]Holger Bernt Hansen, 'Mission and Colonialism in Uganda', in *Missionary Ideologies in the Imperialist Era*, ed. by Torben Christensen and William R. Hutchison (Århus: Aros, 1982).

Navy's guns being turned on rebellious natives, although missionary opinion was divided on both.[11] This aligned with broader British Imperial practice: "flogging and caning were standard forms of punishment in British Africa", and while it may have been officially prohibited it was both commonplace and found to be justified; even when officials were censured for floggings they were praised for 'imposing [their] will' on the natives despite the use of 'unsound methods'.[12]

Nor did the Congo situation do much to influence British public opinion in general in the direction of a broader anti-imperialist sentiment. The liberal attitude was that empire was necessary in order to shape 'barbarians' into civilized peoples, and that until such time their rights were minimal.[13] As such, while abuses could be condemned as being contrary to this civilizing mission, the occurrence of abuses did not undermine the principle of empire as a whole. Contemporary metropolitan liberal anti-imperialists therefore believed not that empire should be abandoned, but that it had, in the case of India for example, achieved its aims to the extent that India could be allowed home rule on a similar model to the 'white dominions'. There was little public support for any broad anti-imperial policy in the metropole; while Irish Home Rule found some Parliamentary support, this rarely went as far (outside Ireland itself) as support for Irish independence, much less criticizing imperialism in general, and was again primarily based upon the liberal principle that Ireland was sufficiently civilized to govern itself. Contemporary Irish nationalists rarely drew comparisons between their own situation and that of other subject peoples, and indeed on occasion explicitly rejected such comparisons. They tended instead to position themselves as superior to the non-European subjects of the British empire;[14] this was perhaps a logical extension of the view that home rule was deserved by 'civilized' peoples. Even the radical left did not have a consistent anti-imperial stance; while Marx had written articles against American slavery and in favour of Irish independence, other more mainstream socialists were just as likely to prioritize the interests of the British working class over those of colonial subjects where the two conflicted.[15]

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[11]Darch.

[12]Jock McCulloch, 'Empire and Violence, 1900–39', in *Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[13]Nicholas Owen, *The British Left and India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 2 <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199233014.001.0001>.

[14]Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chaps 4–5 <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199249909.001.0001>.

[15]Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought 1895–1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

A similar general principle can be observed in the Parliamentary response to the atrocities. Debate in the House of Commons, while primarily concerned with the treatment of the natives, did not neglect to address the restrictions on trade that had been put in place; a motion tabled in 1908 referred to "the personal liberty and economic rights of the native population and of the freedom of commercial intercourse with the outer world".[16] Thus while there was a general agreement that the situation was unacceptable and must be resolved, the motives included the (unspoken) benefit to Britain of free trade with the Congo as well as simple humanitarian concerns. Needless to say, Parliament had few concerns for imperialism as a whole, the only suggestion of hypocrisy coming from a representative of the Irish Parliamentary Party who nevertheless dismissed that concern as being irrelevant so long as Britain did not appear to benefit excessively from the situation.

The outcome of atrocities in the Congo was thus not a generalized crisis of empire, wherein the basic principle of European imperialism might be undermined. Rather it was a restructuring and consolidation, allowing those who desired an imperialism based on the principle of 'improvement' for the perceived benefit of the ruled to discredit other forms of imperial rule and strengthen their hold on empire based on this new principle. It came at a time not of imperial decline but expansion; it was during the same period in which the United States first acquired its overseas possessions, similarly using the language of liberalism as justification in its war against the perceived backwardness of the Spanish empire. Crisis would come later, not because metropolitan opinion demanded a reconsideration of colonial policy but when the political–economic situation became untenable, particularly in the face of a world war and its consequences.

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