



Leopold II of the Belgians: King of Colonialism

Barbara Emerson

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Leopold II is both a controversial and a key figure in Belgian, European and African history in the second half of the nineteenth century. From his youth he was determined to acquire a colony and, with the help of his private fortune, the volatile explorer H.M. Stanley, and some audacious diplomacy, he became absolute ruler of an enormous portion of Central Africa, the Congo Free State. It was an extraordinary achievement that was to be overshadowed by the harsh regime that developed in the colony and the international outrage it aroused which forced the Belgian government to annex the Congo in 1908. But Leopold II's importance is not only due to his role in the "Scramble for Africa." When he acceded to the Belgian throne in 1865, many considered that his chances of keeping Belgium intact were slight. Leopold was, however, soon able to demonstrate his ability and determination to defend his country's interests and throughout his reign, unpopular though it made him, he never ceased impressing on his countrymen their military vulnerability. Leopold II's fervent patriotism combined with his insatiable colonial ambitions were to involve him in many of the major issues of the period in Europe and Africa.

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