

Second edition, June 2022

Racism, the Belgian Congo, and William Lever



The *Huilleries du Congo Belge* train bringing palm fruit from the plantation areas to the mill station. Image: kind permission from Unilever Plc.



Port Sunlight
VILLAGE TRUST

We are in an important time of change.

In May 2020 George Floyd was brutally murdered.

The growth of the Black Lives Matter movement which followed brought an increased focus on race and racism.

This includes a close examination of the UK's colonial past.

In the summer of 2020, the Leverhulme Memorial in Port Sunlight was included on a list of targets for anti-racist activism. This was because of the business operations of William Lever in the Belgian Congo during the early 20th century. Lever founded the village of Port Sunlight and he wanted to improve the lives of his workers here. However, workers were treated very differently in places like the former Belgian Congo, where Lever got some of the raw materials for making soap.

Port Sunlight Village Trust (PSVT) is committed to telling a fuller story about William Lever's colonialist enterprises in Central Africa. We want to reflect a true picture of events. We are sharing this history to acknowledge our past, but – just as importantly – to signal as well that, as an organisation, we are on a journey towards openness, transparency and the creation of an inclusive culture for all.

PSVT has embarked on a long-term research programme to explore colonial legacies with our community and partners.

This booklet is the start of us examining the problematic aspects of William Lever's business practices in our museum and public spaces. A year has passed since its 1st edition. There is still much more to uncover. We look forward to sharing what we learn with you as our research progresses.

June 2022

Let's talk!

We hope that this booklet is a starting point for conversations about inequality and racism. Some people may find the content of this booklet emotionally triggering due to its discussion of prejudice, racial injustice, and physical/sexual violence. We know that some people might be unsure of which words to use when talking about these issues, or might have thoughts and questions on the subject. Please feel free to ask us anything you like. If we don't know the answer, we will do our best to find out for you.

You can speak with a member of staff or email us at feedback@portsunlightvillage.com

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What was William Lever's business in the Belgian Congo?

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Palm oil was a key ingredient in making Lever Brothers soaps. William Lever wanted to secure supplies of this raw material to help keep Lever Brothers profitable. He made a deal with the Belgian government to set up a company called *Les Huileries du Congo Belge* (HCB) in their Central African colony, the Belgian Congo. This country is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

“[This] will make us independent, I hope, of the fluctuations in the raw material for the manufacture of soap.”

William Lever in *Progress*
(Lever Brothers' staff magazine), April 1911 ¹

One of the most commercially promising areas was Lusanga on the Congo river. Lever planned to turn it into an African version of Port Sunlight. His vision was for a self-contained 'model colony' with plantations, factories, transport links, good housing, recreation and catering facilities.² This area was renamed Leverville. Lever hoped that he would find a local workforce in the Belgian Congo who would be willing to work for him to produce the oil.

Tractable means
easy to teach,
influence or control

“The natives are tractable and industrious, and if they are well treated, the industry should be the beginning of a new era of prosperity for that part of the world.”

William Lever in *Progress*, April 1911 ³

But the colonial years in the Belgian Congo had left the country and its people in a terrible state. This made it very hard for the company to operate commercially and recruit workers. It also undermined the good intentions Lever had for the area.⁴ Local people avoided working for HCB due to the low wages which were offered for really tough work.⁵

In order to find workers, there is evidence that local company managers joined with the colonial administration and local chiefs to force people to work for HCB.⁶ Forced labour, or coercing people to work, was forbidden in the Belgian Congo.



Bringing in palm fruit in Leverville.
Kind permission from Unilever Plc.

What is forced labour?
Find out more
on page 12

Lever had earned a good reputation for looking after those who worked for him in England. But the practices of HCB in the Belgian Congo did not match this. During the time in which HCB was a subsidiary of Lever Brothers, it forced labourers to work against their will and for very little pay.

The use of forced labour in African colonies was no secret back in Britain.⁷ Lever and other people in the company, including in Port Sunlight, were aware of the low wages and use of forced labour in the Belgian Congo.⁸ Some research has also suggested that local HCB administrators may have covered up the scale of these conditions.⁹ But even in the British parliament, where Lever was a Liberal MP (1906-1909), HCB's working conditions were known about. There were appeals made to protect African people from 'the soap boilers of the world.'¹⁰

William Lever and the profits from forced labour

Lever Brothers' palm oil production in the Belgian Congo was not profitable to begin with. Lever poured huge amounts of money into HCB to enable the company to continue.¹¹ Palm oil production in the area required a heavy investment in: investment in machinery, land preparation, and the building of factories and villages for workers.

Lever saw the company's operations in the Belgian Congo as more than just commercial. He said HCB was "a business like none other we have. Perhaps Port Sunlight comes nearest to it in its social work."¹² Initially, Lever Brothers had wanted workers in the Belgian Congo to be well treated.

"We need hardly to say that the natives will be 'well treated.' Their labour will not be exploited to everyone's advantage but their own. They will have their eight hours' day, like ourselves. They will be secured the full rate of wages of the district, not only at the outset, but as the improvement of civilisation in these regions necessitates, there will be a means of raising wages."

Lever Brothers statement to employees in *Progress*, April 1911 ¹³

But, even from the beginning of its time in the Belgian Congo, HCB used forced labour practices. This went against the country's Colonial Charter. It also went against Lever's reputation for philanthropy. Nevertheless, reports of forced labour practices continued until the 1930s.¹⁴



Workers at Leverville. Kind permission from Unilever Plc.

In 1923, a year before Lever's death, HCB began to make a consistent profit from palm oil production and soap manufacture. The vast investments made by Lever Brothers through HCB did eventually benefit the wider economy of the Belgian Congo. But this investment came at a terrible price for HCB's Congolese workers, who suffered in poor conditions.

We know that Lever, his company Lever Brothers, their shareholders, and Port Sunlight all benefited from forced labour in the Belgian Congo. At the moment, it is difficult to say exactly how much they all benefited. Our partner, Unilever, is doing independent research to map the flow of colonial capital at Lever Brothers at that period.

William Lever and racism

What is racism?
Find out more
on page 13

During the early 20th century, workers at Lever Brothers were valued differently according to their race. Living and working conditions in Port Sunlight were very different to those in Leverville and other areas of the Belgian Congo.

In William Lever's time, many people wrongly believed that different races had different abilities. They thought that white people were biologically and culturally superior. This attitude led some people to think that it was the duty of Europeans to bring what they saw as civilisation to Africa. However, many different cultures, with rich histories and customs, already existed on the continent and had done so for thousands of years. Lever believed that investing in African countries was necessary to bring them up to speed with a rapidly modernising world.

There is evidence of racism in Lever's private letters and the books he published. Talking about his business operations in Africa, he wrote in 1924:

“The African native will be happier, produce the best, and live under the larger conditions of prosperity, when his labour is directed and organised by his white brother who has all these million years ahead of him.” ¹⁵

William Lever operated his business at a time when white supremacy and colonialism were at the height of their popularity in many nations. Lever used these ideas to justify taking the control of palm oil manufacture out of local African hands. Lever's colonial attitudes were widely shared by powerful people in Britain during the 19th and early 20th centuries. These opinions often led to justifying attitudes and behaviours that are now completely at odds with modern-day values and beliefs.

Find out more

Lever Brothers and *Huileries du Congo Belge*

At the start of the 20th century, the Belgian government was keen to attract investment in its Congolese colony. It had heard of Lever's reputation as a 'humane capitalist'. So, in 1909, the government invited Lever to discuss a deal that would give him access to the palm oil plantations in their new colony, the Belgian Congo.¹⁶

In 1911, he signed an agreement with the Belgian government for land in their colony. Here he could establish plantations for the production of palm oil.

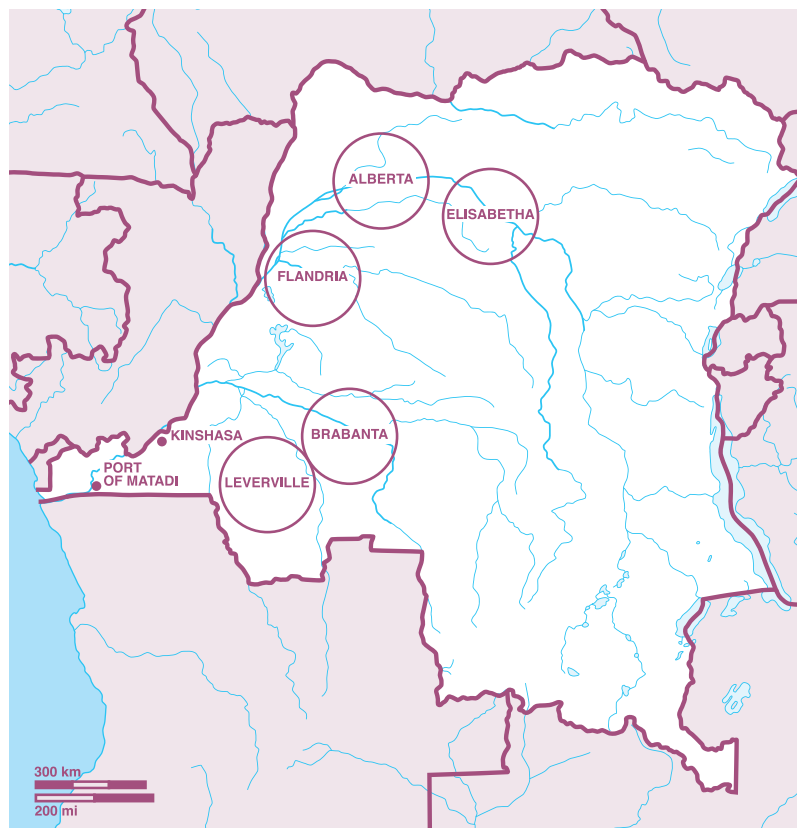
Les Huileries du Congo Belge means 'Oil-Works of the Belgian Congo' in French.

A separate company, registered in Belgium, was set up in the Belgian Congo and called *Les Huileries du Congo Belge* (or HCB). This was jointly owned by the Belgian government and Lever Brothers. There was an initial investment of twenty five million francs (about £78 million today) by Lever Brothers.



The HCB bulk-oil installation at the Port of Matadi. Palm oil arrived here by rail tanker or river boat, ready to be taken to Europe and America by ocean steamer. Kind permission from Unilever Plc.

Find out more



This concession gave Lever and HCB control over 750km² of the Belgian Congo. That's nearly five times the size of the Wirral.

It was split into five 'circles':

- Alberta in Bumba
- Elisabetha in Basoko
- Brabanta in Basongo
- Flandria in Ingende
- Leverville in Lusanga

Part of Lever's agreement with the Belgian government was to provide food, housing and hospitals in each of the five circles. This was done according to a strict framework for running public and private projects in the new colony. Projects were required to improve "the natives' moral and material living conditions."

For more information

- *Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts: Colonial Exploitation in the Congo* by Jules Marchal (translated by Martin Thom) (2008)
- *So clean: Lord Leverhulme, soap and civilisation* by Brian Lewis (2008)

Find out more

Leopold, the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo

Some of the difficulties faced by Lever and HCB in their commercial operations in the Belgian Congo were due to the terrible state of the region when they began business there in 1911.

From 1885 to 1908, the country had been the private colony of the Belgian king, Leopold II. It was known as the *État Indépendant du Congo* or Congo Free State. Leopold oversaw a brutal regime in which the local population were at the mercy of violent police called the *Force Publique*. Forced labour was widely used. Men, women and children were compelled to work for the state, mainly harvesting rubber. To intimidate them into working, some people's family members were kidnapped and physically/sexually abused — particularly women. Those who were unwilling to work were often murdered. Their hands were removed as proof of execution.¹⁷

There was international condemnation of the violence the Congo Free State. By 1908, this forced Leopold II to hand over control of the region to his government in Belgium. The new colony was renamed the Belgian Congo. In an attempt to put right some of the country's problems a 'Colonial Charter' was written. This aimed to ensure that the colony was administered more fairly and included the banning of forced labour.¹⁸ Leopold II died in 1909.

However, these new rules were difficult to enforce. The local colonial administrators, private companies and local chiefs continued to exploit the Congolese people.

For more information

- *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*
by Adam Hochschild (1998)

What is forced labour?

Forced labour is any work or service which people are forced to do against their will, under threat of punishment. Forced labour is the most common element of modern slavery. Almost all slavery practices contain some element of forced labour.

Forced labour still affects millions of people of all ages and genders around the world. Today, 3.7 million people in Africa are forced to perform work against their will.

“Nobody can be forced to work on behalf of and for the profit of companies or privates.”

Article 3 of the *Colonial Charter*, 1908

“Forced or compulsory labour is all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily.”

Article 29 of the International Labour Organization
Forced Labour Convention, 1930

The Human Rights Act 1998 protects UK citizens from forced labour. Article 4 protects those citizens' right not to be held in slavery or servitude, or made to do forced labour.

What is racism?

Racism has many definitions. At its core is the false belief that there are distinct 'races' of humanity, defined by a person's skin colour and cultural background. This thinking wrongly holds that the 'racial' traits of white people make them superior to Black, Brown, and Indigenous people.

Racist ideologies create structural racism: embedded processes in society that exert power and privilege according to 'race'. It manifests in discriminatory attitudes, behaviours, and practices towards Black, Brown, and Indigenous people.

Even though they make up the majority of the global population, racist attitudes marginalise Black, Brown, and Indigenous people.

Racial bias benefits white people and disadvantages people of Global Majority heritage.

“ Racism’s legacy does not exist without purpose. It brings with it not just a disempowerment for those affected by it, but an empowerment for those who are not.”

Reni Eddo-Lodge,
Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race

The European colonisation of countries in Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries is an example of something that happened in the past that still causes problems today.

In Britain, enormous wealth was gathered from the rich resources of its colonies and the labour of colonised people. White individuals in positions of power benefited most from colonial riches. They built a racist system of social, political, and economic frameworks to protect that wealth.

The historical system of colonialism shaped the way that modern Britain operates. Its racist legacy continues to discriminate against people of the Global Majority.

Anti-racist activism, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, asks us all to recognise and challenge racial discrimination, in support of justice and equality for everyone.

For more information

- The Runnymede Trust
<https://www.runnymedetrust.org>
- Black Lives Matter
<https://blacklivesmatter.uk>
- Black Equity Organisation
<https://blackequityorg.com>
- *The New Age of Empire: How Racism and Colonialism Still Rule the World* by Kehinde Andrews (2021)
- *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* by Reni Eddo-Lodge (2018)
- *Bordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* by Nadine El-Enany (2020)
- *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* by Afua Hirsch (2018)
- *Blackness in Britain* edited by Kehinde Andrews & Lisa Amanda Palmer (2016)
- *Black and British: A Forgotten History* by David Olusoga (2016)
...and the revised and rewritten version for young people:
- *Black and British: A short, essential history* by David Olusoga (2020)
- *How to Argue With a Racist: History, Science, Race and Reality* by Dr Adam Rutherford, (2020)
- *Empireland: How Imperialism Had Shaped Modern Britain* by Sathnam Sanghera (2021)
- *Wish We Knew What to Say: Talking with Children About Race* by Dr Pragya Agarwal

Where did we get this information from?

We have used the following reliable sources of information to research this booklet:

- “The Land Tenure System in the Congo, 1885-1960: Actors, Motivations and Consequences.” by Piet **Clement**, in *Colonial Exploitation and Economic Development: The Belgian Congo and the Netherlands Indies Compared*, edited by Ewout Frankema, and Frans Buelens (2013)
- *Unilever Overseas: The Anatomy of a Multinational, 1895-1965*, by David **Fieldhouse** (1978)
- *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Central Africa*, by Adam **Hochschild** (2011)
- “An Acoustic Register, Tenacious Images, and Congolese Scenes of Rape and Repetition.” by Nancy Rose **Hunt**, in *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2, (2008)
- *So clean: Lord Leverhulme, soap and civilisation*, by Brian **Lewis** (2008)
- “ ‘We Are Left with Barely Anything’: Colonial Rule, Dependency, and the Lever Brothers in the Belgian Congo, 1911–1960,” by Reuben **Loffman** and Benoît **Henriet**, in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (2020).
- *Lord Leverhulme’s Ghosts: Colonial Exploitation in the Congo* by Jules **Marchal** (translated by Martin Thom) (2008).
- *Africa Since 1800*, by Roland **Oliver** and Anthony **Atmore** (1972)
- “Lever Brothers and the Congo”, in **Progress**, Vol. 11, April 1911, no. 102.

Image references

- Page 1: *Progress*, Vol. 32, January 1932
- Page 5: *Progress*, Vol. 13, April 1913
- Page 7: UARM Reference No. UAC/1/11/9/3/21
- Page 9: *Progress*, Vol. 32, September 1932

Endnotes

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| <p>¹ <i>Progress</i>, Vol. 11, April 1911, no.102</p> <p>² Loffman and Henriët (2020), page 78</p> <p>³ <i>Progress</i>, Vol. 11, April 1911, no.102</p> <p>⁴ Loffman and Henriët (2020), page 81</p> <p>⁵ There is evidence that Lever Brothers were being misled about the levels of wages set in the Belgian Congo. Loffman and Henriët (2020), page 83</p> <p>⁶ This was the same with other private enterprises operating in the Belgian Congo. Loffman and Henriët (2020), page 85</p> <p>⁷ Lewis (2008), page 186</p> <p>⁸ Marchal (2008), pages 15-20</p> <p>⁹ Loffman and Henriët (2020), page 82</p> <p>¹⁰ As reported in <i>House of Commons Debates</i>, 1913, vol.56, col.786 (<i>Harcourt</i>, 31 July 1913), quoted by Brian Lewis in <i>So Clean</i> (2008), page 164</p> | <p>¹¹ A full description of HCB's financial status including its first year of profitability in 1923 can be found in Fieldhouse (1978), pages 506-9</p> <p>¹² William Lever, quoted by Lewis (2008), page 177</p> <p>¹³ <i>Progress</i>, Vol. 11, April 1911, no.102</p> <p>¹⁴ Loffman and Henriët, (2020), page 86</p> <p>¹⁵ William Lever, quoted by Oliver and Atmore (1972), page 174</p> <p>¹⁶ Loffman and Henriët (2020), page 76</p> <p>¹⁷ Loffman and Henriët, (2020), page 81
Hunt (2008), pages 220-253</p> <p>¹⁸ Article 5 of the Colonial Charter of the Belgian Congo (1909) prohibits forced labour. Clement, (2013), page 101</p> |
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Who was involved in creating this booklet?

- Port Sunlight Village Trust staff, volunteers and Board Members including Katherine Lynch, Director of Heritage and James Hayes, Collections Officer
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