King Leopold's Ghost: Diplomacy, Utility, and Beneficence in 19th Century Governance

In his monograph titled *King Leopold's Ghost*, Adam Hoschild puts in writing the untold (or perhaps, simply unread) story of the Belgian occupation of the Congo. He details the human atrocity that occurred in the hands of King Leopold and his men in his pursuit of the economic benefits this part of the African landscape had to offer, as well as the opportune "forgetting" of the brutality. Through description of international reactions to the selfish massacres of Leopold, it is clear that the motivations of international governments to intervene in human rights abuses lie in utility, rather than principle.

This era of imperialism was set apart from previous eras of wrongdoing by the communication revolution of the 19th Century, which put the injustices taking place in the Congo on an international scale more comprehensively than what was possible before: "It was the first major international atrocity scandal in the age of the telegraph and the camera" (Hoschild, 4). There was a greater body of witnesses to the ways "the men in the Congo trumpeted their killings." (Hoschild, 5). However, this also meant that there was more public pressure on governments and lawmakers. Both the events in the Congo themselves and various governments responses were put on international display, making them not only a matter of human rights, but also modern public relations.

King Leopold was skilled in this field of public relations, which contributed to the lack of accountability he received in the beginning of his reign in Africa. However, he also had a captive audience, nations who readily accepted his appeals to their respective ethos: "This particular illusion, echoing the idea of a union of states, was likely to appeal to an American audience. To Europeans, on the other hand, the king talked about free cities." (Hoschild, 67). Instead, critics had a hard time gaining traction, "for they were not as skilled at public relations as the king, who

deployed his formidable charm to neutralize them"(Hoschild, 173). Similarly, "the foreign missionaries, who had seen so many atrocities, had little media savvy or political clout." (Hoschild, 185). There was an undertone of diplomacy to conversations surrounding human rights and suffering. Countries such as the United States and Great Britain chose to see these abuses for what they were only when their own interests were at stake.

This points to a give-and-take relationship in how governments handle such abuses even into the modern day. States had the recourse to quiet conversations of misdoings in the Congo or to take up the cause. In the case of Britain, they may have taken up the cause, but only with pacifying rather than concrete solutions. Through his discoveries, E.D. Morel put the Congo question on the British public agenda, which led to a debate in the House of Commons and a unanimous resolution that "Congo natives should be governed with humanity" (Hoschild, 194). Hoschild qualifies this "resolution", stating that "Morel had been able to launch a barrage of criticism in print and to inspire a parliamentary resolution, but getting a reluctant British government to put pressure on a friendly monarch was something else." (Hoschild, 194). This is an example of the diplomatic priorities when constructing conversations around human rights. Governments are discretely asking: Is it useful to the nation to take up this cause? Hochschild points to reasons both for and against the United States and Britain interjecting themselves into this conversation. For example, "one reason Britons and Americans focused on the Congo was that it was a safe target. Outrage over the Congo did not involve British or American misdeeds, nor did it entail the diplomatic, trade, or military consequences of taking on a major power like France or Germany". (Hoschild, 282). On the other hand, with the start of World War II, the Allied powers needed more raw materials from the Congo, therefore "the legal maximum for forced labor was increased to 120 days per man per year…The Allies also wanted ever more

rubber for the tires of hundreds of thousands of military trucks, Jeeps and warplanes." (Hoschild, 279). Ultimately, these governments value the reciprocal benefits of their fight for human rights over a pure and value-based reasoning. The dominant national narrative of the time was the need for participation in World War II: "Germany invaded [Belgium] in 1914, killed more than 5000 Belgian civilians, and deliberately set fire to many thousands of buildings… During the next four years, first the British and then the American governments used the suffering of 'brave little Belgium' to whip up war fever in countries that had not themselves been attacked" (Hoschild, 296). Hoschild goes on to say that "no one in the Allied countries wanted to be reminded that, only a decade or two earlier, it was the king of the Belgians whose men in Africa had cut of hands." (Hoschild, 296)." If it does not contribute to the national narrative, governments may not see this as a worthy cause.

The reaction to the indisputable barbarity Leopold's Belgium is proof of a largely accepted view that world governments are internally motivated by their own desires, rather than moral principles. Therefore, they look for a utility in their fights against human rights abuses, whether as evidence for a dominant national rhetoric or a headline for public relations. This process undermines the value of beneficence in the world system.