Edmund D. Morel, The Black Man's Burden (1920)

Opposition to colonial expansion grew louder at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Edmund Morel (1873–1924) worked as a clerk for a British shipping company that carried freight between the Congo Free State and Belgium. He noticed a trade imbalance; the value of goods going from Europe was below the value of resources coming from Africa. Active in socialist politics, Morel began to investigate and publish tracts in local newspapers. In 1904 he published a book, *King Leopold's Rule in Africa*, which among other critiques provides details about "red rubber" (named for the blood spilled in its extraction). Morel collaborated with Roger Casement (see Sir Roger Casement, "Consul General's Report to Sir Edward Grey," in Casebook: Rubber and the World Economy, following Chapter 18) to show the widespread effects of colonial exploitation.

Leopold II of Belgium ran the Congo Free State as private enterprise from 1885 to 1908, when the Belgian government assumed administrative control and proclaimed Congo a colony.

Morel's "The Black Man's Burden" title for the following 1920 essay responds to Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, "The White Man's Burden," intended to encourage the United States to colonize the Philippines.

It is with the peoples of Africa, then, that our inquiry is concerned. It is they who carry the "Black man's" burden. They have not withered away before the white man's *occupation*. Indeed, if the scope of this volume permitted, there would be no difficulty in showing that Africa has ultimately absorbed within itself every Caucasian and, for that matter, every Semitic invader too. In hewing out for himself a fixed abode in Africa, the white man has massacred the African in heaps. The African has survived, and it is well for the white settlers that he has.

CITATION: Edmund D. Morel, *The Black Man's Burden* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1920), pp. 7–9.

In the process of imposing his political dominion over the African, the white man has carved broad and bloody avenues from one end of Africa to the other. The African has resisted, and persisted.

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But what the partial occupation of his soil by the white man has failed to do; what the mapping out of European political "spheres of influence" has failed to do; what the maxim [the first machine gun, 1884] and the rifle, the slave gang, labour in the bowels of the earth and the lash, have failed to do; what imported measles, smallpox and syphilis have failed to do; what even the oversea slave trade failed to do, the power of modern capitalistic exploitation, assisted by modern engines of destruction, may yet succeed in accomplishing.

For from the evils of the latter, scientifically applied and enforced, there is no escape for the African. Its destructive effects are not spasmodic: they are permanent. In its permanence resides its fatal consequences. It kills not the body merely, but the soul. It breaks the spirit. It attacks the African at every turn, from every point of vantage. It wrecks his polity, uproots him from the land, invades his family life, destroys his natural pursuits and occupations, claims his whole time, enslaves him in his own home.

Economic bondage and wage slavery, the grinding pressure of a life of toil, the incessant demands of industrial capitalism—these things a landless European proletariat physically endures, though hardly. It endures—as a * * * population. The recuperative forces of a temperate climate are there to arrest the ravages. * * * But in Africa, especially in tropical Africa, which a capitalistic imperialism threatens and has, in part, already devastated, man is incapable of reacting against unnatural conditions. In those regions man is engaged in a perpetual struggle against disease and an exhausting climate, which tells heavily upon child-bearing; and there is no scientific machinery for salving the weaker members of the community. The African of the tropics is capable of tremendous physical labours. But he cannot accommodate himself to the European system of monotonous, uninterrupted labour, with its long and regular hours, involving, moreover, as it frequently does, severance from

natural surroundings and nostalgia, the condition of melancholy resulting from separation from home. * * * Climatic conditions forbid it. When the system is forced upon him, the tropical African droops and dies.

Nor is violent physical opposition to abuse and injustice henceforth possible for the African in any part of Africa. His chances of effective resistance have been steadily dwindling with the increasing perfectibility in the killing power of modern armament. Gunpowder broke the effectiveness of his resistance to the slave trade, although he continued to struggle. He has forced and, on rare occasions and in exceptional circumstances beaten, in turn the old-fashioned musket, the elephant gun, the seven-pounder, and even the repeating rifle and the gatling gun. He has been known to charge right down repeatedly, foot and horse, upon the square, swept on all sides with the pitiless and continuous hail of maxims. But against the latest inventions, physical bravery, though associated with a perfect knowledge of the country, can do nothing. The African cannot face the high explosive shell and the bomb dropping aeroplane. * * *

Thus the African is really helpless against the material gods of the white man, as embodied in the trinity of imperialism, capitalistic-exploitation, and militarism. If the white man retains these gods and if he insists upon making the African worship them as assiduously as he has done himself, the African will go the way of the Red Indian, the Amerindian, the Carib, the Guanche, the aboriginal Australian, and many more. And this would be at once a crime of enormous magnitude, and a world disaster.

Questions

1. Morel differentiates among colonial occupation, administration, and assertion of economic control. Which does he argue poses the greatest challenge to Africans' survival? Why?

2. Why does Morel think that capitalist labor regimes are even harder on African workers than on Europeans? Do you agree with his argument? Why or why not?

3. What transnational comparisons does Morel invoke to support his argument? Can you identify the influence of socialist principles in Morel's choice of examples? How do the transnational comparisons Morel finds important differ from those invoked by Cecil Rhodes (see Cecil Rhodes, "Confession of Faith," in this chapter).

Eugene Lyons, Revolt against Ugliness (1937)

Eugene Lyons (1898–1985) was born to Jewish parents in the Ukraine. He grew up in New York's Lower East Side ghetto and became a socialist at a young age. In the 1920s, he became well-known as a radical journalist and author. From 1928 to 1934 he was United Press International's first Moscow correspondent and wrote quite favorably about the Soviet Union. By 1937, when he published the autobiographical *Assignment in Utopia*, he had become very critical of the USSR, though from a generally leftist perspective. Later in life, he became much more conservative, writing for *Reader's Digest*, *National Review*, and *Human Events*.

The following "Revolt against Ugliness" selection comes from Lyons's description of growing up, and it mixes general reflections on the immigrant experience in the United States with an explanation of why he gravitated to writing and radical politics rather than the career as a doctor or lawyer that his parents hoped he would pursue.

In America we still romanticize the glories of a hard, poverty-ridden youth. Our rags-to-riches legends and literature overlook the fact that Tony the Bootblack ends up as a hod-carrier or a gangster more often than a millionaire. They overlook the more vital fact that when he does achieve wealth he generally carries the scars of the unequal struggle on his mind and spirit forever. He can rarely attain the mellow quality of the full, cultured existence of those whose rise was more orderly, less desperate. Our up-from-the-gutter type of true, or nearly true, story is written by the few

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CITATION: Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937), pp. 3–8.