

Leopold, II Biography

Leopold, II

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Biography

Leopold II (1835-1909) was king of the Belgians from 1865 to 1909. He founded the Congo Free State.

Leopold was born in Brussels on April 9, 1835. He was the second child of the reigning Belgian monarch, Leopold I, and his second wife, Louise, the daughter of King Louis Philippe of France. His elder brother had died a few months after his birth in 1834, and thus Leopold was heir to the throne. When he was 9 years old, Leopold received the title of Duke of Brabant.

Leopold's public career began in 1855, when he became a member of the Belgian Senate. That same year Leopold began to urge Belgium's acquisition of colonies. In 1853 he married Marie Henriette, daughter of the Austrian archduke Joseph. Four children were born of this marriage; three were daughters, and the only son, Leopold, died when he was 9 years old.

In 1865 Leopold became king. His reign was marked by a number of major political developments. The Liberals governed Belgium from 1857 to 1880 and during their final year in power legislated the Frère-Orban Law of 1879. This law created free, secular, compulsory primary schools supported by the state and withdrew all state support from Roman Catholic primary schools. In 1880 the Catholic party obtained a parliamentary majority and 4 years later restored state support to Catholic schools. In 1885 various socialist and social democratic groups drew together and formed the Labor party. Increasing social unrest and the rise of the Labor party forced the adoption of universal male suffrage in 1893.

In 1876 Leopold organized, with the help of Henry Stanley, the International Association for the Exploration and Civilization of the Congo. The Congo Free State was established under Leopold II's personal rule at a European conference on African affairs held in Berlin in 1884-1885. Leopold then amassed a huge personal fortune by exploiting the Congo. His rule there, however, was subject to severe criticism, especially from British sources. Criticism from both Social Catholics and the Labor party at home forced Leopold to give the Congo to the Belgian nation. The Congo Free State was transformed into a Belgian colony under parliamentary control in 1908.

On Dec. 17, 1909, Leopold II died at Laeken, and the Belgian crown passed to Albert, the son of Leopold's brother, Philip, Count of Flanders.