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| “Decree of Leopold II, King of the Belgians, Sovereign of the Independent State of the Congo, Regarding Settlements for African Children, 21 July 1890”  To all present and to come, greeting:  Whereas it is expedient to make provision for the protection of those children who have been victims of the Slave Trade; and   Whereas it is the general duty of the State to assume the guardianship of abandoned children, or of those whose parents do not fulfill their duties;  Now, therefore, on the proposal of our Administrator-General of the Foreign Department, we have decreed and do hereby decree:--  ARTICLE I. The State shall assume the guardianship of children liberated in consequence of the arrest and dispersal of a convoy of slaves; of fugitive slaves who demand such protection, of children forsaken, abandoned, or orphans, and of those whose parents do not fulfill their duty with regard to maintaining and educating them. They shall be provided with the means of livelihood and a practical education, and established in life.  ARTICLE II. With this object agricultural and professional settlements shall be established, which shall admit not only such children as come under the definitions of Article I, but, as far as may be, those children who shall ask to be admitted.  ARTICLE III. From the day of their admission the children shall be placed exclusively under the guardianship of the State, to which they shall remain subject, and shall be liable to work, at the discretion of the Governor-General, up to the expiration of their twenty-fifth year in return for maintenance, food, lodging, and free medical attention. |  | Top of Form    Bottom of Form |

**Who do you think wrote this decree? Under which circumstances?**

**How might the audiences have shaped the decree?**

**How might the audiences have responded to the decree?**

**Do you have any reasons to doubt the seeming benevolence of this decree?**

George Mason University, World History Sources, Be the historian, Official Documents: Who was the primary audience for the document, N.d., <http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/docsq4ex.php?s=one> (April 29, 2013).

Professor of History Benedict Carton’s Analysis of the PSD

**1. Introduction and Background Information**  
First, some background about this decree. While claiming to uplift central Africa, King Leopold II instead brought horror. He governed his possession through private companies and an army named the *Force Publique*, which coerced equatorial peoples into collecting raw materials such as wild rubber and ivory. These natural resources made King Leopold II and his business partners fabulously wealthy.

In pursuit of official orders and their own riches, the *Force Publique* killed hundreds of thousands whose only crime was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time; the casualties included children, toddlers, and infants. When African parents died in this colonial violence, their offspring sometimes became wards of a new guardian, King Leopold II. Leopold II secretly conducted his rubber extraction campaigns, issuing denials that jealous enemies who exposed his abuses in the Congo distorted his charitable efforts.

**2. " ... children who have been victims of the Slave Trade;"**   
King Leopold II also claimed to protect victims of the slave trade. In reality, however, his method of “protection” was actually enslavement. Colonial soldiers also arranged to have children, along with their mothers, kidnapped and placed in stockades, an experience of terror and confinement familiar to many African slaves. The Congo hostages would be released if men in their family gathered enough rubber to fulfill a stiff company quota. If these workers feared for their own lives and fled, their shackled offspring could become the “children forsaken” in “agricultural and professional settlements.”

**3. " ... children liberated in consequence of the arrest and dispersal of a convoy of slaves;"**  
King Leopold II does not indicate who was “liberating” the children in a dispersed “convoy of slaves.” In fact, he created orphans with the intention of pressing them into unpaid labor.

**4. "They shall be provided with the means of livelihood and a practical education, and established in life."**  
King Leopold II also claimed that boys and girls under his sovereignty could receive benefits of “civilization” such as vocational schooling and rudimentary Christianity. Among many other claims, King Leopold II boasted that his paternalism extended to urchins incorporated within Catholic missions. The holding of women and children, even the loosening deliberately of parental bonds or the kidnapping of children to funnel them into these missions was part also of this broader notion that Christianity, coloniszation [sic], uplift, and at the end profit, but couched within the other three markers, was crucial to the whole enterprise of Leopold II. He generously funded such religious institutions and made sure they had access to fresh converts.

How was he to redeem children and grant them “the means of livelihood”? Members of his paramilitary, the *Force Publique*, answered this question. When overseeing rubber brigades, they killed slow or enfeebled workers, driving their “abandoned children” to baptism ceremonies; the newly transformed boys and girls then learned the heavy cost of corporal punishment in their course of “education,” as local *Force Publique* units could be called upon to mete out disciplinary beatings in missions.

**5. ARTICLE III**   
ARTICLE III is explicit about how to protect young children “liable to work” for more than two decades “at the discretion of the Governor-General.” King Leopold II constantly feared labor shortages, which could disrupt rubber collection. Shortages resulted from a number of factors, but mainly *Force Publique* rampages and attendant African flight. Thus, “agricultural and professional settlements,” as the decree states, became pools of accessible workers, for the children living there were required to toil in return for “maintenance.” They engaged in rubber procurement, running a gauntlet of retribution and torture for perceived indolence; or hauled loads up to half their body weight to and from boats along the Congo River.

**6. Concluding Remarks and International Response**  
Overall, members of the international community eventually learned to read between the lines of King Leopold II’s decrees. In the first years of 1900, the Belgian monarch’s use of slave labor created an international scandal. News of the conditions in the Congo Free State were exposed in European and U.S. press. The furor attracted Mark Twain, who lampooned the aging ruler in a pamphlet titled *King Leopold’s Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule*. The protagonist of this true-to-life fiction is a rapacious old regent, who complains bitterly that his critics are outmaneuvering his propagandists. Twain’s narrative revolves around the oversized stories that King Leopold circulates, celebrating his so-called humanitarian exploits in the Congo. Abolitionists get wise to the lie, puncture the King’s swollen tales, and voice outrage that the “Sovereign of the Independent State” is in fact the biggest slaver in Africa. By 1908, public pressure and diplomatic maneuvers led to the end of King Leopold II’s rule, and to the annexation of the Congo as a Belgian colony. The kind of benevolent statements and decrees that fooled many in the international community in the 1890s were no longer persuasive by the first decade of the 20th century.

[**http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/bentranscript.html**](http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/bentranscript.html)