

UNIT 4 | ACTIVITY 4.3**SPIN AND COUNTERSPIN**

Adam Hochschild, author of *King Leopold's Ghost*, discussed the role of the media in exposing the horrors of Leopold II's rule over the Congo. This interview appeared on *FAIR's CounterSpin*.

Q: King Leopold was able to portray himself as one of the world's great philanthropists and humanitarians. How did that happen?

AH: He sure did, and this is one of the fascinating parts of the story to me, that here he was running essentially a massive slave labor regime. And maybe I should say something about how that operated. Basically, gathering wild rubber in the African rain forest is very labor intensive. The way that they forced people to do this was they would send soldiers in village after village and hold the women hostage until the men had gone out and gathered a quota each month of wild rubber, something which took most of the month.

Q: What happened if the quota wasn't reached?

AH: People would be killed. Sometimes they would kill everybody in the village in order to send a message to the next village that we mean business here. . . . So while all this was going on, King Leopold very effectively was portraying himself to the world as a disinterested philanthropist, someone who was involved in Africa purely for humanitarian purposes to bring civilization to these benighted natives, to invite missionaries in to spread Christianity. He was not making a profit, he said. He was there purely for philanthropic purposes, and until news of what was going on began to leak out, the world believed it.

Q: What roles did journalists play in this?

AH: There were only a small number of white men in the Congo, only a few thousand Europeans. They worked for the

king. . . . There were a handful of horrified witnesses who were British, Swedish, and American missionaries who were there, who saw the population being decimated, people starving to death, people fleeing into the rain forest to avoid the regime. They tried to tell the world about it but they didn't have much media savvy. They had access to missionary journals but not the mainstream press. As a result, very little information leaked out. . . . The person who really blew the whistle was a black American journalist named George Washington Williams. After he had been traveling for several months, he sat down on the banks of the Congo River and wrote a remarkable document, which was "An Open Letter to King Leopold II." It was published in newspapers, both in Europe and the United States, created a tremendous ruckus, was really the first comprehensive exposé written of this regime. Williams, very sadly, however, died of tuberculosis on his way home from Africa, so he never had the time to write the book about this, or to take part in the international campaign that later was mounted against it.

For the next ten years very little information leaked out. Then the major journalist who comes into the story is a remarkable Englishman named Edmund Dean M'bel. . . . He went to the head of the shipping line and said, something terrible is going on here. We can't be a party to it. The head of the shipping line told him to get lost, and when that didn't work, he tried to promote him to another job in another country, and when that didn't work, he tried to pay him some money to shut up. M'bel wouldn't shut up. He quit his job and in the

space of three or four years he became the greatest British investigative journalist of his time, and for ten years he worked sixteen hours a day trying to put his story of slave labor in King Leopold's Congo on the world's front pages. And he succeeded.

Q: You say in your book that in one year Mbrel sent 7,000 letters in carrying out his activism against King Leopold's slave state.

AH: That's true. He did nothing but write all day long. He wrote letters. He wrote pamphlets, he wrote books, he edited a weekly newspaper. . . . He knew what any investigative reporter today knows, which is that to get people to pay attention you have to be absolutely correct in what you say, everything has to be documented and you also have to write in a way that people will want to read it.

Q: How would you answer critics or people who say that one shouldn't mix journalism with activism?

AH: I think that there's something of a myth that there is a distinction between factual journalism and opinion journalism. Which facts you choose to talk about is a

political decision, and I just think that whether journalists believe that they're writing straight reportage or believe that they're writing something that's more of an opinion, you let your passion drive you towards ferreting out the facts of the story.

Q: With the Congo getting some news media attention these days—it's in the middle of a widespread war involving more than half a dozen African countries—you'd think that history would be recounted occasionally. Why are we not hearing these stories of the past more frequently?

AH: One of the tragedies of what's happened in Africa, one of the effects of colonialism, is that it's robbed people not only of their natural resources but also of their history. . . . Many Africans have told me that a lot of the material in *King Leopold's Ghost* comes as news to them, not that they didn't know that colonialism was brutal or that ancestors of theirs died, but censorship forbade the details of what happened from being written about throughout Africa in the colonial period . . . the conquerors wrote the schoolbooks.

Questions:

1. Elsewhere in this interview, Adam Hochschild describes the King Leopold story as one of spin and counterspin from one hundred years ago. What was the "spin" and who was promoting this false idea to the public? What was the "counterspin"?
2. Using context clues in the interview, explain what Hochschild means by "mainstream press." Why would a missionary journal not be considered "mainstream" press?
3. Using context clues again, explain what Hochschild means by "media savvy."
4. In what way was Mbrel "media savvy"?
5. What reason does Hochschild give for why George Washington Williams was not more effective in his attempts at counterspin?
6. According to Hochschild, why are some Africans not fully aware of the atrocities committed on their people a century ago?
7. What two types of journalism are discussed in this interview? Provide an explanation of each.

