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## **Return to “the Heart of Darkness”: Dragutin Lerman’s Colonial Activities in Africa**

*Dragutin Lerman’s career during the colonial period and his time in Africa are seldom examined critically. In other words, his involvement with Belgian King Leopold II is not given the detailed historiographical contextualization it deserves; instead, it is often presented as a romanticized tale of a daring Croatian explorer and cartographer who navigated exotic territories. This article aims to reevaluate Lerman’s participation in Leopold II’s colonial project by analyzing Lerman’s diary, letters, relevant secondary literature, and unpublished archival documents. Therefore, numerous sources from the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the City Museum of Požega, and newspapers from the late nineteenth century were used. To understand Lerman’s role in the colonization of the Congo, his activities in Africa are placed within the broader context of European conquest of the continent. Additionally, the article examines how Lerman’s surviving writings reflect the colonial rhetoric of the late nineteenth century. Ultimately, it seeks to determine the extent to which Lerman was aware of the atrocities committed during European colonization in the Congo.*

**Keywords:** Dragutin Lerman; Leopold II; Congo; colonization of Africa; nineteenth century

## Introduction

In addition to the global coronavirus pandemic, the spring and summer of 2020 were marked by protests in the US against police brutality and racism, sparked by the killing of unarmed 46-year-old African American George Floyd in Minneapolis.<sup>1</sup> The demonstrations quickly spread around the globe, leading to the demolition and vandalism of numerous monuments in several European cities. Many of these statues were dedicated to figures associated with colonialism and the slave trade. Once again, the actions of Belgian King Leopold II (r. 1865-1909) and the horrific crimes committed in the Congo during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century captured public attention.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the growing demand for the removal of Leopold's monuments in Belgium has started to yield results.<sup>3</sup> The events of 2020 have sparked a series of heated yet mostly constructive debates about the colonial legacy and the necessity for reinterpretations of certain historical chapters. These discussions have garnered the attention of several scholars and commentators in Croatia as well. While some argued against the demolition of monuments,<sup>4</sup> others sought to understand the criteria determining which should be removed and which preserved.<sup>5</sup> In addition, some authors have noted that Eastern Europe experienced a similar transformation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, marked by the collapse of communist states and the removal of many monuments linked to that historical period.<sup>6</sup> However, assuming that Croatian history has minimal or no connections to colonialism, while viewing this topic as solely an issue for those countries that were once colonial superpowers, most commentators have not thoroughly reevaluated the actions of individuals like Dragutin Lerman. In other words, while Lerman was directly involved in Leopold II's colonial project, his role has not been critically examined.

In short, despite numerous demands for additional revaluation of the complex and troublesome legacy of European colonialism, the status of Dragutin Lerman, an explorer of Africa from Požega, has remained almost unchanged within the Croatian scientific and cultural community.<sup>7</sup> Lerman's work is still mainly viewed through the

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1 Taylor, „George Floyd Protests: A Timeline“.

2 See: „George Floyd protests: The statues being defaced“.

3 Schultz, „Belgians Target Some Royal Monuments In Black Lives Matter Protest“.

4 Bajruši, „Povjesničar specijaliziran za kulturu sjećanja: Jako je pogrešno rušiti spomenike“.

5 Duhaček, „Koje spomenike treba srušiti, a koje ne?“.

6 Pavičić, „Trend koji je nekad bio popularan u istočnoj Europi danas se širi na europskom Zapadu i SAD-u“.

7 However, it is necessary to single out the excellent MA thesis “The Representation of Croatian Explorer Dragutin Lerman in Public and Scientific Discourse” by Damjan Roce (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb). As the author explained, his intention was to “examine the construction of the image of Croatian explorer Dragutin Lerman within ethnological, historical, museum, cultural-tourism and popular discourse, with a focus on his ethnographic activities as well as his role in the colonial administration of the Belgian king Leopold II.” Considering all of the above, the research conducted by Roce represents a unique example of the revaluation of

prism of his contributions to cartography and ethnography, particularly his mapping of Central Africa<sup>8</sup> and several hundred objects (knives, baskets, bracelets, wooden figurines, clubs, arrows, etc.) that he once donated to the National Museum in Zagreb.<sup>9</sup> In fact, according to some authors, his supposedly benevolent work in Africa can be described as an “enlightening” rapprochement of different civilizations.<sup>10</sup> However, Damjan Roce argues that when we examine Lerman and his work in Africa from a historical perspective, there is not much left to admire.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is worth questioning what remains of the idea of a noble explorer of exotic lands when placed in a historical context.<sup>12</sup> To use Joseph Conrad’s words, a return to “the heart of darkness,”<sup>13</sup> to the historical chapter of unprecedented European crimes in Africa, turns out to be a historiographical necessity.

Given the previously described view of the European colonial past, which is often seen as a burden and responsibility of other nations, Croatian historiography has scarcely attempted to adopt and develop postcolonial theory.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, when analyzing Lerman’s career in the service of the Belgian king between 1882 and 1896, it is indispensable to refer to some aspects of this theoretical corpus. First, it should be noted that the analysis of the colonial discourse occupies one of the central places within the postcolonial theory, which was popularized, along with other important

Lerman’s career within the Croatian academic community. In short, Roce notes that the discussion surrounding Lerman has hardly changed for decades. Even during the socialist Yugoslavia, which officially promoted anti-imperialist and anti-colonial policies, Lerman was exempt from criticism. However, as a person who gained public recognition during his lifetime thanks to his participation in the colonial project of another monarchy – while coming from a country that was never an imperial power – he has become a curious footnote in Croatian history, gradually fading into obscurity. See: Roce, „Reprezentacija hrvatskog istraživača Dragutina Lermana u javnom i znanstvenom diskursu“, 2022.

8 For example: Slukan Altić, „The Croatian explorer Dragutin Lerman (1863-1918)“, 1-13.

9 Today’s Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb features a section dedicated to non-European cultures, which includes donations from Dragutin Lerman. Some of these African objects are also preserved in the ethnographic collection of the City Museum of Požega. See: „Zbirka izvaneuropskih kultura“, „Etnološki odjel“.

10 Roce, „The Representation of Croatian Explorer Dragutin Lerman in Public and Scientific Discourse“, 42.

11 *Ibid.*, 62.

12 Only a handful of authors have provided a critical perspective on Lerman’s years in Africa. For instance, Sonja Kirchoffer characterized Lerman in an article as a participant in “brutal exploitation” and genocide in the Congo. In her analysis, she highlighted the necessity for a historical reassessment of Lerman’s colonial career. Kirchoffer, „Dragutin Lerman: naš istraživač Afrike i sudionik u belgijskom genocidu u Kongu“, 22.

13 *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899, is a novella by Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad. Written at the height of British imperial might, this work is one of the most significant Victorian representations of colonial exploitation and widespread racial intolerance during that era.

14 Postcolonial theory is a diverse and complex theoretical corpus. In essence, it “deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies.” In addition, one of the goals of this theory is the analysis of “general discursive forces that held together the imperial enterprise and that operated wherever colonization occurred.” Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 168, 172.

authors, by the American literary critic of Palestinian origin, Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978). For him, it was important to demonstrate the correlation between colonial discourse and the maintenance of existing power relations in favor of the colonizer. Said points out that every colonial project implied a narrative about the “civilizing mission” of barbarian peoples, a concept that was not unknown even to Lerman.

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilizatrice.<sup>15</sup>

As we will show in the text, Lerman readily defended the Belgian colonial presence in sub-Saharan Africa, often referred to the need to “civilize” the native population, and as an official of Leopold II, in certain situations, he did not shy away from using violence to assert his authority.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in this paper, we will treat the colonial discourse as “a system of statements that can be made about colonies and colonial peoples, about colonizing powers and about the relationship between these two.”<sup>17</sup> Considering this, Lerman's extensive writings on Africa will be examined as an instance of late nineteenth-century colonial discourse.<sup>18</sup>

According to Kevin C. Dunn, the Congo of the late nineteenth century was a European invention defined and described through complex colonial discourses. Colonial agents produced images of Africans that were assigned specific attributes, characteristics, and meanings. As Dunn points out, through repetition, colonizing discourses of identity became a “stabilizing power, producing a script that ‘naturalized’ the domination and domestication of the Congo.”<sup>19</sup> One of the leading authorities on the process of shaping Congolese identity during the period of conquest of the African continent was Lerman's idol and associate, the American journalist of Welsh origin Henry

15 Said, *Orientalism*, xvi.

16 Let us add that by analyzing the basic features of Said's work, Shelley Walla reminds readers of the following aspect of colonialism: “The subtle use of stereotypes, hinging obsessively on the violent and sensual nature of the natives, made legitimate a very cruel and exploitative practice of colonialism. The coloniser could justify subjugation and even extermination through the logic of the ‘civilising mission’ which in Rudyard Kipling's rhetoric became the ‘white man's burden.’” Walla, *Edward Said and the Writing of History*, 40.

17 Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, 37.

18 During his stay in Africa, Lerman wrote nine travel notebooks. He began recording his observations in 1888. Ultimately, this material, published only in 1989, was compiled by the ethnologist and anthropologist Aleksandra-Sanja Lazarević. Also, during Lerman's stay in Africa, in 1891 and 1894, his letters to his friend Julius Kempf were published in two books. See: Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*; Lerman, *Listovi iz Afrike*; Lerman, *Novi listovi iz Afrike*.

19 Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 22.

Morton Stanley. Stanley wrote numerous newspaper reports, travelogues, and works of fiction that publicized his exploits and views. His depictions of Africans eventually became an "accepted truth in the West." It was he who popularized the term "the Dark Continent." Thanks to signed agreements with other colleagues, according to which they promised not to write or speak publicly about their travels until he published his works, Stanley, as Dunn points out, "reduced any direct challenge to his position as the expert and guaranteed his narratives' place as the standard interpretation."<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the article will analyze Lerman's portrayal of the natives, his duties in the Congo, and his relationship with the African population. We start from the assumption that Lerman had been previously familiarized with the discourse of other colonial officials and explorers, such as Stanley, and that he implemented the existing colonial rhetoric in his writings. In this sense, we propose the thesis that by adopting and reproducing the existing colonial discourse, Lerman aligned himself with those who implemented and accepted the colonizing policy of the Belgian King Leopold II in the Congo. At the same time, by analyzing Lerman's records, we will try to critically present his involvement in colonial activities in the Congo at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

One of the fundamental problems of history from below is undoubtedly the reconstruction of the voices of the underprivileged, i.e., politically, economically, and culturally marginalized individuals.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, historians are forced to analyze the administrative discourse of power centers, as well as various scattered and fragmentary sources, to present the experiences of individuals who rarely left direct historical traces about themselves. In other words, in the context of this research, it is difficult to reconstruct the perspectives of Africans who interacted with Lerman. However, by using the surviving letters of individual African chiefs and drawing on the insights of other historians who have considered similar phenomena, we will provide limited insight into the perspectives of the colonized population.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-25.

<sup>21</sup> As previously mentioned, the existing corpus of texts about Dragutin Lerman primarily focuses on biographical, ethnographic, and cartographic subjects. Among other works, notable mentions include the following: Wittenberg, „Velika obitelj Lermanovih“, 69-105; Kočevar, „Svoj o svome – ondašnji karlovački tisak o karlovačkim putnicima – istraživačima Afrike i Južne Amerike“, 93-109; Bačić-Karković, „Putne bilježnice i dnevnici Dragutina Lermana“, 59-84; Lopašić, *Commissaire general Dragutin Lerman 1863-1918*; Lopašić, „The Lerman Collection“, 51-83; Lopašić, „Karlovac i dva istraživača Afrike“; Lopašić, „Dragutin Lerman. Portrait of an African Pioneer“, 313-320; Lazarević, „Dragutin Lerman – Požežanin (1863-1918)“, 69-75; Sremac, Živković, „The Lerman collection of art from the Congo at the Ethnographic Museum Zagreb“, 106-111; Kolar, „Poruka Dragutina Lermana hrvatskom narodu iz 1904. godine“, 151-157, Jukić, „Dragutin Lerman u Hercegovini“, 309-342, etc.

<sup>22</sup> On postcolonial efforts to reconstruct the forgotten voices of the colonized, see the essay: Chakravorty Spivak, „Can the Subaltern Speak?“, 1988.

## King Leopold II's Congo: an overview of colonial ambition and terror

After successfully finding the Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone in 1871 in Ujiji, located on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, Henry Morton Stanley embarked on his second journey to Africa. From 1874 to 1877, Stanley traversed the entire African continent, discovered several lakes, and became the first white man to document the course of the Congo River.<sup>23</sup> He had already achieved international fame with his newspaper articles about Africa and his work *How I Found Livingstone* (1871). The public followed his travels with interest, as is confirmed by a cartoon published in New York's *The Daily Graphic* in 1876. The lines below the illustration, with confident-looking and armed Stanley as its central figure, read: "Elephant guns and whiskey flying free, / Beasts and men so merrily I slay, / Civ'lization bearing on my way, / As I march, march, march through Africay."<sup>24</sup> Belgian King Leopold II closely followed his exploratory expeditions. Adam Hochschild described the king's interests, noting that since he came to the throne in 1865, "everywhere he went, he looked for imperial opportunities."<sup>25</sup> By the 1880s, extensive regions of the African continent had already been claimed by Great Britain, France, Portugal, and Spain, while a considerable part remained under the leadership of indigenous chiefs.<sup>26</sup> It was in the area around the Congo River that Belgian King Leopold II saw his future colony. However, Hochschild notes: "Few Belgians shared Leopold's dreams of colonies. They were deterred by practical considerations – such as their country's lack of a merchant fleet or navy – that seemed petty to him."<sup>27</sup>

As a country that only gained independence in 1831, Belgium had no experience as an imperial power.<sup>28</sup> Despite numerous challenges, the Belgian king expressed a strong desire to participate in the colonial race. Central Africa was still largely unknown in Europe at that time, except for the accounts of few explorers.<sup>29</sup> Leopold II's relentless pursuit of colonial expansion led to the convening of the International Geographic Conference in Brussels in 1876. At the conference, Leopold portrayed himself as a benevolent, selfless ruler and philanthropist. He claimed that the "opening" of Central Africa was not only about exploration but also about promoting civilization, encouraging free trade, and combating the notorious Arab slave trade.<sup>30</sup> At the conference, he

23 Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 23.

24 *The Daily Graphic. An Illustrated Evening Newspaper*, 1.

25 Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 36.

26 Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 22. According to Eric Hobsbawm, between 1870s and the First World War, or in the *Age of Empire*, as he calls it, "about one-quarter of the globe's land surface was distributed or redistributed as colonies among a half-dozen states." Hobsbawm elaborates that the scramble for the African territories was primarily economic and that Africa stood as one of "the main zones of competitive land-grabbing." Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, 59, 68.

27 Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 37–38.

28 Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa: A History of the Congo*, 78.

29 Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo 1885–1980*, 19.

30 Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 21.

was elected president of the newly founded International African Association. Two years later, Leopold II founded the Committee for Studies of the Upper Congo and hired Stanley. Stanley's task was to establish "research" stations on behalf of the Committee (later on behalf of the International Association of the Congo) and to reach agreements with local chiefs to cede their land to Europeans.<sup>31</sup> During a five-year expedition – between 1879 and 1884 – Stanley was to establish the territory of what would later become the Belgian Congo.<sup>32</sup> Finally, at the Berlin Conference (November 1884 – February 1885), Leopold II "was permitted to carve out his private domain in Africa"<sup>33</sup> thanks to shrewd diplomacy and promises through which he guaranteed free trade in that territory.<sup>34</sup> The notorious Congo Free State was established, a private possession of the Belgian monarch in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>35</sup> Incidentally, to realize his imperial dream, Leopold II used, among other documents, materials prepared by Dragutin Lerman during his first stay in the Congo at the Berlin conference.<sup>36</sup>

The growing exploitation of ivory and, since the 1890s, rubber, resulted in the establishment of a brutal colonial system in the Congo region, leading to the deaths of millions of Africans.<sup>37</sup> Along with the apparent need for basic infrastructure such as roads, ports, administrative buildings, and warehouses, there was also a need for a workforce. The colonial army, the Force Publique, was formed and represented the pillar of the local repressive system. At the same time, career opportunities, dreams of huge profits, and a desire for adventure attracted mostly younger, unmarried Europeans who readily entered the service of Leopold II.<sup>38</sup> Lerman, who set off for Africa as

31 Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 76.

32 Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 23. Hochschild explains Leopold II's colonial ambitions and obsession with Congo in the following way: "There was no more unclaimed territory in the Americas, and Maximilian and Carlota's disastrous adventure in Mexico was a reminder of what could happen if one tried to take control of an independent country there. Nor were there blank spaces in Asia: the Russian Empire stretched all the way to the Pacific, the French had taken Indochina, the Dutch the East Indies, and most of the rest of southern Asia, from Aden to Singapore, was colored with the British Empire's pink. Only Africa remained." Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 61.

33 Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, 68.

34 Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 84-87.

35 Congo Free State was 76 times larger than the territory of Belgium. Stanley, "Belgium's Heart of Darkness".

36 Lazarević, "Naši izvaneuropski putnici istraživači", 180.

37 Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, 126. There is no consensus on the exact number of victims of the Belgian colonial system in the Congo. However, some authors estimate that the population of the Congo was reduced by fifty percent between 1880 and 1920. This means that nearly 10 million people may have died as a result of mass murder, severe corporal punishment, starvation, and disease epidemics, such as smallpox. Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 225-234.

38 *Ibid.*, 140.

early as 1882 as a young man inspired by the achievements of explorers such as Stanley and Heinrich Schliemann, perfectly fits the profile.<sup>39</sup>

After it became clear that Leopold II would lose his colonial possessions in the Congo in 1908, an attempt was made to destroy numerous documents that could confirm various crimes committed in Africa.<sup>40</sup> Luckily, some accounts of the horrors endured by Africans under the Belgian king have survived. Working to exhaustion, shooting, flogging, rape, starvation, hostage-taking, burning of villages, cutting off of limbs. This was the stark reality for the native population in the Congo during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Punishments were meted out to anyone who failed to meet quotas for resource collection or showed hostility toward their white overseers. For example, a Catholic priest recorded the testimony of Tswambe, who described the unprecedented cruelty of colonial official Léon Fiévez during the 1890s, during the rubber craze.

All the blacks saw this man as the Devil of the Equator... From all the bodies killed in the field, you had to cut off the hands. He wanted to see the number of hands cut off by each soldier, who had to bring them in baskets... A village which refused to provide rubber would be completely swept clean. As a young man, I saw [Fiévez's] soldier Molili, then guarding the village of Boyeka, take a big net, put ten arrested natives in it, attach big stones to the net, and make it tumble into the river... Rubber caused these torments; that's why we no longer want to hear its name spoken. Soldiers made young men kill or rape their own mothers and sisters.<sup>41</sup>

It is important to note that all of the aforementioned events took place in the Congo Free State while Dragutin Lerman (who returned to Europe in 1896) was still employed by King Leopold II. Additionally, during Lerman's time in Africa, the first critics of the colonial violence perpetrated by the Belgian king began to emerge. One notable example is the American George Washington Williams, who visited the Congo and witnessed the brutal exploitation of the local population. In 1890, he published an open letter addressed to Leopold II, accusing him of crimes against humanity.<sup>42</sup> As Williams pointed out, the African population was forced to suffer "deceit, fraud, robberies, arson, murder, slave-raiding, and general policy of cruelty" carried out by the colonial masters:<sup>43</sup> "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 in detail."<sup>44</sup>

39 Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, introduction by Aleksandra-Sanja Lazarević, 12. Kempf claims that Lerman's "desire to explore the distant world" was inspired by W. W. Cooper, a correspondent for the English newspaper *The Standard*, whom Lerman encountered in Brod na Savi. Lerman, *Listovi iz Afrike*, III.

40 Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 294.

41 *Ibid.*, 165-166.

42 *Ibid.*, 108-112.

43 Rutz, *King Leopold's Congo and the "Scramble for Africa"*, 52.

44 *Ibid.*, 50.



Over time, Williams's statement sparked a series of criticisms of the situation in the Congo Free State. However, using skillful diplomacy, bribery, continuously discrediting his opponents, and investing in newspaper propaganda, Leopold II and his associates persistently denied all the accusations. Nevertheless, new faces, such as Edmund Morel, Roger Casement, Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain and others, joined the growing campaign against the Belgian king. However, these voices continued to encounter resistance in the public sphere of the time, including in the Croatian press. For example, in 1904, some Croatian newspapers described the Congo as an "exemplary colony" exposed to various slanders and "malicious accusations" by Leopold II's envious rivals.<sup>45</sup> It was only years later that Croatian newspapers began to mention the crimes in the Congo. For example, in 1919, one newspaper wrote about the "barbaric cruelty" of the Belgian colonial authorities, who abused the African population in the heinous ways. As the newspaper *Virovitičan* points out, even "merciless Europe" at one point realized that it was necessary to end these horrors.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, the quoted article was published more than a year after the death of Dragutin Lerman, while he was not mentioned in the text or connected to this Belgian colony in any way.

After a long and exhausting international campaign, the discredited Leopold II was forced to surrender this territory to the Belgian government in 1908.<sup>47</sup> The very next year, 74-year-old Leopold II died from an embolism.<sup>48</sup> "By the time that Henry Morton Stanley brought the Congo to the world's attention in 1877, most of that good life had disappeared, and by the time Leopold's brutal regime ended three decades later, the Congo had become perhaps the most dreadful place on earth," writes Robert D. Edgerton.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, Lerman never publicly criticized Leopold II or attempted to draw attention to the crimes committed in the Congo. Moreover, as will be shown later in the paper, he defended the Belgian colonial system in sub-Saharan Africa on several occasions.

45 See: „Povjestno-zemljopisni osvrt na g. 1903. Afrika“, *Hrvatska zastava*, October 27, 1904, 2.

46 „Zločin na Kongu“, *Virovitičan*, December 7, 1919, 1-2.

47 Congo gained independence on June 30, 1960. Unfortunately, this did not mark the end of the country's social unrest, economic problems, and political instability. For example, see: Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*, 2007.

48 Albert I, the nephew of Leopold II, became king in 1909 and ruled until 1934. Commentators of the time, including the American anthropologist Frederick Starr, noted that he had a strong interest in the Belgian colony. Starr described the new king as "the most democratic of European kings" and characterized him as "a man of heart and ideas." However, Hochschild notes that Albert I eventually lost his "youthful idealism." The exploitation of Africa's natural resources and the Congo's population persisted in a somewhat different form. See: Starr, „The Congo Free State and Congo Belge“, 399; Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 272, 278.

49 Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, xiv.

### Lerman on “the Dark Continent” (1882 – 1896)

Considering the increasing need for colonial officials, the Committee for Studies of the Upper Congo decided to employ young people from all over Europe with military experience and knowledge of foreign languages.<sup>50</sup> After seeing an ad in a French newspaper about hiring people to research the Congo with the apparent goal of spreading civilization, 19-year-old Dragutin Lerman, a native of Požega, decided to apply with his friend Napoleon Lukšić, a young cadet of the Austrian Navy, whom he had met in Karlovac. In 1882, Lerman and Lukšić approached Dobner von Dottendorf, the Committee’s representative in Zagreb, who sent them to Brussels to talk directly with Stanley. Exhausted, Stanley was temporarily in Europe to recover from his stay in Africa.<sup>51</sup> In the end, both Lerman and Lukšić were accepted to join his expedition to the Congo.<sup>52</sup> Lerman reportedly amazed Stanley by declaring that he learned everything about Africa by reading texts written by Livingstone and this Welsh-American explorer.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, Stanley was very pleased when young Lerman allegedly informed the Committee members that he was willing to do whatever it took in Africa.<sup>54</sup> Despite initial skepticism regarding Lerman’s age, it seems that Stanley’s opinion prevailed, as he stated briefly and clearly: “Hired!”<sup>55</sup>

In early November 1882, Lerman and Lukšić boarded the ship *Harkaway* in Antwerp and arrived in Boma, a city at the mouth of the Congo, in mid-December of the same year. Lerman stayed in Africa for the next three years, and during his first stay, he was not yet keeping a diary or exchanging letters with Julius Kempf, a friend from Požega. Ethnologist and anthropologist Aleksandra-Sanja Lazarević explains that this chapter of Lerman’s stay in Africa has remained less known due to the apparent lack of sources. However, during these years, Lerman sent his first shipment of around 120

50 Sremac, Živković, „The Lerman collection of art from the Congo at the Ethnographic Museum Zagreb“, 107.

51 Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 69.

52 The article will analyze Lerman’s African years, so we will not pay attention to his life before and after the career he achieved in the service of Leopold II. However, it should be noted that Dragutin Lerman was born in Požega in 1863, where he completed elementary school and the first grades of high school. For a while, he lived in Budapest, where he attended the School of Commerce. When he was sixteen, he left Zagreb and reached Hamburg and Bremen, and from there, he headed to London. As a young man, he learned French and English and read books about the exploits of famous explorers with great interest. He stayed in the Congo intermittently between 1882 and 1896. He left Africa when he was 33 years old. In Požega, he married Hedviga Reiner, the daughter of a wealthy landowner. After unsuccessfully trying his hand at banking, he left his hometown in 1909. In Kreševo, in central Bosnia and Herzegovina, he was engaged in mineral exploration and establishing a coal mine. He died there in 1918 at the age of 55. Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, 12, 26.

53 Fuis, *Podzemni Zagreb i druge reportaže 1934. – 1941.*, 94-95.

54 Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, HAZU), personal archive of Dragutin Lerman, 39 – XV-55, „Dragutin Lerman, član Stanleyeve Kongo-ekspedicije 1882. – 1896. napisao Julije Kempf“, 4.

55 Fuis, *Podzemni Zagreb i druge reportaže 1934. – 1941.*, 94-95.

specimens of African tribal culture to the National Museum in Zagreb.<sup>56</sup> The museum's director, Šime Ljubić, kindly thanked Lerman for "a large chest full of various precious objects" and praised his dedication and patriotism.<sup>57</sup> During later expeditions, Lerman continued to send crates filled with African objects to Zagreb, arousing the enthusiasm of the Croatian press.<sup>58</sup>

Shortly after Lerman's departure for Africa, a Croatian newspaper informed readers that the young man had joined "the famous Stanley's scientific expedition."<sup>59</sup> Later, it was reported that Lerman was "quite healthy and content" on another continent.<sup>60</sup> However, Lazarević points out that some of Lerman's closest associates, including 21-year-old Napoleon Lukšić, died of tropical fever in early 1883.<sup>61</sup> The death of his friend, with whom he had undertaken an African adventure, reportedly affected him deeply. However, this loss did not deter him from proving himself to his superiors as a capable officer. After receiving praise from Stanley, he was appointed as the station commander at Philippeville in April 1884. He continued to advance in rank, and in November of the same year, he became the station commander at Rudolfstadt, located at the mouth of the Kwilu River. He remained there until his return to Europe in August 1885.<sup>62</sup>

At the same time, in his new book, *The Congo and the Founding of its Free State* (1885), Stanley publicly expressed his admiration for Lerman, whom he described as "the gallant Croat."<sup>63</sup> Roce correctly observes that Stanley's assessment of Lerman will serve as a legitimization of his character in almost all subsequent biographies. Stanley writes the following about Lerman:

There is a gentleman named Lehrman, a Croat, who, by the remarkable power of development that he possesses, has taught me not to be too rash in judging from externals. For certainly no one bore such an unpromising exterior and seemed so utterly inexperienced as Mr. Lehrman, yet to-day he deservedly ranks very high in my estimation as a thoroughly valuable officer. Energetic, bright, alert in mind and body, possessing a fine control over his men, and enjoying splendid health,<sup>64</sup> no better man could be found to

56 Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, 12, 26.

57 „Izvanredni dar nar. zem. muzeju“, *Viestnik Hrvatskoga arheološkoga društva*, January 1, 1886, 61.

58 See: „Dragutin Lerman“, *Narodne novine*, April 30, 1891, 3.

59 „Hrvati u nutarnjoj Africi“, *Narodne novine*, November 23, 1882, 5.

60 „U Požegi, 22. svibnja. (Dopis)“, *Narodne novine*, May 25, 1883, 3.

61 Napoleon Lukšić's obituary from June 11, 1883, states that this young man died "desirous of becoming a member of Stanley's expedition to explore the distant world and to help bring the rays of enlightenment to the remote corners of the human race." „Osmrtnica na ime Napoleon Lukšić“.

62 Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, introduction by Aleksandra-Sanja Lazarević, 16, 18.

63 Henry Morton Stanley, *The Congo and the Founding of its Free State*, volume II, 212. It is interesting to note that the bulletin of the Royal Belgian Geographical Society at the same time described Lerman as a "young and courageous Croat" who "had done wonders" in Congo. *Société Royale Belge de Géographie Bulletin*, 109, 360.

64 In an interview with journalist Franjo M. Fuis in early 1941, Lerman's widow, Hedviga, revealed that her husband frequently returned from Africa due to health issues. "He suffered from tropical fever

take the command of Phillippeville, on the Kwilu-Niadi. It was so isolated in its position that no one seemed willing to accept the appointment, but Mr. Lehrman, seeing the reluctance of others, and previously too modest to obtrude himself upon my notice, volunteered for the post, and has kept me ever since free from anxiety about himself, his own men, or the natives.<sup>65</sup>

However, it is worth noting a few details about Stanley. Although he was undoubtedly one of the most renowned explorers of Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century, Stanley remains a highly controversial figure in the context of European colonial history. Hochschild points out his brutality and explosive temper,<sup>66</sup> along with his tendency to exaggerate his achievements and publish misleading statements.<sup>67</sup> “Stanley was at heart a military man. He liked order and discipline and was a terrifying but effective commander,” explains Hochschild.<sup>68</sup> For Stanley, the African is a savage who, in his words, only “respects force, power, boldness, and decision. [...] Forbearance is to him cowardice; mildness, patience, and an equable temper are, in his undeveloped and unreasoning mind, only evidences of effeminacy.”<sup>69</sup>

Lerman continued to advance in his role as a colonial official for Leopold II. After completing two years of military service in Osijek in 1888, he set off for Africa once again, where he remained until 1891. During this second trip, he began keeping a diary.<sup>70</sup> He then served as a diplomatic delegate and administrator of Stanley Falls, and in 1889, he participated in exploring the area around the Kwango River.<sup>71</sup> His third stay in Africa lasted from December 1891 to July 1894. During this period, he explored the area between the Congo and Kuilu Rivers and helped delineate the border between the Belgian Congo and Portuguese Angola. In 1893, he also discovered a waterfall on the Kuilu River, which he named the Zrinski Chutes.<sup>72</sup> Lerman spent his last time in Africa from May 1895 to August 1896. He continued to explore the southern part of the Kwango Oriental province, especially the area around the Wamba River.<sup>73</sup>

Lerman was regularly promoted and appointed to the post of governor of various stations and districts in the Congo Free State. Such stations were essential to

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and was critically ill several times. Additionally, he dealt with the aftermath of a severe injury that had flattened the upper part of his skull. He carefully concealed that area of his head with his hair to prevent anyone from noticing that it was completely flat, as if it had been cut off,” she explained. This interview was published in the newspaper *Novosti* on February 21, 1941. Fuis, *Podzemni Zagreb i druge reportaže 1934. – 1941.*, 100.

65 Stanley, *The Congo and the Founding of its Free State*, 277.

66 Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 31, 196.

67 *Ibid.*, 30.

68 *Ibid.*, 71.

69 Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent*, volume II, 45–46.

70 Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, introduction by Aleksandra-Sanja Lazarević, 20.

71 Slukan Altić, „The Croatian explorer Dragutin Lerman (1863-1918)“, 2.

72 *Ibid.*, 6.

73 *Ibid.*, 3.

the maintenance of the newly established colonial government. Perhaps the greatest achievement of Lerman's career came in 1896 when he was appointed Commissioner-General of the Kwango Oriental District. He eventually received the Etoile de service (Service Star) for his achievements and was made a Chevalier de l'ordre royal du Lion (Knight of the Royal Order of the Lion).<sup>74</sup> He took breaks between expeditions to rest and complete reports for the colonial authorities. During these times, “our dear African” (as the local newspapers referred to him) regularly attended parties and was active in the social life of Požega.<sup>75</sup> By the early 1890s, Lerman had undoubtedly become a well-known figure in Croatia. For instance, in 1891, the Chamber of Commerce and Crafts in Zagreb organized a banquet in his honor, where he delivered a lecture about his experiences in the Congo.<sup>76</sup> That same year, a newspaper published a short biography of Lerman with a black-and-white portrait of him.<sup>77</sup> Letters he had sent from Africa to his friend Kempf were also published as a book. Advertisements in the newspaper regularly invited readers to spend 1 forint to buy the book detailing the experiences of “this honest young man [...] in hot Africa.”<sup>78</sup> Lerman, aware of his reputation as a daring explorer, was eager to commercialize that narrative. His “cultural work” in Africa was portrayed in the newspapers as an important contribution to the bold project of the far-sighted Leopold II, who allegedly sought to build a state in Africa modeled after contemporary European countries.<sup>79</sup>

74 Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, 20, 26. The notifications and certificates for these awards are kept in the City Museum of Požega. See: City Museum of Požega, the Lerman Collection, certificate of awarding Dragutin Lerman the title of Knight of the Royal Order of the Lion (13.637); notice on the awarding of Dragutin Lerman with the Service Star (13.641). While the Service Star was created by a decree of the king Leopold II in 1889, the Royal Order of the Lion was established in 1891. Hochschild explains the emergence of new decorations for colonial officials at the end of the nineteenth century as the reflection of “the burgeoning hierarchy of imperial rule” in Africa. Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 116.

75 „Dragutin Lerman“, *Glasnik županije Požeške*, August 8, 1891, 3.

76 „Banket u čast g. Lermanu“, *Narodne novine*, June 9, 1891, 2.

77 „Dragutin Lerman“, *Dom i svijet*, August 1, 1891.

78 „Listovi iz Afrike“, *Glasnik županije Požeške*, July 4, 1891, 5.

79 „Dragutin Lerman“, *Crvena Hrvatska*, November 1, 1894.



Figure 1. Dragutin Lerman (left, wearing white clothes) resolving a dispute among local people in Congo in 1896. (HAZU, personal archive of Dragutin Lerman, 39 – XV-55)

Meanwhile, Lerman maintained ties with some of the most influential people in Croatia's public life. He established contact with Bishop Josip Juraj Strossmayer, who was almost fifty years his senior, and with whom he exchanged numerous letters.<sup>80</sup> In a letter to Strossmayer from March 1894, sent from Popocabaca, Lerman admitted that he was reluctant to use weapons against "poor natives" but knew that it was sometimes necessary. He added that it was "best for their future, and for us, so that they would be aware of our superiority."<sup>81</sup>

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80 According to Lazarević, Lerman met with Strossmayer while serving in the military during exercises near Đakovo. Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, 18.

81 HAZU, 39 – XV-55, letter from Dragutin Lerman to Josip Juraj Strossmayer, from March 19, 1894.



Figure 2. Lerman writing a letter to his wife. Congo, May 1896. (HAZU, personal archive of Dragutin Lerman, 39 – XV-55)

After his return from Africa in 1896, Lerman was welcomed as a hero in his hometown. The people of Požega decorated their streets and held a procession for him accompanied by music; children and citizens greeted him enthusiastically, and his carriage was showered with flowers.<sup>82</sup> The newspapers reported on the renowned African traveler who, at the age of 33, returned to his homeland with remarkable achievements and significant international recognition.<sup>83</sup> Lerman's colonial career was then interpreted solely through the prism of “work for the benefit of humanity” and his compatriots, whom he supposedly introduced to exotic African culture.<sup>84</sup> This romanticized but essentially ahistorical narrative has survived in a certain form to this day.

However, by the time Lerman returned triumphantly to his homeland, the Congo had transformed into a place marked by suffering and the horrific exploitation of people and natural resources. It is worth reminding that George Washington Williams published an open letter to King Leopold II in late 1890, during the same period when Lerman was in the Congo. Williams later revealed that he faced immense pressure

82 Tomislav Wittenberg, „Velika obitelj Lermanovih“, *Godišnjak njemačke narodnosne zajednice*, 78.

83 „Dragutin Lerman“, *Banovac*, October 17, 1896, 2.

84 „Lerman se vraća iz Afrike“, *Banovac*, July 18, 1896, 2.

not to publish his account of the atrocities he had witnessed in Africa.<sup>85</sup> During those years, African porters endured extremely harsh conditions while colonial administrators flogged or hanged Africans for the slightest transgressions.<sup>86</sup> The intense exploitation of rubber in the early 1890s led to increased repression of the native population. Colonial military troops would not hesitate to massacre entire villages that failed to collect enough rubber or that resisted the authorities in any way.<sup>87</sup> Despite the immense fear and exposure to violence, Africans were not entirely passive. There were several uprisings in the Congo, some of which took place during Lerman's time in Africa. For instance, in December 1893, Chief Nzansu led a rebellion against the colonizers that lasted for months, resulting in the death of Eugène Rommel, a brutal representative of the colonial regime.<sup>88</sup> The Swedish missionary Carl Niklas Börrisson spent several years in the Congo and was familiar with this situation. In one letter, shortly after the aforementioned rebellion, he stated that the Congo Free State is solely to blame for such uprisings due to its humiliating attitude towards Africans, who are regularly abducted, captured, abused, and killed. "Is anyone surprised if the discontent surfaces?" he asked.<sup>89</sup> Is it possible that Dragutin Lerman was among those who were surprised? In the case of a trusted and praised colonial official like him, it would be unusual to assume that he genuinely did not know how the system essentially worked i.e. that he was unaware of the systematic oppression and humiliation of the local population.

Despite everything, Lerman was always ready to defend his employer, King Leopold II of Belgium. Commenting on the establishment of the Congo Free State in May 1890, he concluded that "sad Africa" could be sure that "better days would dawn."<sup>90</sup> For Lerman, Leopold II was "one of the most intelligent and noble men of our century." On April 9, 1892, the day of the king's birthday, Lerman wrote in his diary that he felt nothing but great respect and admiration for this monarch.<sup>91</sup> As more voices began to highlight crimes against humanity in the Congo, Lerman continued to reject all criticism of the Belgian colonial system in Africa. The *Journal de Bruxelles* quoted him in October 1896, stating:

I consider it a real duty for me [...] to render homage to the officers of the Belgium<sup>92</sup> army who are so unjustly accused, I have lived among them for fourteen years and I have learned to esteem them... I declare boldly that if some people assert that your countrymen have misbehaved in Africa, they do not speak the truth.<sup>93</sup>

85 Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 31, 107.

86 *Ibid.*, 119, 122-123.

87 *Ibid.*, 227. See: Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo*, 22.

88 Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 106.

89 Natermann, „To Maintain or Adjust?“, 476.

90 Lerman, *Listovi iz Afrike*, 192.

91 Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, 228.

92 The spelling error is identical to the original text. The same applies to the syntax of both sentences.

93 Descamps, *New Africa: An Essay on Government Civilization in New Countries*, 307.



It is important to note that Lerman also met Tippu Tip, an infamous Arab slave trader. Tippu Tip amassed a vast fortune from the ivory and slave trade, and effectively ruled the eastern Congo in the late 1880s. From 1887 to 1890/1891, he temporarily cooperated with Leopold II, even serving as the governor of the Stanley Falls District. Additionally, Tippu Tip supplied Leopold II's army with "freed" enslaved individuals, who were required to serve in the Force Publique for seven years.<sup>94</sup> Tanzanian historian Abdul Sheriff asserts that by the mid-1890s, Tip owned approximately 10,000 slaves.<sup>95</sup> In his 1890 diary, Lerman described this influential Arab as being "very kind towards Europeans" and noted that he "enjoys great popularity by other tribes."<sup>96</sup> Although he was a well-known slave owner, Tip was also an important associate of Leopold II, which is why Lerman chose to avoid criticism of him.<sup>97</sup> In any case, Lerman was well aware that Tip was a slave trader. Given Tip's enormous influence in the eastern Congo, he tried to portray the temporary collaboration with him as a necessity and a pragmatic move.<sup>98</sup>

Lerman openly acknowledged in his diary entries that many Africans showed fear and distrust when his expeditions reached villages that had been hastily abandoned. Despite this, he stressed that his main goal was to promote happiness, prosperity, and peace.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, the peace-loving Lerman was also a pragmatic man who understood that establishing authority was essential for the successful execution of colonial tasks. To inspire awe among African chiefs and their subjects, he imposed harsh punishments on thieves, including public whippings, beatings, and the use of chains.<sup>100</sup> Porters who deserted or contemplated rebellion faced the ultimate penalty: they were

94 "Although Leopold managed for most of his life to be all things to all people, the spectacle of this antislavery crusader doing so much business with Africa's most prominent slave-dealer helped spur the first murmurings against the king in Europe", Hochschild explains. Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 130-131.

95 Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices, & Ivory in Zanzibar*, 108.

96 HAZU, 39 – XV-55, Dragutin Lerman's fourth travel notebook, from June 18, 1890 – December 12, 1890, "Arab chief..." (an entry originally written in English by Lerman).

97 Tippu Tip has become a prominent name in East African history textbooks, though not in a positive light. One of the co-authors of this article noticed this during a visit to Africa while skimming through some Tanzanian textbooks. For instance, one book describes Tippu Tip solely as a notorious slave trader. The same chapter also details the treatment of enslaved individuals in Africa during the second half of the nineteenth century: "After being captured, slaves were taken to collection centers. These centers were referred as calling stations. The centers were resting points where caravans stopped to get necessities. [...] At the calling stations slaves were chained and yoked together for the journey back to the coast. Hundreds of slaves would be yoked together from neck to neck or at times gagged by a piece of wood. [...] Many slaves died on the way because of the harsh treatment they received from slave drivers. Slaves were ill treated and abused along the way. Those who walked slowly would be thoroughly beaten. The sick and very weak would normally be killed. This discouraged the others from walking slowly. On reaching the coast, slaves were herded into pens." Rwegasira, *Understanding History* 5, 35, 37.

98 Lerman, *Listovi iz Afrike*, 78.

99 Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, 328-329.

100 See: *Ibid.*, 247-248.

shot.<sup>101</sup> Describing the case of a rebellious African named Kinzengua in the summer of 1893, he wrote: “He said he was afraid of no one and would kill me too if necessary. I sentenced him to death...”<sup>102</sup>

Reconstructing the perspectives of Africans is quite challenging due to the limited availability of sources. The only surviving documents are letters from individual chiefs to Lerman, whose social circumstances were very different from those of exhausted porters or African women who faced oppression based on gender, race, and class. One such letter, written in 1890, is from an Arab chief named Salim. In this letter, Salim addresses Lerman as a friend, expressing humility, invoking God’s mercy and peace, and praying to Allah to guide Lerman on the right path.<sup>103</sup> Lerman’s response and other details regarding this communication are unknown to us. The other preserved letters are similar; from them, we can see that the people who communicated with Lerman had a privileged social position. They mainly addressed him as a friend, they politely expressed the wish that his fame would last forever, and some even wrote that they wanted God to reward him with many slaves.<sup>104</sup>

Unfortunately, even in the case of contemporary historiography, African voices are largely shrouded in silence. On the one hand, the statements of Africans recorded in the context of European colonial imperialism in the late nineteenth century are mostly the result of colonial agents’ writings, such as Stanley. Also, numerous testimonies were documented by missionaries or commissions formed to prosecute crimes committed in Africa. In the case of Leopold II’s colony, the contents of such reports with the most shocking testimonies were not made public until the 1980s.<sup>105</sup> The unimaginable horrors of the Congo had to be hidden for as long as possible.

### Performing “the sacred duty”: a brief analysis of Lerman’s colonial discourse

Several important details must be noted about using Dragutin Lerman’s African diary as a historical source. Considering certain factors, it appears that Lerman wrote his diary for a broader audience, making his narrative intentionally selective. Namely, at the beginning of the first notebook, it is possible to read the following instruction that Lerman addressed to his friend Julius Kempf: “Please do not disclose matters concerning politics because in doing so, you may expose me to danger and trouble with the state of Congo.”<sup>106</sup>

101 *Ibid.*, 345, 441.

102 *Ibid.*, 441.

103 City Museum of Požega, the Lerman Collection, letter from an Arab chief (13.616). We thank our colleague, Professor Fahd Kasumović (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo), for translating this letter.

104 HAZU, 39 – XV-55, letters from Arab chieftains sent to Dragutin Lerman in 1890. The letters were translated in 1931 by a Bosnian Muslim imam and writer from Sarajevo, Fehim Spaho.

105 Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 53, 131-133, 253-255.

106 HAZU, 39 – XV-55, Dragutin Lerman’s first travel notebook.

With this in mind, we can conclude that Lerman knew that certain details related to Leopold II's colony must be kept out of the public eye. He wrote his travel notes, knowing that other people would read them. For example, his diary entries were partially published in the *Glasnik županije Požežke* in 1896 and 1897.<sup>107</sup> Finally, it is worth recalling that Lerman recorded his experiences of certain events several weeks or even months after they had occurred. With this in mind, Roce states that such accounts are inevitably partial and even fictional to some extent. The same author warns of a number of factors that could have influenced Lerman's experience and understanding of a particular situation in interaction with the native population (language barrier, fever, the influence of medication, etc.), arguing that "the question is how much of what is recounted is actually said, and how much is merely his impression of the event." Roce concludes that Lerman's diaries are not an intimate reflection of his thoughts and feelings; rather, they serve as a somewhat conscious representation of the author himself. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that these texts were written when traveling to Africa represented an opportunity for many young Europeans to gain fame and enhance their social status.<sup>108</sup>

When meeting ordinary people and chiefs, Lerman diligently recorded his impressions in his diary. He described them using various characteristics such as "curious", "good", "rude", "polite", "strange", "sad", "noble", "arrogant", "unbearable", "timid", and "stern". Furthermore, Lerman exhibited conflicting attitudes toward Africans. His diary includes examples of positive impressions of certain local chiefs and Arab slave traders. However, it also contains negative generalizations, such as, "It is difficult to understand a black man. He is worse than a Greek and more cunning than a Jew."<sup>109</sup> He was surprised that the native population was unwilling to hunt elephants, which he interpreted as lacking courage.<sup>110</sup> He also considered the fear of thunder and rain a childish trait of Africans.<sup>111</sup> On the other hand, he was impressed by Edward Wilmot Blyden, a Liberian writer and politician and author of *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race* (1887). For Lerman, the educated Blyden was "a Negro of the purest blood."<sup>112</sup>

Lerman's notes reveal that he was responsible for recruiting natives for expeditions and negotiating with local chiefs to gain recognition from the Belgian authorities. Speaking about his treatment of the natives in June 1893, Lerman stated that he was a "friend" to all Africans but that he could be "harsh" and "strict" with those who belittled his friendship. He emphasized that patience was needed in dealing with the Congolese and that he would only use weapons in the event of an attack on his people. He

107 See the issues of this newspaper published between October 24, 1896, and January 30, 1897.

108 Roce, "The Representation of Croatian Explorer Dragutin Lerman in Public and Scientific Discourse", 46-48.

109 Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, 444.

110 *Ibid.*, 204.

111 *Ibid.*, 234.

112 *Ibid.*, 37.

explained that many Africans were unfamiliar with the lethality of European weapons and that he established his authority by force when necessary.<sup>113</sup> Leopold II himself propagated a similar strategy for achieving authority: “In barbarous countries I know that a strong authority is needed to bring the natives, who have never been accustomed to it, under the practice of civilisation. To this end it is necessary to be at the same time firm and paternal.”<sup>114</sup>

In short, Lerman did not question the use of weapons to achieve the supposed progress of culture and freedom, nor did he question the decisions of the Belgian monarch: “It is up to me to pursue a policy of peace persistently, and at the same time maintain the dignity of the state I represent.”<sup>115</sup> However, he did not demonstrate his power exclusively in moments of direct resistance from the natives. If there was indiscipline among the African servants, such as sleeping on guard duty, stealing, or collaborating with the rebellious population, Lerman did not hesitate to use various methods of punishment, such as beatings, starving the accused, or outright death.<sup>116</sup> It is also necessary to point out the fact that Lerman learned some indigenous languages and that he intervened in tribal communities by prohibiting cannibalism or punishing child abusers and people accused of marital infidelity.<sup>117</sup> In addition to portraying himself as a loyal colonial official who could maintain and expand Belgian authority, Lerman tried to boast in his writings as a skilled negotiator with several local chiefs. Describing negotiations with Chief Mwene of Kasongo Lunda in 1892, he called himself a “greater chief” than Mwene because his army had “ravaged” the latter’s subjects.<sup>118</sup>

Lerman undoubtedly believed in “the progress of culture that was slowly arriving from Europe and replacing the greatest savagery, barbarism, and cradle of anthropophagy.”<sup>119</sup> He considered himself among those whose efforts “contributed to the opening of the Congo,” which had formerly been an “iron prison.”<sup>120</sup> As a Catholic, he openly expressed his desire to see Africa become a predominantly Catholic continent.<sup>121</sup>

He recorded in several places in his diaries how the natives saw white people and him. For example, Lerman reports that in 1889, Chief Mwene N’dinga noted he was “pleased to have white people visiting him.” According to Lerman, this chief was a great friend of the whites because he considered them extremely intelligent. He allegedly valued their knowledge of making guns and gunpowder and stated that

113 *Ibid.*, 426.

114 Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 44.

115 Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, 400.

116 *Ibid.*, 62, 82–83, 246, 248, 262, 441.

117 *Ibid.*, 516, 226, 517–518.

118 *Ibid.*, 293.

119 *Ibid.*, 58.

120 *Ibid.*, 317.

121 *Ibid.*, 337.

his subjects would be very happy if white people settled among them and passed on these skills to them.<sup>122</sup> Lerman wrote that he earned the nickname "Ango-Ango" after the Africans concluded in 1892 that he had come "with good intentions" by giving them a gift of fish he had caught.<sup>123</sup> Of course, a clearer perception of Lerman from the perspective of the native population is almost impossible to reconstruct historiographically.

As already noted, Lerman's letters to Kempf were published, advertised in print, and sold during Lerman's stay in Africa, more precisely at the height of his colonial career in the 1890s. In these letters, it is possible to read how Lerman was delighted that he had the opportunity to "exercise the sacred duty" that entailed "supporting the development of human society." In doing so, it is indicative that he felt the need to emphasize that he "did not care what many people think about it."<sup>124</sup> Was Lerman aware of certain criticisms of Leopold II and his actions in the Congo and consciously decided to ignore them? Or was it his brief reflection on the views of certain compatriots who perceived his trips to Africa as reckless adventurism? In any case, Lerman saw the arrival of people like himself on this continent as pulling Africans out of the "darkness of a miserable life."<sup>125</sup>

Of course, in his letters, he did not forget to highlight the "unspeakable sacrifices" of the Belgian king, who had maintained numerous colonial posts in the Congo for years for so-called civilizational progress.<sup>126</sup> Although Lerman admitted that European culture had also "affected badly" Africans,<sup>127</sup> he believed that they were immature and unenlightened and that they needed "better parents."<sup>128</sup> "The Negro is naturally endowed with that weakness which we call laziness," Lerman wrote, among other things.<sup>129</sup> Thus, colonialism is in his discourse, as well as in the writings of other Lerman's contemporaries, to some extent justified as benevolent parental care for millions of infantile and ignorant people. As such, colonial practices were portrayed as a kind of sacrifice of the colonizers for the greater good. Or, in Kipling's words, it was precisely the white man's progress that became his greatest burden.

122 *Ibid.*, 80.

123 *Ibid.*, 298.

124 Lerman, *Listovi iz Afrike*, 1.

125 *Ibid.*, 12.

126 *Ibid.*, 79.

127 *Ibid.*, 151.

128 *Ibid.*, 179.

129 Lerman, *Novi listovi iz Afrike*, 29.

## Conclusion

Dragutin Lerman will remain an intriguing historical figure. As a young man, fascinated by stories of great geographical and archaeological discoveries, he ventured on a journey to another continent, where he spent several years. His story is all the more interesting because he came from a peripheral European country that had only been modernized in the last decades of the nineteenth century and had almost no connection with the feverish European colonial imperialism. Unlike most contemporaries, he regularly wrote down his impressions of the world, new acquaintances, cultures, fears, and ambitions, leaving historians and other interested readers with invaluable sources. Written between 1888 and 1896, his diary represents a unique source for studying the involvement of individuals in European colonial activities. While there are no records of Lerman's first trip to the Congo (1882-1885), the records of the other three trips are well documented. We learn from the preserved texts, that Lerman was a loyal employee of the Belgian government and King Leopold II, that he believed in the need for Western culture and civilization to penetrate the Congo, but also that he did not hesitate to use different methods of punishment to maintain his own and Belgian authority. As in the case of other colonial officials of the time, his writings were permeated with rhetoric that did not question the superiority of whites over blacks and the need to "civilize" the latter. On the microhistorical example of Dragutin Lerman, we can analyze the presence and influence of the aforementioned discourse outside the territory of the leading imperial empires and how certain colonial officials used it to justify their actions.

Although some authors have pointed out that Lerman was simply a man of his time and probably one of the most humane officials in the Congo,<sup>130</sup> we believe that the analysis of Lerman's colonial career has so far largely lacked adequate historiographical contextualization. Lerman was almost certainly not a sadist like some of the Europeans who found themselves in sub-Saharan Africa in the late nineteenth century. For example, the brutal Belgian soldier and colonial agent Léon Rom, who beheaded Africans and kept their heads as morbid souvenirs, is said to have inspired Joseph Conrad to create the antagonist of his iconic novel *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz.<sup>131</sup> On the other hand, Lerman's character has not inspired any novelist. Moreover, outside Croatia, Lerman has largely faded away as a participant in the African colonial project, slipping into oblivion as a loyal official of Leopold II. However, he was undoubtedly a reliable cog in the Belgian monarch's cruel colonial mechanism. In addition to rationalizing and independently carrying out specific violent actions against the African population (flogging, beatings, chaining, shooting), he dedicated all his public appearances to defending European colonialism and glorifying the internationally discredited Leopold II. As a result, he almost constantly advanced in his career and was rewarded with recognition for his work. Even when voices against the crimes committed in the Congo

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<sup>130</sup> For example: Lerman, *Afrički dnevnik*, 24.

<sup>131</sup> Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 145.

Free State became numerous, Lerman remained a faithful soldier of the crumbling colonial empire. Any attack on Leopold II's megalomaniacal African project would also entail deconstructing his public image, which was carefully constructed and commercialized during the 1880s and 1890s.

To suggest that Lerman was unaware of the broader context or the voices of Leopold II's increasingly vocal critics underestimates his intelligence. Lerman was much more knowledgeable than his greatest admirers want to admit. Would consulting archival documents supposedly held in Belgian or German archives, as some historians vaguely call for,<sup>132</sup> change our view of Lerman in the context of the European conquest of Africa? Would Lerman become more innocent thanks to these new sources? We sincerely doubt it. On the contrary, it would likely strengthen our view of his responsibility for participating in Leopold II's brutal undertaking (assuming that the aforementioned archival sources even exist). Numerous compromising documents were burned in Brussels in 1908 for good reason, and the remaining sources were not available to the general public until the 1980s.<sup>133</sup> In any case, after the American George Washington Williams wrote an open letter to Leopold II in 1890 accusing him of crimes against humanity, Lerman remained in the service of this notorious European monarch for years. He was deep in the very "heart of darkness" during one of the most horrific chapters in the African history. He worked, rose through the ranks, and received royal recognition. And, most importantly, he kept quiet.

The analysis of Lerman's colonial career raises some other questions as well. For example, his contribution to bringing African cultures closer to his compatriots is sometimes emphasized. Lerman's texts and public lectures aroused great interest among the Croatian public, and he was indeed a well-known figure at the end of the nineteenth century. However, the long-term impact of his work in Africa on understanding the socio-political complexities of this continent has been somewhat overestimated. What is known or published about the peoples and cultures that Lerman encountered in the 1880s and 1890s, aside from what this researcher documented in his diary? Today, there are almost no experts in the culture and history of sub-Saharan Africa in Croatia who continuously and systematically deal with these phenomena. In the mid-1980s, Biserka Cvjetičanin, one of the few Africanists from this region, argued that "attempts to organize the study of African studies in Croatia have failed, and African studies have found themselves outside the institutional framework, that is, outside the educational system."<sup>134</sup> Although Dragutin Lerman is not responsible for the missed opportunities

132 Španiček, „Putevima Dragutina Lermana-Požezanina (1863–1918)“.

133 Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 255, 294.

134 See: Cvjetičanin, „Da li postoji kriza afričkih studije“, 18–19. It should be noted that, in the context of Yugoslavia's active participation in the Non-Aligned Movement, the Institute for African Studies was founded in 1963 in Zagreb. However, by the end of the 1960s, it was already apparent that the Institute had problems financing its activities and finding adequate staff, as very few people were engaged in African studies. See: Šidak, ed., *Spomenica u povodu proslave 300-godišnjice Sveučilišta u Zagrebu*, vol. I, 682–683.

in later scientific development in Croatia – such a claim would be both pointless and unfair – the arguments that suggest he, nonetheless, brought Africa closer to Croatians need to be placed in a more realistic framework.

Furthermore, Lerman's contribution to the mapping of Central Africa should also be seen in the light of the imperial aspirations of the Europeans of the time. Lerman claimed he was happy to "go into the unknown depths of the vast African forests, helping to bring the light of civilization into the black of that night."<sup>135</sup> While Lerman wrote about the supposed higher purpose of his work, his mapping of unexplored territories had a practical function for Leopold II, who demanded as precise a record as possible of the territories and resources he claimed.<sup>136</sup> Osterhammel emphasizes that geographical knowledge was essential for colonial actors in the late nineteenth century. "Of all the branches of learning, geography had the greatest affinity with the imperial expansion of the West," writes Osterhammel.<sup>137</sup> In other words, any narrative about Lerman in Africa is inseparable from the broader colonial context.

We hope that the romanticized narrative of the courageous explorer of Africa, who was allegedly unaware of the horrors that raged around him, will be abandoned as an anachronism. Although some colleagues may argue otherwise, this position is ultimately untenable. In a world of dynamic migrations and frequent intercultural encounters, but also of increasingly pronounced tensions, institutions such as museums that house objects related to nineteenth-century European colonialism can become important spaces for dialogue whose purpose is to confront the general public with the past and to offer the multiperspective view of history. (Fortunately, models for such endeavors already exist in certain Western European countries, such as the Netherlands.) In doing so, historians play an indispensable role in broader contextualization and critical interpretation of a particular issue. With this in mind, Lerman and his legacy represent an important topic that should not be reduced to an exotic footnote or a short passage in history textbooks. With all of the above, we believe that the upcoming analyses will serve as a new opportunity for practicing postcolonial theory within the framework of Croatian historiography, thus refreshing the usual approaches to this topic. In this way, new possibilities will open up for stimulating discussions about the legacy of colonialism, the consequences of which are deeply rooted in contemporary African societies.

<sup>135</sup> Lerman, *Novi listovi iz Afrike*, 73.

<sup>136</sup> Mirela Slukan Altić draws attention to the fact that cartographical data, which Lerman noted for the first time, have been included in all future official maps of the Congo. Slukan Altić, "The Croatian explorer Dragutin Lerman (1863-1918)", 1.

<sup>137</sup> Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World*, 821.



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## SAŽETAK

### **Povratak u „srce tame“: kolonijalne aktivnosti Dragutina Lermana u Africi**

Kolonijalna karijera Dragutina Lermana i njegove afričke godine rijetko kada se kritički propituju. Njegov angažman u službi belgijskog kralja Leopolda II. lišen je detaljne historiografske kontekstualizacije te sveden na donekle romantizirani narativ o odvažnom istraživaču i kartografu egzotičnih teritorija. Analizom Lermanovog dnevnika, pisama, relevantne sekundarne literature kao i neobjavljenih arhivskih dokumenata poput izvora dostupnih u arhivu Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti, Gradskom muzeju Požege te novina iz kasnog 19. stoljeća članak nastoji iznova evaluirati Lermanovo sudjelovanje u spomenutom kolonijalnom projektu belgijskog monarha. S ciljem određivanja Lermanove uloge u kolonizaciji Konga, njegovo djelovanje u Africi postavljeno je u širi kontekst europskog pokoravanja tog kontinenta. Osim toga, članak pokušava odrediti na koji način sačuvani Lermanovi tekstovi odražavaju kolonijalnu retoriku kasnog 19. stoljeća. U konačnici, problematizira se je li Lerman bio svjestan širih političkih i moralnih posljedica europskog koloniziranja Konga.

**Glavne riječi:** Dragutin Lerman; Leopold II.; Kongo; kolonizacija Afrike; 19. stoljeće