

A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF BELGIAN IMPERIALISM IN
AFRICA'S CONGO REGION

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This paper examines Leopold II's Congo Free State and Belgium's later colonial rule in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) through the lens of four philosophers—Thomas Hobbes, Carl Schmitt, Immanuel Kant, and Max Weber. Tracing the DRC's historical development from the Congo Free State (1885–1908) through the Belgian Congo (1908–1960), this paper argues that those philosophers' theories on sovereign power, the relationship between state and society, imperialist self-deceit, and the role of the international community help explain how Belgium was able to exploit the Congolese. This analysis also suggests that while no one philosophy can completely explain the Belgian parliament's decision to nationalize the colony in 1908, Hobbes' view of mankind's selfishness, Kant's concept of the use of imperial subjects, and Weber's theory on national honor each contribute to understanding the establishment of the Belgian Congo.

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INTRODUCTION

Written in 1651, Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* describes nature as rendering men "apt to invade and destroy one another."¹ His exposition of the selfishness of human nature, the role of law in setting standards of morality, and how destructive war is to human advancement illuminates common facets of colonialism. Hobbes' philosophy further helps to strip down the social, religious, and political excuses imperialist nations give for their invasion of resource-rich countries. Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* supplements Hobbes' breakdown of imperialist justifications by highlighting the false dichotomy between politics and economics and the false hierarchy of state and society.²

Like Hobbes, Immanuel Kant believes that humanity is capable of great malevolence, which is primarily exposed in international relations.³ His investigation into sovereign power elucidates how imperialist monarchs are able to establish colonies and why civilians tolerate the injustice their rulers impose on colonized peoples. Kant's comparison of the different ways conquerors use their imperial subjects circles back to Hobbes by prompting an examination into the utilitarian impulses behind the type of humanitarian reform that leaves the colony-colonizer relationship intact. In his exploration of the injuries nation-states are willing to accept to their interests versus their honor,⁴ Max Weber's work complements Kant's theories and provides another tool for understanding legislative response to monarchy-led colonization.

The unique developments in the colonial past of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a large country in sub-Saharan Africa rich in natural resources,⁵ make it ripe for philosophical analysis. Putting Hobbes and Kant into dialogue using the DRC as a case study,

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2. CARL SCHMITT, *THE CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL* 76 (George Schwab trans., University of Chicago Press 2007) (1932).

3. IMMANUEL KANT, *PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY* 326 (Mary J. Gregor ed., Cambridge University Press 1999).

4. MAX WEBER, *WEBER: POLITICAL WRITINGS* 356 (Peter Lassman & Ronald Speirs eds., Cambridge University Press 1994).

5. Central Intelligence Agency, *Congo, Democratic Republic of the*, *THE WORLD FACTBOOK* (Jan. 21, 2026), <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/congo-democratic-republic-of-the/> [<https://perma.cc/XCX8-AFML>].

with minor additions from Schmitt and Weber, both illuminates the Congo's experience and challenges these thinkers' philosophies.

This article argues that the DRC's colonial history vindicates certain aspects of Hobbes', Kant's, Schmitt's and Weber's philosophies on colonization, demonstrating how their theories about sovereign power, the relationship between state and society, the lies imperialists tell themselves, and the role of the international community in both exposing human nature and legitimizing occupation work together to explain how Belgium was able to exploit and inflict horrors on the Congolese. In doing so, this article also challenges the depth and flexibility of these philosophies by analyzing how well they elucidate the 1908 nationalization of the Belgian colony.

Part I of this paper will analyze the existence and violence of the Congo Free State, while Part II delves into attitudes towards the Congo Free State and Leopold II himself, especially those held by the European missionaries who would become the driving force behind Belgian nationalization of the colony. Part III focuses on that regime change itself, while Part IV explores how the Belgian Congo would be remembered in the late twentieth century and the connection between colonization and the DRC today. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the various stages and philosophical takeaways of the Belgian colony before discussing how and why the DRC's colonial past continues to affect the country today.

PART I. LEOPOLD II'S PRIVATE COLONY: THE CONGO FREE STATE

A. Establishing the Congo Free State

Leopold II, the monarch of Belgium, established the first Congolese colony in the 1880s, along with a group of private European investors he led.⁶ They called this entity "*French État Indépendant du Congo*," known in English as the "Congo Free State."⁷ Scholar Benoît Henriot has explained that many historians view the Congo Free State as a "special example of political sovereignty," since its territory was established

6. *Congo Free State*, ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA (Nov. 14, 2025), <https://www.britannica.com/print/article/132463>.

7. *Id.*

by “disputed treaties made in the name of geographical and philanthropic societies with almost no legal existence.”⁸ Henriët argues, however, that “international law and foreign imperial rules” formed “the very matrix of the Congo Free State’s legal existence as a sovereign State.”⁹ In fact, it was the international Berlin West Africa Conference of 1884–85 that officially recognized the personal rule of King Leopold II over the Congo Free State “on the basis that it remained a free trade zone.”¹⁰

The creation of the Congo Free State broaches Thomas Hobbes’ connection between injustice and the existence of laws. Hobbes writes that the actions which proceed from the desires and passions of men are “no sin” until they “know a law that forbids them,” and a law which forbids those desires and actions cannot be known until such laws are made.¹¹ On one hand, by the nineteenth century, European nations often engaged in legitimate diplomacy efforts, hosting intergovernmental conferences, signing multinational treaties that benefitted all parties, negotiating state neutrality, and solving “complex diplomatic situation[s].”¹² Under Hobbes’ philosophy, then, Leopold II and his government should have known that establishing the Congo Free State using fraudulent treaties would be a “sin.” On the other hand, European powers accepted Leopold’s claim, refusing to make conduct like Leopold II’s illegal. Since Europe probably comprised the entirety of the international community as known to Leopold II and his group of investors, nascent “international law” refusing to forbid Leopold II’s usurpation of the Congo allowed the Belgians and their ruler to see the colonization of the Congo Free State as not sinful.

A second critical and philosophically interesting aspect of the Congo Free State is the role of armed forces in its establishment. The *Force Publique*, established in the wake of the Berlin Conference of 1884-

8. Benoît Henriët, *Colonial Law in the Making: Sovereignty and Property in the Congo Free State (1876–1908)*, 83 THE LEGAL HIST. REV. 202, 202 (2015).

9. *Id.*

10. Mario Draper, *The Force Publique and Frontier Warfare in the Late 19th Century Congo Free State*, 10 HIST. ENCOUNTERS 95, 96 (2023).

11. HOBBS, *supra* note 1, at ch. XIII.

12. See Maartje Maria Abbenhuis, *A Most Useful Tool for Diplomacy and Statecraft: Neutrality and Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century, 1815–1914*, 35 INT’L HIST. REV. 1, 5 (2013) (describing how the Treaty of London, negotiated in 1839 between the Netherlands and the Great Powers (France, Great Britain, Prussia, Austria and Russia), established Belgium as an independent and permanently neutral state protected by the combined force of the five major powers, who pledged to protect the country if it was invaded).

85, was an army that grew in numbers from 200 men in 1886 to 19,026 in 1898.¹³ Scholar Mario Draper argues that this military, comprised first mainly of mercenaries and indigenous recruits and later filled with Belgian soldiers, occupied an increasingly central role in the “pacification, exploitation, ejection, and expansion projects” of the Congo Free State administration.¹⁴

The centrality of violent conflict in the establishment of the Congo Free State supports Hobbes’ concept of human nature. Hobbes writes that when an invader has no more to fear than another man’s power and that man has something the invader wants, it is to be expected that the invader should come with united forces to dispossess and deprive him of his land.¹⁵ Under this Hobbesian perspective, the resource-rich Congo region was too irresistible for a militarized European nation like Belgium to resist, and their invasion was perhaps inevitable. King Leopold II’s extraction of Congo’s resources actually transformed him into “one of Europe’s wealthiest men.”¹⁶ Although Leopold II made an effort to legitimize his rule through international law (i.e., political treaties), violence and coercion were still at the core of his colonial entity. This reflects the prescience of Hobbes’ pragmatism, as he attempts to strip away men’s excuses for their conduct and square with the true impulses behind action.

B. *Political and Economic Spheres*

Philosopher Carl Schmitt amplifies Hobbes’ work, revealing the falseness of this dichotomy between the legal justifications for the Congo Free State, as epitomized in the Berlin Conference, and the violence with which the colony was established and managed. Schmitt critiques the twentieth century narrative of separation between economics and politics. He explains that Europeans view the “economic way” as “reciprocity of production and consumption” leading to “mutuality, equality, justice, and freedom,” and distinct from the “political way,” which appears to be “a conquering power outside the domain of economics,” involving “thievery, conquest, and crimes of all sorts.”¹⁷

Leopold II’s political position as the Belgian monarch gave him the authority to sign the treaties that created the Congo Free State. Yet the early military force used to make that political entity into a reality

13. Draper, *supra* note 10, at 96.

14. *Id.*

15. HOBBS, *supra* note 1, at ch. XIII.

16. Draper, *supra* note 10, at 96.

17. SCHMITT, *supra* note 2, at 96.

on the ground were mostly mercenaries, as described above—men who fought in exchange for money and had no political loyalty to Leopold II or belief in his mission’s goals. The colony was built on a relationship of one-sided, forced wealth extraction but was ironically called a “free trade zone.”¹⁸ In accordance with Schmitt’s philosophy, it seems that belief in distinct political and economic spheres is a sociological fiction Europeans created to feel better about their desires and the operations they undertake to satisfy those desires. The Congo Free State at its baseline functioned as an economic tool for Leopold II, but it did not lead to mutuality, equality, justice, or freedom. Belgian political conquest relied on its contemporaneous international community refusing to acknowledge it as a form of “thievery” or “crime,” and was both enabled and justified by economics.

Interestingly, visitors to the Congo Free State in its early years identified the economics of the Congo Free State as causing its political problems. For example, journalist Edward James Glave wrote in 1897 that “the wretched rubber business should be stopped; this would remove the great evil. It is the enforced commerce which breeds all of the trouble.”¹⁹ Glave didn’t seem to realize that without the rubber business, there would be no reason for the colony to exist (from the perspective of Leopold II and his investors). This disconnect speaks to the fading boundaries between the qualities Schmitt describes as typically associated with either the political or economic sphere.

Such a disconnect also speaks to the difference in motive between Leopold II and the missionaries and visitors to the Congo Free State. Leopold II was profit-driven, necessarily creating a shortsighted administration. His government asked only how they could extract the most resources at that moment. The missionaries, in contrast, appear to have genuinely believed in their “civilizing” mission. They wanted to spread Christianity, and perhaps also to remodel Congolese society in a European light. These goals require slow, sustainable growth and the implementation of effective government structures—all of which would have slowed down the Leopoldian government’s profit extraction. Missionary authors like Glave seem a bit surprised by what they saw as the incompetent administration of the Congo Free State. But this administration was only incompetent in achieving the goal of helping a people develop their own democratic, capitalist society. It was unfortunately rather effective for Leopold II’s purposes.

18. Draper, *supra* note 10, at 96.

19. Marouf Hasian Jr., *Alice Seeley Harris, the Atrocity Rhetoric of the Congo Reform Movements, and the Demise of King Léopold’s Congo Free State*, 23 *ATLANTIC J. COMM.* 178, 183 (2015).

C. State, Society and Sovereignty

Schmitt further maintains that the false dichotomy of economic and political ways serves to maintain a “hierarchical value system of the relation of state and society.”²⁰ Another aspect of the Congo Free State—the role of private investment—highlights this point. Scholars Sara Lowes and Eduardo Montero describe how Leopold II designated large parts of the Congo Free State as “concessions to private companies,” who extracted natural resources by using extreme violence and co-opting local leaders.²¹ Such private companies are in the domain of “society,” but were crucial to effectuating the goals of Leopold II’s political campaign and maintaining the state’s political domination over the Congolese. The state and its political ways were in turn necessary for those private corporations to be able to extract as much wealth from the Congolese as they did. Particularly insidious about this arrangement is how it enabled private European companies to present a clean façade to their societies, blaming any violence or cruelty on the state and its political functions. In effect, these corporations were able to conceal the truth that the violence was both embedded in and crucial for their own operations as well as society’s economic institutions.

This society-state dichotomy is further deconstructed in line with Schmitt’s theory by the positioning of the “state” in the Congo Free State. Leopold II personally established the “Committee for Studies of the Upper Congo” in 1877—a precursor to the Congo Free State—with the express goal of opening up the African interior to European trade along the Congo River.²² It was under this committee’s auspices that British explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley began the first negotiations with Congolese leaders, lending a multinational character to Belgian’s efforts.²³ Leopold II owned the colony, but the foundational treaties intended to ensure that “all of the European nations” would profit from “free trade” in the region.²⁴ Leopold II began to acquire “vacant” land and passed a number of protectionist measures throughout the 1880s and 1890s, becoming the “overseer of a massive governmental structure” that brought together “private concessionary companies, military outposts, and religious missions.”²⁵ The Congo

20. SCHMITT, *supra* note 2, at 96.

21. Sara Lowes and Eduardo Montero, *Concessions, Violence, and Indirect Rule: Evidence from the Congo Free State*, 136 Q.J. ECON. 2047, 2048 (2021).

22. *Congo Free State*, *supra* note 6.

23. *Id.*

24. Hasian Jr., *supra* note 19, at 182.

25. *Id.*

Free State occupied an anomalous position: formally a sovereign entity under Leopold's personal rule, but deeply entangled with Belgian personnel, capital, and later state interests..

Immanuel Kant's philosophy sheds light on how Leopold II was allowed to develop the Congo Free State and maintain his ironclad grip in the early years. Kant writes that "each state puts its majesty" in the quality of it not being subject to "external lawful coercion."²⁶ One could understand this statement to mean simply that kings of states are not subject to legal coercion. However, an alternative interpretation is that it is the lack of lawful external coercion itself that creates and defines "majesty" (i.e., the kingly position). Perhaps Leopold II's ability to exert ownership over the Congo colony and to run it as abusively as he wanted reified his position as monarch as much as it derived from his power as monarch.

D. *Cruelty and Human Nature*

Moreover, the Congo regime's cruelty substantiates Kant's view of European imperialists. Kant argues that the "injustice" civilized and commercial European states show in "visiting foreign lands and peoples" reaches "horrifying" heights, with visitation being "tantamount to conquering them."²⁷ By the late 1890s, the inhumane treatment of the Congolese included forced labor with rubber-gathering quotas, beating and lashings, kidnapping workers' families, burning villages, slaughtering families of rebels, and body mutilation such as cutting off children's hands.²⁸ The population of the entire state is said to have declined from some twenty million to eight million.²⁹ According to scholar David M. Gordon, the violence began even before the Red Rubber frenzy that marked the 1890s and first few years of the twentieth century.³⁰

The abuses experienced by the Congolese also validate Kant's proposition that European colonizers viewed places like the Congo as "countries belonging to no one," full of inhabitants that counted as "nothing."³¹ They also corroborate Weber's analogy of a victorious

26. KANT, *supra* note 3, at 326.

27. *Id.* at 329.

28. *Congo Free State*, *supra* note 6.

29. *Id.*

30. David M. Gordon, *Precursors to Red Rubber: Violence in the Congo Free State, 1885–1895*, 236 PAST & PRESENT 133, 133 (2017).

31. KANT, *supra* note 3, at 329.

conqueror to a successful lover who believes his rival must have been a man of lesser worth, or else he would not have lost.³² Europeans viewed the Congolese as having lesser worth, and the administration's dehumanization of the local populace allowed the Belgians and private corporations to justify their actions.

The brutality of the Congo Free State further verifies Kant's understanding of human nature. Kant writes that under civil laws (i.e., internally in a country), government restraint can "greatly veil" the "malevolence of human nature," but that nature is "unconcealed in the free relations of nations."³³ Leopold II would not think to treat his own countrymen this way and the European community would not allow it. But in its relationship with the Congo, Leopold II and his Belgian administration revealed their malignant impulses, lack of self-control and absence of guilt over their actions. While states pay lip service to the concept of human rights, Kant further argues, there is a great "moral predisposition to eventually become master of the evil principle within him" and to "hope for this from others."³⁴ Leopold II, the *Force Publique*, and all the private corporate overseers seem to have fed off of each other's brutality, encouraging each actor to embrace their own torturous impulses and to justify others doing so.

Finally, Hobbes provides another pragmatic layer to Kant's reflections on nature. He explains that "taking pleasure" in envisioning one's potential for conquest leads man to take more than he needs for security.³⁵ This theory helps explain how the Congo Free State administration reached the levels of cruelty it did during the early years. Beatings, kidnappings, village burnings, and the cutting off of children's hands³⁶ were not necessary to secure resource extraction, yet the Belgians and their conscripted African soldiers perpetrated those atrocities anyway. Hobbes' concept of the pleasure in envisioning potential conquest could help explain why they chose to do so. Hobbes' theory also prophesizes how the Belgian parliament would take the Congo back after observing Leopold II go too far. When Belgium annexed the Congo Free State, it did not relinquish the colony but chose to administer it with the minimum level of violence they viewed as necessary for the security of their investment in the Congo.

PART II. ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE CONGO FREE STATE

32. WEBER, *supra* note 4, at 356.

33. KANT, *supra* note 3, at 326.

34. *Id.*

35. HOBBS, *supra* note 1, at ch. XIII.

36. *Congo Free State*, *supra* note 6.

AND LEOPOLD II

A. *Early Pro-Congo Free State Perspectives*

In the beginning of Congo Free State, Leopold II's regime faced widespread approval from missionaries on the ground. Missionary approval is significant because missionaries did not have an economic stake in the extraction of natural resources like Leopold II and private corporations did. Many members of the Balolo mission regarded King Leopold II as a "magnanimous Christian benefactor who advanced Europe's civilizing missions."³⁷ Many missionary photographs portrayed Europeans as "saviors and pioneers."³⁸ One prominent British missionary, William Holman Bentley, was convinced that the Belgian people in Europe would be proud of the "part which their small country" had played in the "opening up of Africa."³⁹ *Fin de siècle* images comprising the visual culture of the Congo Free State included many "positive, pro-Leopoldian images" imbued with themes of violence, European heroism, and anti-Arab sentiment that served to emphasize a "favorable view of colonialism."⁴⁰

This positive reception reflects what Kant terms the *peccatum philosophicum*, a philosophy endorsed by many of his time, which held that "the devouring of a *small* state" is an "easily pardonable trifle" if a "much *larger* state gains by it, to the supposedly greater good of the world."⁴¹ Missionaries and visitors to the Congo arguably viewed the exploitation of the Congo region (inherent in colony-colonizer relationships) to be "pardonable" since Belgium was economically gaining from it. In fact, Kant's theory remains pertinent even on a larger scale. Zooming out, the colonial relationship was not simply between Congo and Belgium, but between the Congo region (analogized as the small state) and the European continent (the much larger state). Although European states fought many wars between themselves, a sense of unity predominated when Europeans looked at Africa. The centrality

37. Hasian Jr., *supra* note 19, at 181.

38. *Id.* at 182.

39. *Id.*

40. Matthew G. Stanard, *Competing Visions: The Visual Culture of the Congo Free State and Fin de Siècle Europe*, 46 HIST. REFLECTIONS 101, 101 (2020).

41. KANT, *supra* note 3, at 350 (emphasis in original).

of Christianity to the missionaries' work⁴² fits nicely with Kant's description of the "supposedly greater good of the world."⁴³ The destruction of Congolese social relationships, the derogation of their culture, and the appropriation of their resources were all a "trifle" when compared to how much the world would supposedly improve by the spread (read: imposition) of Christianity. In his writings, the missionary William Bentley "underscored the fact that great numbers of natives were enrolled as legal citizens of the state," and he argued that they "assumed all civil rights."⁴⁴ The identification of indigenous people as "legal citizens" with "civil rights" further served to justify colonial rule—almost as if current legal status (the accuracy of which is highly debatable) can undo the original sin of establishing the colony in the first place.

B. *Public Approval Dissipates*

As the years went on, cracks developed in public attitudes towards Leopold II's regime. By the turn of the century, a few missionaries began to "openly worry" about the Congo Free State's destruction of villages, sentry abuse, military raids, and the dehumanization of the Congolese, who were "supposed to be the protected wards of the state."⁴⁵ But these missionaries viewed themselves "as guests of the Congo Free State" and as such, were "waiting for gradual reform that might end perceived horrors."⁴⁶ Public concern remained limited in scope and did not spur intervention. Men like the journalist Glave were convinced that Leopold II somehow did not know about the abuses, refusing to take an anti-imperialist stance or denigrate Leopold II's work.⁴⁷ Sectarian "interest, national loyalty, and an overwhelming faith in the benefits of Europeanization were allowed to obscure the essential facts" of the Congo Free State regime and its humanitarian abuses.⁴⁸ This

42. See Hasian Jr., *supra* note 19, at 179 ("For many years British Protestant missionaries viewed themselves as visitors in the CFS who were allowed to work alongside their Catholic brothers and sisters as they spread the word of God in the Congo Basin.").

43. KANT, *supra* note 3, at 350.

44. Hasian Jr., *supra* note 19, at 182.

45. *Id.* at 183.

46. *Id.* at 184.

47. *Id.* at 183.

48. Catherine Ann Cline, *The Church and the Movement for Congo Reform*, 32 CHURCH HISTORY 46, 46 (1963).

concern, marked by the hesitancy and the reticence to question Leopold II, reaffirms the accuracy of both Kant's exposition on monarchical authority and his concept of the *peccatum philosophicum*.

Interestingly, when public sentiment finally started shifting, the first target was Leopold II himself. Hasian Jr. explains that the "relative silence" of the early Protestant missionaries created a situation where "critics had to see themselves as anti-Leopoldian reformers before change could take place."⁴⁹ Once the Belgians and missionaries viewed the Congo Free State as Leopold II's private playground, they felt it was legitimate not only to attack him but to void the treaties that established the Congo Free State as a private, political entity. Missionary and visitor need to decouple the monarch from the entity casts an interesting shadow on Kant's view of restraint on kingly coercion. The Belgian parliament did not mind subjecting Leopold II to external, lawful coercion (removing the colony from his control),⁵⁰ but did not remove him from power as ruler of Belgium.

Finally, this development also reinforces the Hobbesian idea of the inherent selfishness of man.⁵¹ Many missionaries did not officially turn on Leopold II until he started prohibiting the expansion of British Protestant missions, electing instead to help fund the spread of Belgian Catholicism.⁵² It took what these missionaries saw as Leopold II's betrayal of them to stop denying the abuses they saw intensify each year.

PART III. REGIME CHANGE FROM THE CONGO FREE STATE TO THE BELGIAN CONGO

A. *Establishing the Belgian Congo*

By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, international indignation at the abuses of the Congo Free State grew so great that Leopold II was "forced to transfer his authority in the Congo to the Belgian government."⁵³ In 1908, the Belgian parliament abolished the Congo Free State and replaced it with the Belgian Congo, a

49. Hasian Jr., *supra* note 19, at 182.

50. See *Belgian Congo*, ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA (Oct. 30, 2025), <https://www.britannica.com/print/article/59224> (The Belgian Congo was "established by the Belgian parliament to replace the previous, privately owned Congo Free State").

51. HOBBS, *supra* note 1, at ch. XV.

52. Hasian Jr., *supra* note 19, at 184.

53. *Congo Free State*, *supra* note 6.

colony that the legislature would control.⁵⁴ The international outrage that led to this regime change, considered by some scholars to be the “first modern international human rights campaign,”⁵⁵ was in large part sparked by the publication of Alice Seeley Harris’s “atrocities photographs,” which imprinted the need to intervene into the public imagination.⁵⁶ Newspapers across the world publicized debates about the atrocity photographs and European parliaments were “flooded with reformist petitions.”⁵⁷ Changing public sentiment began a “war” against Leopold II, albeit a war marked by condemnation and international pressure instead of violence.

While the atrocity photographs were used primarily to provoke a public revolt against Leopold II’s personal control over the Congo region, they were also used to further justify the system of colonialism. Hasian Jr. argues that the images were often contextualized in ways that “furthered the goals of missionaries who were interested in displaying the redemptive power of civilizing missionary work in the Congo.”⁵⁸ One journalist, William McCutchan Morrison, wrote an essay in 1903 that used Harris’ photographs to evidence what he called “the misgovernment of the Congo Free State.”⁵⁹ A decade after public concern started, the public still chose to view the Congo Free State abuses as untethered to colonialism as an institution. In their eyes, the Belgian colony was simply “misgoverned”; the system was not inherently unjust.

While modern thinkers and Kant view the entire colonial system as inhumane and unjust, even without physical cruelty and violence, proponents of the Belgian colony (which turned out to be most of the missionaries, journalists, and Belgians at home) took a utilitarian stance. To them, the abuses of the Congo Free State may have impaired the usefulness of the colony—or to be more pragmatic, limited the ability of the Congolese to work at their highest capacity. But to the missionaries and public, such impairment did not destroy the useful-

54. *Id.*

55. Berber Bevernage, *The Making of The Congo Question: Truth-Telling, Denial and ‘Colonial Science’ in King Leopold’s Commission of Inquiry on The Rubber Atrocities in the Congo Free State (1904–1905)*, 22 *RETHINKING HIST.* 203, 203 (2018).

56. Hasian Jr., *supra* note 19, at 185 (“After all, after seeing these sights of actual victims of Léopold’s sentinels, how could defenders of the Congo Free State continue to say that abuses were not taking place and that reformers weren’t needed?”).

57. *Id.* at 188.

58. *Id.* at 185.

59. *Id.*

ness of a Belgian colony. Imperial life inspired feelings of both “repulsion and desire” in Belgians and missionaries.⁶⁰ Such desire harkens back to Kant’s concept of the malevolence of human nature and Hobbes’ view of mankind’s selfishness. As the international community continued to legitimize an imperialist Belgium while protesting Leopold II’s behavior, that “desire” tipped the scales in favor of saving the colony while ousting Leopold II from his position as its proprietary owner.

Enduring pro-imperial attitudes also reflect Kant’s concept of the use of imperial subjects. He pessimistically writes that European “savages” know how to better use the people they have defeated than American “savages,” who simply “make a meal” of their defeated enemies.⁶¹ Europeans “would rather increase the number of their subjects,” in effect growing their “instruments” for war.⁶² This proposition is applicable to the Congo, if one views Leopold II and the Congo Free State as analogous to the “American savages” in Kant’s rhetoric and the Belgian Congo to the “European savages.” The core limitation of “making a meal” out of someone is that it’s short-sighted. Once eaten, a meal can no longer provide future returns. But increasing the number of one’s subjects and using them to conquer greater fields is far-sighted. The conqueror may not reap immediate benefits, but they will profit more in the long run. Kant’s concept is thus similar to today’s common maxim of feeding a man a fish versus teaching a man how to fish. Applying Kant’s philosophy to the Congo, Leopold II’s regime “made a meal” of the people he defeated. The Congo Free State put its efforts into maximizing the profit he could extract from them at that moment in time. From a purely utilitarian perspective, the administration actually weakened their ability to extract future profit from the natives in the long run. Put in colder administrative terms, terror on that scale could undermine the very labor force the regime sought to exploit. The point is not that lesser violence would have made colonialism legitimate, but that Belgian reformers could condemn Leopoldian brutality while preserving the underlying extractive relationship. Perhaps the Belgians believed that slightly better treatment of indigenous people could improve their numbers.

60. *Id.* at 183.

61. KANT, *supra* note 3, at 326.

62. *Id.*

B. *Utilitarianism and Economic Growth*

Ultimately, in accordance with Kant's theory, the reduction in violence and cruelty that accompanied the nationalization of the Belgian colony in the Congo did have utilitarian benefits for Belgium and its Western allies. Private foreign investment in the Belgian Congo increased substantially after World War I, establishing livestock farms and large plantations (growing cotton, oil palms, coffee, cacao, and rubber).⁶³ Mining operations grew to include gold, diamonds, copper, tin, cobalt, and zinc, with the Belgian Congo also becoming an important source of uranium for the United States.⁶⁴ It appears foreign investment in the colony during this period was spurred by World War I. It is also likely, however, that the international community felt more comfortable investing in a colony whose violence had been white-washed, where the worst human rights abuses had been hidden beneath a veneer of peaceful paternalism.

Economic development during the years of the Belgian Congo raises the question of how important the moral outrage was in the minds of activists and the Belgian parliament when they decided to oust Leopold II from proprietorship of the colony. Although the decision was couched in the language of morality and humanitarian rights, Kant and Hobbes might both argue that deep down, the true motivation was to make their exploitation of the Congolese both more sustainable and more palatable.

Justifying foreign occupation by its economic benefits abjectly fails to center the violated humanity and experiences of the Congolese people. Kant, who stands out among thinkers of his time for recognizing the humanity of non-white peoples, might agree. Kant argues that a state is a society of human beings, not a belonging, and as such, to annex a state like it's a possession is to obliterate the existence of moral personhood and turn people into things in violation of divine law.⁶⁵

C. *Belgian Honor and Dignity*

Like Kant, Weber would likely reject the moralizing excuses of the Belgium public for their 1908 decision to keep the Congo colony. But he adds a new layer for understanding the Belgian decision. Weber

63. *Belgian Congo*, *supra* note 50.

64. *Id.*

65. KANT, *supra* note 3, at 318 (“[T]o annex [a state] to another state as a graft is to do away with its existence as a moral person and to make a moral person into a thing, and so to contradict the idea of the original contract, apart from which no right over a people can be thought.”).

writes, “A nation will forgive damage to its interests, but not injury to its honour, and certainly not when this is done in a spirit of priggish self-righteousness.”⁶⁶ Anti-Leopoldian activists’ appeals to humanitarianism may have been viscerally genuine in that they did not like seeing sentries chop off children’s hands, but such appeals were still an exercise of “self-righteousness,” especially in light of their pro-imperialist baseline perspective. When the parliament was about to appropriate the Congo Free State in 1908, Leopold II ran to burn his administrative papers, reportedly exclaiming that “they will have my Congo, but they will never know what I did there.”⁶⁷ Unfortunately for Leopold II, the public already knew much of what he had done there. And that knowledge created a dignity issue for the Belgian public. Leopold II embarrassed the Belgians on the world stage—even their fellow imperialist nations thought the Congo Free State went too far.

In addition to being a possible reason for the Belgian parliament’s decision to nationalize the Congo Free State, this dignity issue could also be a reason why the Belgians kept the colony. If the Belgian government relinquished all claims to the Congo, then it might look to the rest of Europe like having the colony was a bad idea from the start. Weber’s philosophy thus introduces the idea of saving face into the Belgian decision. The Belgian parliament and people weren’t able to defend Leopold II’s actions, but they could legitimize the mission he started.

PART IV. 20TH CENTURY REFLECTIONS ON THE BELGIAN CONGO

By the late 1950s, while other imperialist nations were preparing their colonies for independence, Belgium still portrayed the Congo as an “idyllic land of parent-child relationships between Europeans and Africans.”⁶⁸ Late twentieth century scholars would come to view the Belgian Congo (1908 – 1960) as a “model colony,”⁶⁹ and former fruit cutters would remember their early years as “pampered children.”⁷⁰ In

66. WEBER, *supra* note 4, at 356.

67. Robert Harms, *Surveying the Archives of the Congo Free State*, 65 J. AFR. HIST. 267, 267 (2024) (book review).

68. *Belgian Congo*, *supra* note 50.

69. Hasian Jr., *supra* note 19, at 189.

70. Benoît Henriët, *‘Brave Men’ and ‘Pampered Children’: Male Bodies, Labour and Coming of Age in Belgian Congo*, 36 GENDER & HIST. 565, 574 (2024).

the end, Belgium re-wrote history so as to categorize the worst of Leopold II's regime as a moment of injustice resulting from the administration simply getting carried away, falsely decoupled from the system of imperialism. This paternalistic view of Congolese life under Belgian rule, both before and after the Red Rubber crisis, conceals the reality of the dynamic of colonization.

CONCLUSION

A. Summary and Synthesis

Belgian King Leopold II established the Congo Free State in the 1880s as a private entity. The creation of the Congo Free State challenges Hobbes' argument that desire is not a sin until a law forbids it. Underneath a veneer of political propriety lent by treaties and supposed due process, militarized violence was central to the Belgium sovereign's control. The violence needed to sustain the fledgling colony supports the pessimistic Hobbesian view of human nature, while Hobbes' pragmatism helps distinguish the administration's pretextual justifications from its true motives. At the Berlin West Africa Conference of 1884–85, the international European community officially recognized the colony, and despite Leopold II individually owning the Congo Free State, many private companies were active in the colony, profiting from the extraction and sale of Congolese resources. The Congo Free State's semi-private, semi-public status supports Schmitt's dissections of the political-economic dichotomy and state-society hierarchy, while its acceptance by the Belgian people and international community echoes Kant's ideas about how sovereign power is leveraged and reified. Finally, Kant's fiery critique of European colonizers and his argument that international relations reveal the malevolence intrinsic in humanity are vindicated by the abuses that Congolese natives suffered at the Belgian hands.

In the early years of the Congo Free State, European journalists and missionaries were quick to praise Belgium's efforts, reflecting what Kant terms the *peccatum philosophicum*. But public attitudes slowly soured on Leopold II's administration, especially after the Red Rubber Frenzy of the 1890s brought new levels of cruelty towards indigenous people.⁷¹ Early activism against the Congo Free State targeted Leopold II as the problem, a development that reaffirms Hobbes' belief in mankind's selfishness while challenging some of Kant's views on the relationship between a sovereign and his people.

71. *Congo Free State*, *supra* note 6.

International outcry, extending into official parliaments, resulted in the Belgian legislature nationalizing the Congo colony in 1908. Pro-imperialist attitudes survived the upheaval and the country refused to dethrone Leopold II, choosing instead to turn the Congo Free State into the Belgian Congo. In purposefully keeping the exploitative colonial dynamic, the Belgian government simply made the Belgian people its benefactor as opposed to Leopold II himself. The fruits of Congolese labor would now flow not to one man, but to many. This development once again reveals the distance between colonizers' justifications and real motives, echoing Hobbes' theory on how men take pleasure in conquest. It also reflects the cold utilitarianism underlying the Belgian parliament's conduct, corroborating Kant's philosophy on the different ways that imperialist nations 'use' their subjects. Weber's exposition on how nations can forgive damage to their interests but not to their honor not only helps explain why Leopold II ran to burn his archives but also provides another possible reasoning for Belgium's choices—shutting down the colony might be akin to admitting they made a mistake.

As physical violence decreased and the end of World War I brought more foreign investment, the colony took on a paternalistic sheen. After the Congolese finally achieved their independence in 1960, the Belgian Congo would come to be remembered as a model colonial project—the violence and terror excused as a momentary lapse of judgement caused by a greedy man (Leopold II), as opposed to an inherent element of the colonized-colonizer relationship.

B. *Connections to the Present*

Hobbes writes that in the condition of war, there is no place for industry, “because the fruit thereof is uncertain.”⁷² Being a colony is like being at war—daily life is forcibly constrained by a foreign power, whose sole goal is to make an indigenous people's entire existence serve the mother nation's needs. In the condition of colonial exploitation, people are unable to develop their own economy, markets and trade contacts, or cultural knowledge. This is because any attention, resources, or time that a subjugated people dedicate to themselves detract from their colonizer's ability to extract all surplus value. Even in a supposedly “model colony” like the nationalized, post-1908 Belgian Congo, a colonized people's natural development is irrevocably damaged. Not only do imperial nations force indigenous people to neglect their industry, but they actively create suffering, foster fear, and destroy

72. HOBBS, *supra* note 1, at ch. XIII.

traditional social relationships because doing so makes subjugation easier. This helps explain why the DRC still struggles with political instability and high rates of poverty despite being so mineral-rich.⁷³

Hobbes' philosophy on this point also provides support for a reparations argument. One could reasonably argue that Belgium has a financial obligation to the DRC because limiting the DRC's economic growth, sabotaging its political development, and destroying its societal fabric were purposeful parts of Belgium's colonial strategy: designed to increase the profit extraction and lessen the risk of Congolese insurgency.

If human desire is malevolent, and it takes the invention of laws for states to see their actions as evil, is all hope lost? Kant provides some cautious optimism. He writes, "[w]hat is morally evil has the property, inseparable from its nature, of being at odds with itself in its aims and destructive of them," which leads to evil clearing the way for the principle of the good, "even if progress is slow."⁷⁴ If Kant is as prescient in this proposition as he has been in others, perhaps the DRC (and other former colonies like it) will eventually reach the place it would have been in now had Leopold II never found the Congo River.

73. Central Intelligence Agency, *supra* note 5.

74. KANT, *supra* note 3, at 346.