



Past Shapes the Present

## Investigating Human Cost: From Leopold to Lithium and Cobalt in the Congo

### Historical Context

In the late 1800s, European nations competed fiercely to control parts of Africa. During this era, known as the Scramble for Africa, Belgium's King Leopold II took personal control of a vast region in Central Africa, calling it the Congo Free State. Although Leopold claimed he wanted to bring civilization and Christianity to Africa, his true motive was to exploit Congo's rich natural resources, especially rubber and ivory, to boost his own wealth. Under Leopold's rule (1885–1908), the Congo experienced extreme brutality and suffering. Congolese people were forced into slave-like conditions, often violently punished or killed if they didn't collect enough rubber. Workers faced torture, starvation, and severe punishments, including the amputation of limbs as a form of discipline and intimidation. Millions of Congolese died during this horrific period. Eventually, international outrage led by journalists and activists exposed the abuses taking place in the Congo. Under pressure from global criticism, the Belgian government took control of the colony from Leopold in 1908, renaming it the Belgian Congo. However, exploitation and hardship continued under official Belgian rule, shaping Congo's troubled path toward independence in 1960. Now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this country faces serious challenges related to the mining of lithium and other valuable minerals like cobalt, which are essential for smartphones, electric vehicles, and other modern technologies. Many Congolese, including children, work in dangerous and exploitative conditions in artisanal mines without proper safety gear or fair wages. Entire communities have been displaced to make way for large scale mining operations, and the environment suffers from pollution and deforestation caused by these industries. Despite the wealth generated, much of the profit is lost to corruption or used to fund armed groups, continuing a cycle of instability. These modern issues echo the legacy of King Leopold II's brutal exploitation of the Congo during the colonial period. Just as Leopold extracted rubber and ivory through violence and forced labor for personal gain, today's global demand for minerals is once again enriching outsiders while leaving many Congolese people to suffer the consequences.

### Connection to Habit

The modern exploitation of lithium and cobalt in the Democratic Republic of the Congo powerfully illustrates how the past shapes the present. The violent extraction of resources under King Leopold II during the colonial era established a pattern of outside powers enriching themselves through the suffering of the Congolese people. Today, that pattern continues as multinational corporations extract valuable minerals for global technology, often through unsafe labor, environmental damage, and corruption. By studying Leopold's brutal rule, marked by forced labor, displacement, and profit-driven violence, we better understand why Congo remains vulnerable to exploitation today. The country's current struggles with poverty, instability, and resource injustice are not accidental; they are deeply connected to colonial systems that prioritized wealth over human life. Recognizing these historical roots allows us to see that today's global inequalities were built on decisions and structures made long ago and can therefore be challenged and changed.

## Discussion Questions

- How did King Leopold II's control of the Congo set the stage for continued exploitation of the region's resources?
- What similarities and differences do you see between Leopold's rubber trade and today's lithium and cobalt mining in the Congo?
- Why do you think outside powers have continued to benefit from Congo's natural resources, while the Congolese people continue to face hardship?
- How might the effects of colonialism still be influencing the political and economic systems in the Congo today?
- How can understanding the history of colonization help us better understand current global inequalities?
- Do you think today's mining companies have a responsibility to learn from the history of Leopold's exploitation? Why or why not?
- What changes would need to happen to break the cycle of exploitation in the Congo from the colonial era to today's tech-driven economy?

## Suggested Activity

### Materials Needed:

- Printed or projected copies of: [Mutilated Congolese Children and Adults \(c. 1900–1905\)](#) and [Daniel \(11\) Carrying Cobalt, 2018 \(Photo by Sebastian Meyer\)](#)
- Sticky notes
- Chart paper or whiteboard
- Reflection journals or sheets of notebook paper

### Step 1: Pre-Lesson Question [5 mins]

Pose the question to your students as a class, have students share aloud: What do you already know about how colonialism affected Africa, particularly in the Congo?

### Step 2: Image Analysis: Gallery Walk [15 mins]

- Post both images around the room or distribute printed copies.
- In pairs or small groups, students spend time analyzing each image using the following observation questions:
  - What do you notice first in this image?
  - Who is in the image, and what are they doing?
  - What emotions or conditions are being shown?

Encourage students to write their thoughts on sticky notes and place them on chart paper labeled "1900s Congo" and "Modern-Day Congo."

### Step 3: Whole Class Debrief [15-20 mins]

First, using the whiteboard or a piece of chart paper label it "Both Images" and students will post sticky notes based on this question: What are the similarities between the two images? What differences do you see?

Then, as a class, examine both sets of responses. Use guiding questions to connect the past to the present:

- How does the image from 1900 help us understand the image from 2018?
- What do these images convey about labor and human rights?
- What do these images reveal about the people in power?

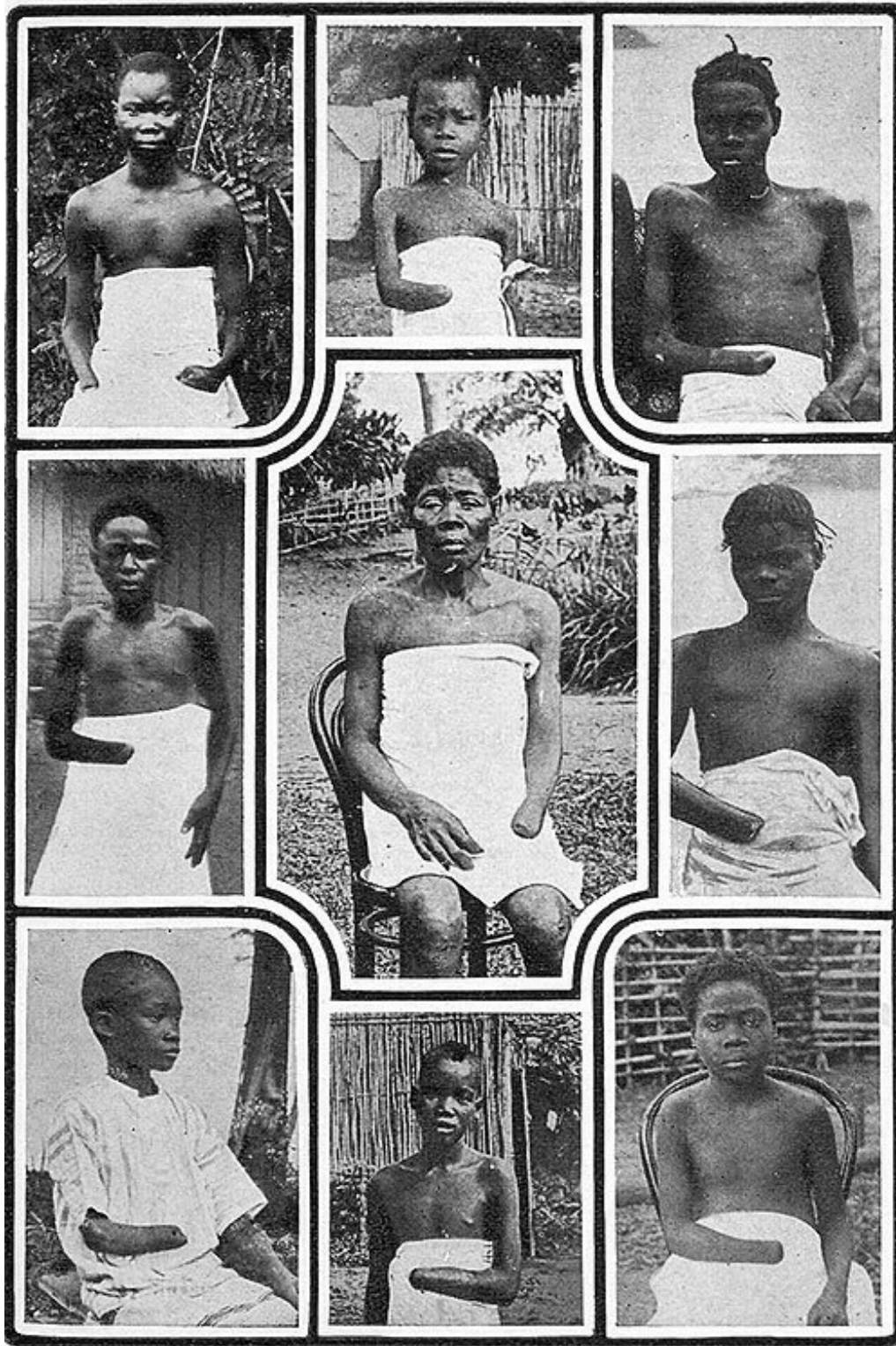
### Step 4: Independent Reflection [10 mins]

Students write a short reflection or complete an exit slip responding to:

- How does understanding the past help us make sense of the present?
- What responsibilities do we have as consumers or global citizens when it comes to human rights in supply chains?

## Primary Source

Photographs of Mutilated Children and Adults in the Congo  
(c. 1900-1905)



Source: Mutilated Congolese children and adults (c. 1900-1905) — in Congo Free State (present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo)

## Primary Source

Photograph of Daniel (11) carries a bag of cobalt on his back.  
He works in a mine ferrying sacks of cobalt to a depot.  
Democratic Republic of Congo, 2018

