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## WHP AP | Unit 6 Overview | World History Project

The relationship of rubber tires and oppression is not as outlandish as it sounds. Their relationship tells the story of European rulers like the Belgian king, Leopold II, who exploited and enslaved Africans for their natural resources.

**0:13**

*Narrator speaking in head bubble; series of photos of people riding bikes; illustration of woman with tires; illustration of a tire rack; photo of a rubber tree*

May not look it, but these pictures are part of a story of suffering, exploitation, and resistance. You see, at the end of the 19th century, rubber tires were the latest, greatest invention. People in industrialized countries started buying a lot more bicycles and automobiles. Factories suddenly needed a lot more rubber. Rubber comes from the rubber tree, which was native to South America, but which arrived in Africa and Asia as part of the Columbian Exchange.

**0:44**

*Photo of a person holding a phone; clip of a miner*

By the way, the oppressive labor conditions created to gather all that rubber should be a thing of the past, but our era's latest, greatest invention, the smartphone needs very specific minerals which are mined in Central Africa by laborers working in terrible, oppressive conditions, as well.

*Map of Africa; portrait of King Leopold II; photo of natives harvesting rubber*

So back in the 1890s, one of the largest producers of rubber was the Congo Free State in Central Africa. This colony was held as the personal property of the Belgian, King Leopold II, from 1885 to 1908. He forced the people there to harvest rubber and other resources to be shipped back to Belgium for his profit.

**1:28**

*Portrait of George Washington Williams; text bubble with quote*

In return, the king sent only guns and chains. His regime committed horrific atrocities, as much as half of the colony's population—some 10 to 12 million people—died during Leopold's reign. Some activists around the world witnessed these crimes and called for an end to his rule. In 1890, George Washington Williams, an African-American politician from Ohio and Civil War veteran, wrote an open letter to King Leopold. He wrote:

"Your majesty's government has sequestered their land, burned their towns, stolen their property, enslaved their women and children, and committed other crimes too numerous to mention. All the crimes perpetrated in the Congo have been done in your name and you must answer for the misgovernment of a people whose lives and fortunes were entrusted to you."

He concluded by demanding an international committee investigate Leopold's crimes.

**2:33**

*Animated world map*

The Congo Free State was 75 times the size of Belgium. It had four times the population, so how did this tiny European kingdom, which had itself only gained independence 50 years earlier, come to dominate this huge populist region of Central Africa? And how did this terrible system of brutality end? To answer these questions, you'll first need to understand something called "The New Imperialism."

*Text bubble: Unit Overview; transitional music; paintings of occurrences of the long 19th century; text bubble: New Imperialism*

Hi, I'm John Arthur, and this is Unit 6: Consequences of Industrialization 1750 to 1900. In the last unit, we explored the dual revolutions in politics and industrialization. In this unit, you'll learn how they combined to create the New Imperialism, an expansion and intensification of empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

### 3:31

*Drawings depicting the birth of the nation-state; images of the Industrial Revolution and battle scenes*

*Archaic maps of Africa*

Political revolutions created nation-states and nationalism, which provided governments with new ideological tools to mobilize their people. The Industrial Revolution provided empires with new, more powerful tools of communication, transport, and weaponry. With these tools, even small states like Belgium could impose their will on colonies. Old empires like the British and French expanded their territory in this period.

Newcomers like Japan, Germany, the United States, and Belgium began to conquer their own overseas empires. This process was most dramatic in Africa. In 1870, European empires occupied about 10 percent of Africa. By 1914, they claimed sovereignty over 90 percent of Africa's land mass.

### 4:24

*Photo of a mine in a colony; text bubble: industrial empires...; text bubble: thematic overview; transitional music*

*Map of India; photo of a railroad*

Industrialization provided the tools for these new empires to expand, but it also provided motivation for colonial expansion. Industrial empires sought out new colonies, partly because they needed more raw materials to fuel industrial production and more markets in which to sell products made in European factories.

Though they enjoyed the fruits of industrialization, imperial powers did not allow most of their colonies to industrialize. Rather, they only encouraged industrialization where it allowed them to extract valuable local resources. In India, for example, the British laid hundreds of miles of railroad to move raw materials more efficiently to British steamships and factories. Despite imperialist claims that they were bringing the benefits of civilization to their colonies, it was the imperial homeland, not the colony that benefited.

### 5:25

*Natives speaking with a European colonist*

*Text bubbles: Colonial hierarchies, Colonial officials, and Foreign corporations; images of colonists marching with subjugated natives; text bubbles: Local collaborators and Most colonized people; photo of a colonists collecting taxes*

Within the colonies, society was deeply unequal: colonial subjects had few or none of the rights of citizens. Ironically, many of the new empires came from the most democratic nation-states of the era including Britain, France, and the United States. Yet while claiming to be the torchbearers of democracy, these states brutally subjugated the people of their colonies.

Colonial hierarchies placed colonial officials and foreign corporations at the top. These officials and companies worked with groups of local collaborators who profited personally, but most colonized peoples didn't benefit from the wealth of their country's natural resources. Colonial governments demanded taxes, extracted resources, and forced their subjects to work for little or no money.



## 6:18

*Image of a graphic novel about colonization; photo of Congo natives; text bubble: Illustrative Example; transitional music*

*Map of Africa; text bubble: Berlin Conference; illustration of the Berlin Conference*

Colonization also disrupted gender roles. Before colonization, women and many African societies often held important positions in social and economic life. European colonial authority often erased these positions. In the case of the Congo Free State, colonizers took women away from their roles in food production, crafting, and trade and forced them to labor in rubber production, decimating local economies.

In King Leopold's Congo Free State, forced labor was particularly harsh, as the king's personal army enforced a brutal system of extraction and slavery. Leopold took control of the Congo Free State after the Berlin Conference ended in 1885. At that conference, European empires carved up the borders of Africa to avoid conflict among themselves.

## 7:15

*Illustration of Leopold "cutting the cake"*

*Text bubble: Force Publique; photo of the Force Publique*

In his own words, Leopold attended the conference because he "Didn't want to risk losing a fine chance to secure for ourselves a slice of this magnificent African cake."

While he might have claimed he was interested in helping the people he colonized, once he had secured his colony, Leopold's interest was in extracting as much of the country's resources as possible. He established his own private army, the Force Publique, a collection of mercenary officers and African soldiers. This army traveled around the colony, forcing villages to produce rubber rather than crops that they could eat or sell themselves.

## 7:58

*Photo of the Force Publique; natives getting their hands cut-off*

*Portrait of GWW and Edie Morrell; illustrations depicting Leopold's rule*

Failing to deliver rubber was punishable by death. The colonial administration demanded that soldiers provide hands as proof that they killed the offender, but to save their ammunition soldiers often cut off the hands and feet of their victims, leaving them to die. Beatings, burned villages, and many other horrific acts characterize the colony.

As you learned in Unit 5, there were many people in the long 19th century who refused to accept injustice. Soon reformers like George Washington Williams and Edie Morrell heard of the conditions in the colony and began an international campaign against Leopold. They printed accounts of the atrocities, published pictures of victims, and leveraged celebrities like Mark Twain to spread the message.

## 8:56

*Clip of a mass printer  
Illustrations and photos depicting local resistance in the Congo*

While industrialization provided the tools for colonial domination, it also provided some tools to resist, including mass printing, the telegraph, and photography.

But it wasn't only international action that ended Leopold's rule: local resistance in the form of mass revolts, mutinies, and other quieter forms of disobedience destabilized the colony. These revolts killed colonial officials, and more importantly, cost Belgium a great deal of money. With widespread international pressure and instability in the colony, the Belgian parliament was finally pressured into taking it from Leopold in 1908.

*Photo of Belgian diplomats; photo of a sign announcing the Congo's independence*

**9:48**

*Photo of an aged King Leopold; text bubble with American poem regarding Leopold's death*

Though this ended the worst atrocities, it was not independence. The Belgian Congo would remain under Belgian colonial control until 1960.

As for King Leopold II, he died in 1909, a year after losing his colony. Crowds booed his funeral procession. One American poet wrote this after his death: "Listen to the yell of Leopold's ghost burning in hell for his hand-maimed host hear how the demons chuckle and yell cutting his hands off down in hell."

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