

BOOK REVIEW

Michael A. Rutz. *King Leopold's Congo and the "Scramble for Africa": A Short History with Documents*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2018. xvii + 113 pp. Chronology. Map. Documents. \$18.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1624666568.

Few topics in the history of Africa have received as much attention as Leopold's reign of terror in the Congo Free State. The narrative of how an ambitious monarch's quest to own a colony in Africa created an extremely violent labor system for the extraction of wild-growing rubber, bringing disaster to the peoples of the Congo Basin, has captured the imagination of and stirred horror in the West. Michael Rutz's *King Leopold's Congo and the "Scramble for Africa"* provides readers with a rich collection of excerpts from contemporary documents that serve to introduce the topic to students and non-specialists. This small book is part of the series "Passages: Key Moments of History" that should be praised for making historical sources accessible to a broader audience. Rutz's work is the first volume in the series that focuses on a topic in African history.

Rutz selected twenty-six written sources which address the topic from various angles. The first documents give us a glimpse of excerpts of travelogues, narratives, official discourses, and diplomatic sources of the Zanzibari slave trade in the Eastern Congo, along with the European justifications for its suppression. The bulk of evidence concentrates on the decades of the 1890s and 1900s, showing the impact of the turn-of-the-century rubber boom on the villages of the Congo Basin and the international campaign denouncing the Leopoldian atrocities in the region. The sources for this time period are mainly letters and narratives published in books and the press as well as committee reports and discussions in both British and Belgian parliaments. Rutz selected, for example, telling excerpts of Casement's report from 1904 detailing the violent nature of the labor regime in the Congo Free State. Finally, the last two documents showcase the moment of Congo's independence and the rule of dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Rutz has also written an introductory chapter that guides its readers to the major topics discussed in the sources he selected: the European scramble for Africa and the Congo basin, the creation of the Congo Free State and the rubber boom, the violence of the colonial rule, the Congo reform movement, and the political aftermath of the Congo Free State.

Rutz's work is a great classroom resource. The selected documents lend coherence to the established narrative of the Congo Free State and the onset of European imperialism in Central Africa by covering the most critical

moments in the international controversies surrounding the Leopoldian colony, illuminating “[the] global significance” (xvii) of this history and its consequences. These documents also give readers multiple perspectives from a variety of historical actors with their own, sometimes conflicting, interests. Rutz makes a sustained effort to foreground the voices of local villagers who were the most affected by the violence of Swahili-speaking slave traders coming from the east and later by the European companies arriving from the west. For example, in Document 17, Rutz offers the first-hand account of a Bangongo man named Moyo. This account was part of Casement’s report, in which Moyo described the effects of the rubber regime on his village. Additionally, Document 3 extracts an excerpt from Disasi Makulo’s autobiography about her enslavement by Tippu Tip’s raiders and her purchase by Henry Stanley.

However, these sources are still not sufficient to give us an adequate sense of how Central Africans mobilized their intellectual resources to conceptualize the colonial violence and deal with its many consequences in their lives. Nor do they explain the many effects that this period had on the political culture of the Congo basin’s peoples. These problems have been explored by historians such as Jan Vansina and Nancy Hunt, among others, who have explained how the “civilizing mission” and atrocities within the Congo Free State not only jeopardized the transmission of ancient knowledge but also conflicted with “therapeutic insurgencies” that shaped the period’s many aftereffects. Indeed, while the global implications of the rubber boom are well represented in this collection of sources, instructors will have to supplement Rutz’s work if they want to convey to students a better understanding of the local significance of these processes. The last couple of documents from after the 1960s barely scratch the surface of the many consequences of the Congo Free State to the Congolese people.

Despite these complaints, Rutz fulfills his objective of providing an excellent collection of historical documents for introductory courses, and scholars teaching the topic will find in his book a useful resource for their classes.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Carton, Benedict. 2009. “From Hampton “[I]nto the Heart of Africa”: How Faith in God and Folklore Turned Congo Missionary William Sheppard into a Pioneering Ethnologist.” *History in Africa* 36: 53–86. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2010.0005>
- Legros, Hugues and Curtis A. Keim. 1996. “Guide to African Archives in Belgium.” *History in Africa* 23: 401–409. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3171951>
- White, Bob W. 2005. “The Political Undead: Is It Possible to Mourn for Mobutu’s Zaire?” *African Studies Review* 48 (2): 65–85. <https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2005.0087>