Rich on Harms, 'Land of Tears: The Exploration and Exploitation of Equatorial Africa'

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Jeremy Rich on *Land of Tears: The Exploration and Exploitation of Equatorial Africa*

Since Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost* was published two decades ago, the brutality of the European colonization of Central Africa has again returned to the attention of Anglophone readers. However, popular understandings tend to present Leopold II’s Congo Free State as a morality tale of cruel rulers without considering the economic, environmental, and comparative aspects to central African colonization. *Land of Tears*, by renowned historian Robert Harms, offers a sweeping review of the history of conquest from the 1860s until the Belgian government purchased the Congo Free State from the Belgian king Leopold II. By covering and comparing both the French and Leopoldian invasions, this study undermines the misconceived idea that the Independent State of the Congo was somehow an aberration of colonial excess. Older French efforts to cast Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza as a peace-loving, cultured hero compared to the boorish and cruel Henry Stanley tended to ignore the common features of imperialism. French colonization borrowed the Leopoldian model of concessionary companies and the rapacious exploitation of Africans. At the same time, Harms acknowledges how African leaders such as Tippu Tip could greatly influence colonial politics.

Harms’s main subject lies in political narrative history, even as he does occasionally draw upon his seminal engagement with environmental factors dating back to the early 1980s. The destruction of elephants drove African traders and eventually colonial officials further and further into the Central African interior. David Livingstone, Henry Stanley, and Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza’s careers drive the first half of the study. Their competition for establishing control over the Congo River and the interior of Central Africa is well-worn territory for scholars of European colonization. The political narratives of Leopoldian and French expansion Harms depicts do not stray far from much older scholarship on these topics.

Yet he effectively uses short cases to make the larger story of industrialization and colonial invasion accessible to readers. For example, an extended discussion of Connecticut factories producing ivory products demonstrates how violent struggles over trade in Central Africa connected to mass production in Europe and North America. When reviewing Stanley’s career, Harms uses a series of scenes complete with individual dates and locations. Harms delineates responses by African leaders and communities to European expansion, whether to resist colonial rule or to accept European dominance. This method also strikes against overly vague generalizations about Africa by providing...
specific geographic locations and individual moments.

The second half of the book considers the formation of colonies after Brazza and Stanley between the mid-1880s and World War I. Not surprisingly, there is more consideration of the concessionary era in the Independent State of the Congo than in neighboring French-controlled territory. Harms’s knowledge of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company (ABIR) concession is particularly valuable to examining the vicious impact of Leopoldian rule. Though familiar figures such as the French journalist Félicien Challaye are referenced in discussing French territories, Harms is clearly on surer ground in the Independent State of the Congo.

There is no doubt Harms has mastered the lengthy archival and published record on European colonization in Central Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Francophone specialists are not going to find a great deal of new insights, especially given that Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and other scholars writing in French have mined explorer and colonial records since the 1960s. While Harms clearly has a grasp of current research on the Congo Reform movement and European actors in colonization, it is striking how little recent work is cited on African participants in either Leopoldian Congo or French Equatorial Africa. Does this speak more to the lack of new scholarship or Harms’s lack of engagement with more contemporary research, especially by African scholars? Could less commonly used sources—such as the Disciples of Christ and other missionary records for the Leopoldian period employed effectively by Nancy Rose Hunt—have brought in new perspectives largely overlooked in the dominant archival record? Hunt’s use of oral sources also indicates the ambivalence and obscurity of violence in the Leopoldian era that is at odds with the matter-of-fact approach by Harms. One of the more frustrating aspects of this book is the lack of individual African cases in the Leopoldian period, beyond the usual cast of Swahili-speaking traders defeated by European forces. For example, Manyema communities constituted the military might of Tippu Tip’s successors in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo in the 1870s and 1880s. Yet the internal political dynamics of this important group are dimly apparent here.

In the end, who is the intended audience for this book? Specialists of colonial conquest in Central Africa already will know this material well. There are few major methodological advances here to inspire future research. At the same time, Harms’s lucid overview is an excellent introduction to the colonization of Central Africa to those unfamiliar with the subject, particularly as Basic Books is a respected trade publisher rather than an academic press. To Harms’s credit, the book assumes no knowledge of the subject or literature. Its length and structure probably make the book a somewhat difficult text in its entirety for undergraduate classes, although the wealth of freely accessible primary sources cited here could make Land of Tears an effective textbook. On the other hand, this would be a valuable work to include in graduate classes on African colonization. It also will serve as an exemplary reference work on the European colonization of Central Africa.


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