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## 'Heart of Darkness'

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# A glimpse at colonialism in action

On Aug. 18, as the Rwandan Patriotic Front began its armed attacks on the camps of Rwandan refugees in Zaire, the London *Observer* published an op-ed by Norman Stone, which went straight to the heart of British policy for Africa. Citing the horrific strife in Rwanda and Burundi, Stone bluntly stated: "For re-imperialization now begins to make sense again, and the Europeans would be in a good position to push through some sort of international mandate. This was what happened over a century ago, and you can argue that the problems of Africa were made infinitely worse than they needed to be because the process was brought prematurely to an end. The world today has a ghostly similarity to that of a century ago."

Many Africans who remember the pre-independence days would not agree with Stone's exultation of colonial rule. The reality of imperialism was not highly publicized, however; even as late as the 1960s, on the eve of independence for most countries, life expectancy in most African countries was generally under 30 years of age. One writer who had a first-hand view of colonialism and depicted it was the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad. In 1889, Conrad traveled the Congo River as master of the ship *Otago*. In 1899, Conrad wrote about his journey through the Belgian Congo, in *Heart of Darkness*. Belgian colonial rule, which was run directly by and for the Belgian monarchy, was notoriously harsh. Conrad relates that the porters for a group of "pilgrims" were not given food each day, but handed a nine-inch piece of wire, which they were supposed to exchange for food with area Africans—a form of payment by which they starved. Under colonial rule, the Congo River Basin had been turned into no less than a giant concentration camp, in which people were worked to death, as Conrad described:

### An 'Inferno'

"A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants. . . . They were building a railway. . . .

"A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints

of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them rhythmically clinking. . . . All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with . . . complete, deathlike indifference. . . .

"At last I got under the trees. My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound—as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible.

"Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

"They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. The man seemed young—almost a boy—but you know with them it's hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ships's biscuits I had in my pocket. The fingers closed slowly on it and held—there was no other movement and no other glance.

"Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence. While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone.

"I didn't want any more loitering in the shade, and I made haste towards the station."